Managing to play:

The Everyday Lives of Adult Videogame Consumers

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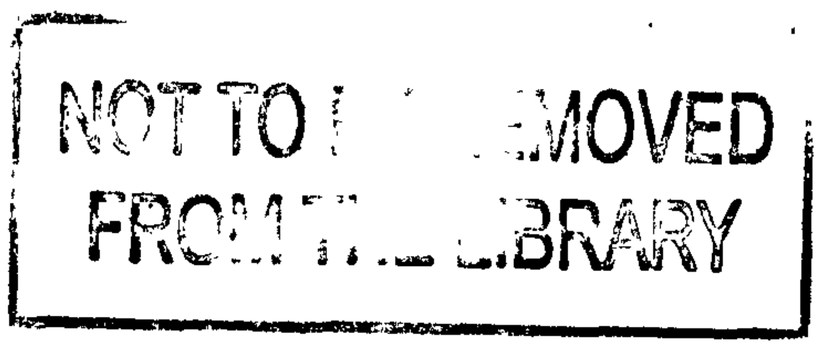

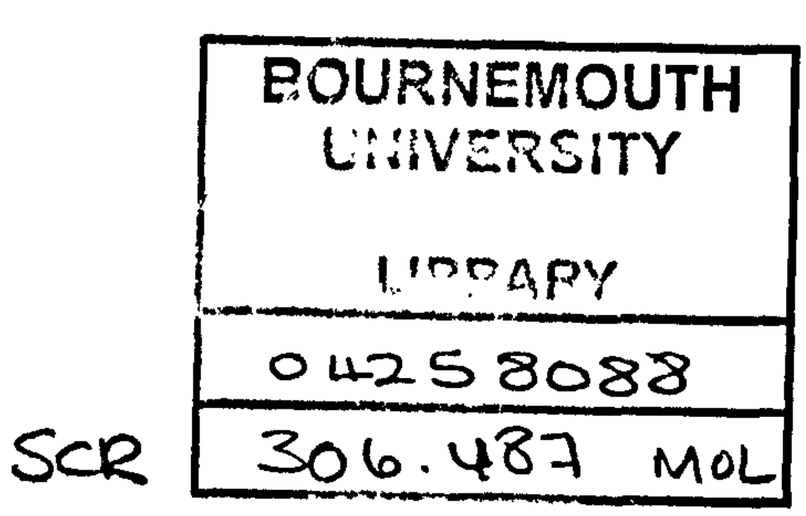

Abstract

Against a backdrop of videogame producers keen to promote themselves as a 'serious' adult entertainment industry, and persistent media reports on the 'dangers' of videogame play, this research examines the lived experiences of adult videogame players. I start with a consideration of the nature of play and of consumption in order to assess the ways in which our consumer society may be seen as becoming more playful, or experiential. I also consider the development of key discourses on videogame use and in particular the problematic ways in which we understand real, virtual and digital spaces. These theoretical contexts provide a background against which I consider a phenomenology of adult videogame consumption. Drawing from extended discussions with 24 adult videogame players I review: the biographical and domestic contexts in which adults play videogames; the various practices that they develop relating to buying, owning and using videogames, and; the nature of experiences produced through play. Adults may have started playing videogames as a result of an educational agenda, or peer pressure whilst as school, but may have continued playing intermittently into adulthood and now find that friends, and especially family influence how and what they play. As a result they have developed a variety of practices that I describe in detail including managing the amount of time and money spent on games and negotiating spaces to play. Within these contexts players aim for 'ideal' experiences of skill and achievement, of escape though the management of their imagination, and of social interaction with family and friends. However these largely positive experiences need to be carefully managed against a risk that their behaviour may be seen as childish, and against the potential for play to cause disruption to work or domestic life. Following these detailed first-person descriptions I consider the 'discourses in practice' during the use of videogames. I note the persistent framing of videogame play as frivolous, but also the way in which games are used to manage everyday life by providing a space that is an escape from routines of work and family life and in particular a space in which the imagination may be actualised. In doing so I also consider the transformatory potential of videogames, concluding that although they may be seen to serve a conservative role, and may be critiqued as part of an over-experienced, yet 'futile' life, their ability to aid the management of everyday life is significant.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over the last 20 years academics have come to recognise the cultural and economic significance of videogames. Not that the two are entirely separate. For example Darley (2000) points out that videogames are *products* of a consumer culture, and Kline, Dyer-Withford and de Peuter (2003) highlight that digital play can best be understood as an interaction between technology, *culture* and *marketing*.

Elsewhere, interest from disciplines including cultural studies, film studies, sociology and psychology has produced a wide range of video game discourses. Newman (2004) attempts an overview suggesting that perhaps the simplest division made between approaches is between a study of the game 'form' and studies that relate to the 'audience'. Juul also claims that: "*A basic dichotomy concerns whether we study the games themselves or the players who play them.*" (2005:11). In terms of understanding the game form - the game as cultural object - we see texts emerge that specifically draw on film studies to understand game structures and content, for example King and Krzywinska's (2002) *ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces* contains chapters that deal with: Hollywood spectacle in games; narrative space; and games as 'remediated animation'. The stated emphasis is the permeable boundary between games and cinema media. In *More Than a Game*, Atkins (2003) also deals with games as narrative form. Other texts deal with play more directly, for example Wolf and Perron's (2003) *The Video Game Theory Reader* contains chapters on subjects like: immersion, engagement and presence in games; post-modern identities; psychoanalysis; and the perfomative aspects of videogame play. Elsewhere there has been an early and continued focus on violence in games and its effects on players (see Grodal, 2000, for example), and more recently there is also interest in the educational potential of games. For example Gee (2004) argues persuasively that games produce new and effective types of learning. The number of publications has become too extensive to list or review in any detail here, but hopefully I illustrate the diversity.

Interest in understanding videogames is such that there are now academic courses in game design, which in turn encourage the publication of academic textbooks such as Salen and Zimmerman's (2003), *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals,* or Irish's (2005), *The Game Producer's Handbook.* The overall message is that games are an accepted area for serious academic study. More than this, Michael Nitche (2007) points out that: *'Nowadays it seems that everybody takes Mario and Luigi seriously, knows about the 256th board in Pac-Man, and is an expert of the magic circle. It is almost a bit disappointing: the special freak status is gone'.* Yet perhaps what is less well covered in the academic literature is this 'everydayness' of videogame use - the routine, lived experiences of adult videogame consumers - and it is this that I want to investigate further.

Videogames are well established as an adult leisure activity and a successful media business, (for example see market data from Mintel, 2006a). Yet we know little about what adults 'do' with and 'get' from videogames, and what, if anything, this might mean to them. For example we might consider the adult use of video games in light of persistent media complaints about videogame violence, their potential for producing 'dangerous addiction', or a broader rejection of them as frivolous, or childish.

For this study I therefore want to gain a better understanding of adults' consumption of digital games. By reporting on discussions with adult players I aim to: (1) provide detailed first person descriptions of adult videogame consumption; (2) identify specific themes and structures in these experiences; (3) analyse the ways in which these experiences may be understood as part of larger trends in our consumer culture, and; (4) therefore explain the possible individual and cultural transformations that may be taking place as the result of adults' use of videogames.

I will argue that videogames are one resource through which adults may manage: their desire to escape from, or be more than what seems possible in their everyday lives; their desire for progress and for control; and their desire to manage their relationships with others. I will suggest that the use of games as a tool to do these things has to be learnt and for adults these skills may have been refined since childhood, but I will also note that despite apparent expertise the management of life through play, aided by videogame technology, is not always entirely successful. Having argued these things I will assess the implications of such practices for our consumer culture noting that the use of videogames may both re-enchant life, but also increase passivity and detachment from other aspects of life.

These arguments and observations result from a phenomenological study of 24 adult players. However, as Thompson et al (1989) suggest, I begin with an examination of historical and conceptual work that surrounds play, consumption and virtual environments. As Goulding (1999) also suggests, such a review is desirable because it allows us see beyond the simplest structures in phenomenological data, and a more complex approach to this is also articulated by Holstein and Gubrium (2005) who advocate the combining of the lived-world approaches of phenomenology with sociological and historical accounts, in what they call studies of interpretive practice.

In chapter 2 I therefore start by briefly describing the market for videogames and the dominant popular discourses that have emerged to account for, promote and vilify digital play. Here I draw on trade research and its reporting, and on media coverage of videogames. I then consider theoretical and historical perspectives by reviewing conceptualisations of play and of consumption, and by considering a possible playful turn in consumer practices. I consider in detail two existing comprehensive reviews, firstly Sutton-Smith's (1997) analysis of play rhetorics, and then Gabriel and Lang's (1995) discussion of dominant discourses on

consumption. In comparing the broad themes these reviews present I note significant similarities in a sociology derived from play and the sociology of consumption, and this serves as a context for a review of historical developments in consumption that have lead to an 'experiential economy' perhaps typified by videogames. In the final section of this chapter I then consider how *digital* play may fit into theories of 'playful consumption'. I consider the different discourses that have been presented to explain the significance of videogames in more detail, then through a discussion about the problematic ways in which videogames are understood as 'not real' I explore the potential for videogames to be used as a form of adult 'escape' from the routine of everyday life.

In chapter 3 I then explain my methods of data collection and my reasons for choosing a phenomenological approach informed by Holstein and Gubrium (2005) call 'interpretive practice'. I also consider the broader use of such methods in consumer research, noting their growth, but also that they are by no means dominant. I therefore also explain how such projects may contribute to knowledge by attempting to allow the reader to better understand the complex experiences of others.

I then present three chapters of findings. In chapter 4, I consider how adults recall first coming to play videogames and the various ebbs and flow of interest and engagement from childhood through to adult life. Here we see that from the start play must fit around the needs of others including parents, partners, employers and children, but may also form a significant part of relationships with others. Videogame play is therefore highly situated and play practices result from both early experiences with videogames and from current domestic and social environments. This chapter therefore contextualises the subsequent more detailed descriptions of practices and experiences.

In chapter 5 I look in more detail at the various practices that make up the adult consumption of videogames. I note the considerable time spent researching and shopping for games and how this in itself may be a social activity. I also note how an interest in videogames may be part of a broader interest in technology (and therefore an excuse to purchase other audiovisual equipment); and/or how this interest may result in large collections of games and related hardware including 'vintage' games consoles. I then consider that adults need to find time and space to play videogames once purchased and I note that this may involve negotiation and compromise, but also that play may be seasonal, may be used to mark special occasions and may also occasionally be consumed in binges. Finally in this chapter I note that adults may recognise that time spent playing videogames may result in disruptions to domestic life and or missed time with friends and family.

The result is that videogame play may produce a range of both positive and negative experiences and these are explored in chapter 6. Here I discuss the ways in which videogames may be used to provide players with a sense of achievement that may in some way

compensate for unsatisfactory aspects of life. I also note how videogames may be a significant imaginative resource, allowing players to both elaborate on daydreams and fantasies and in some way actualise them. Videogame play may also be a useful resource for socialising and I discuss the various ways in which adults experience videogame play with friends and other family members. Finally in this chapter I consider negative feelings that playing videogames may produce in adults including frustration and humiliation, guilt and even 'addiction'.

In the final chapter, I then return to broader social and historical themes in order to further analyse the experiences that adult videogame players described. I note the ways in which different play forms are present in the accounts provided, for example the negotiation between competition and chance, but in particular the role of the imagination – something that seems to dominate the accounts provided. By noting these dominant play rhetorics I am able to comment on the escapist aspects of this form of experiential consumption. In this respect I argue that videogame use represents a good example of a contemporary consumer culture based on imaginative experiences rather than use value, and on aesthetic, or playful rather than rational needs. This is further explored through an analysis of the specific discourses that adults use to account for the videogame play experiences. Here I note the perceived need for achievement in life and the recognition that work and social life often fail to provide the clear signs of achievement, but that these can result from videogame use. In this way videogames may be seen to allow for an actualisation of ideals that 'paramount' reality denies individuals. Overall I therefore note that videogames may provide for adults one useful resource for the management of their lives – not just their sense of progress and achievement, but also their relationships with others and their own sense of self. Yet this resource is not without problems and I also note the potential for videogame use to be 'mismanaged', exacerbating the very aspects of life that games are felt to help with. The result is that that although it may be easy to note the range of positive experiences reported from the use of videogames by adults, there is still room for critique about their overall impact on individuals and on society.

In the final section of the concluding chapter I consider the limitations of this study and note potential for further research. As my emphasis is on the range and types of experience of digital play as described by the players themselves, the results may be considered exploratory. Each of the different aspects of experience may be worthy of further investigation and in particular issues relating to age, family life stage and gender may be developed further. My sample was also small and based only in the relatively affluent South of England.

My hope for this work is that a reader will gain a better understanding of the complexity and importance of adult videogame play through the detailed accounts provided by players themselves, and of the broader social and cultural circumstances that inform play practices.

This is a broadening of the agenda for videogame research beyond the more narrow focus on violence and addiction that as to some degree dominated popular enquiry to date, and still different from formalist studies of games themselves, and players' in-game 'strategies' and behaviours. This work is also a contribution to our understanding of contemporary, experiential consumption practices and in particular the ways in which the market may form the basis of what Cohen and Taylor (1992) call 'escape attempts'.

Chapter 2: Discourses of play, consumption and digital games

In order to understand adults' consumption of videogames, I want to first briefly consider the videogame market, noting its size and structure and also noting dominant popular discourses related to it. This serves as a broad context in which this study takes place. However the main purpose of this chapter is to consider ideas or assumptions that might underpin any analysis of adult players' experiences. This is considered desirable by Thompson et al (1989), Goulding (1999), and Holstein and Gubrium (2005) as it may allow for both more subtlety and scope in the identification of themes and allow a connection to be made between adults' experiences and their life-worlds, and broader social and historical discourses

If we were to accept that the adult use of videogames is 'simply' a form of play then it seems reasonable to examine theories of play to gain insight into how such experiences may be understood and I do this in the second section of this chapter. Play turns out to be more complex than we might imagine. It is a term that has been used to explain the development of culture in societies and a way of regulating change in society (as ritualistic and theatrical performance), as well as a developmental, or recuperative phenomenon. Play also contains a wide range of forms, any combination of which might find their way into videogames. It may therefore be that videogames provide some insight into how play is currently understood and experienced by these adults, i.e., the conceptualisation of play they use to account for their own behaviours.

However as a leisure activity videogames also involve disposable income spent on hardware and software and involve behaviours related to buying, owning and using videogames that represent a potentially complex set of *consumption* practices. Within games individuals also interact with simulations of consumption activities, so we might consider that they are also new locations for consumption acts. The third part of the review will therefore consider discourses surrounding consumption, noting the inherent playfulness of consumption in its various forms. Here we see that to a large degree play has become commercialised, or perhaps consumption has become more playful (or at least more recognised as playful).

This presents a link between consumer culture and play and in the third section I consider a history of consumption that might account for a playful turn that has provided a trajectory towards digital simulations. The result is that I will have produced both a review of theories relating to play and consumption, and also a brief account of the historical trajectory towards experiential consumption practices of which videogames may represent a particularly good example.

This brings us to the existing dominant discourses used to account for videogames themselves. In the last section of this chapter I aim to consider these and to explore what it is about videogames that might make them 'special' as a subject of enquiry into contemporary

consumption practices. I conclude with an argument that aims to link our consumer society's preference for imaginative and playful consumption to the sorts of functional attributes of videogames that might make then attractive in such a context.

So this chapter provides an overview of the market and key popular discourses related to videogames, a review of play, then a review of consumer culture that considers its playfulness, and finally a more specific consideration of the consumption of digital media. This identification of both the broad and more specific discourses related to the consumption of videogames should allow for an analysis of the reported experiences of adult players that follows.

2.1 Videogames as adult leisure industry

Rutter and Bryce (2006) point out that it has become the 'custom' for videogame studies to start with an overview of the market that highlights its size. For example I might note that the European Leisure Software Publishers Association (ELSPA) claims that UK videogame sales were £519 million in first 6 months of 2007, with 26m games sold. However Rutter and Bryce complain that such market data is often presented without comparison and therefore merely as a rhetorical device to justify videogames as a focus by suggesting that they are somehow *more* significant than similarly sized markets. A comparison with other leisure media, for example by Mintel (2006a) reveals that game sales (including hardware) were £2,626m in 2006 and growing at 17%, whereas pre-recorded music sales were £1,721m (and in decline). Further comparison gives us Cinema (£1,151m and growing slowly); live entertainment (£1,243m growing slowly), and; visiting museums/galleries, (£879m). The only leisure forms doing better economically than videogames are DVDs (£2,755m and growing), and books (£6,493m). Globally, a similar picture is presented. Kolodny (2006) cites PricewaterhouseCoopers data that predicts that the 2010 global market for videogames may be worth $46.5billon. Although such growth *may* be justification for a study of videogames, Rutter and Bryce (2006) argue that other 'mundane' markets have equally impressive economic performance. The *reporting* of videogame market size and growth does however suggest that the industry would have us 'take video games more seriously'. And the use of such data by academics suggests that they too feel a need to justify the study of videogames as 'worthwhile', i.e., that unlike cinema, or music, etc., there is an implicit assumption that videogames are somehow too frivolous to be the subject of serious academic studies.

The industry also has good reason to want to be taken seriously. Commercial games cost millions of pounds (dollars, or yen) to develop and promote and as costs increase videogames again become comparable with films. In fact to some degree the two have become increasingly inter-related. It is expected to see videogame releases of major films (Poole,

2001) and to see films based on popular video games. Game producers have also learnt from Hollywood that valuable extra income can be gained through merchandising, tie-ins and other commercial involvement (Scally, 2000) and so look for new sources of income and/or marketing support. Alternatively they may look for ways to reduce licensing costs for simulation games through brand placement deals (Hyman, 2004; Gwinn, 2004). We see that as they have become more popular videogames are not just big business, but have become intertwined with systems of marketing and with other media forms.

So this is a complex and maturing market, yet the discourse of videogames as an apparently childish activity persists (see Newman, 2004). So as the industry struggles for respectability as a significant new business endeavour, a necessary angle of videogame PR is to 'normalise' *and* promote the use of games, for example by dismissing the popular perception of videogame players as predominantly male teenagers, obsessively playing alone (Poole, 2001). For example the US Entertainment Software Association (2007) claims that the average age of game players is 33 and that less than a third are under 18. They are also at pains to point out that 38% of players are female and that whereas the average adult player plays for 6.8 hours a week, they spend over 23 hours on activities such as: '*exercising or playing sports, volunteering in the community, religious activities, creative endeavours, cultural activities, and reading*'. Adding to this 'normality' is the ESA's claim that adult gamers have been playing for an average of 12 years, suggesting that they have happily carried a childhood interest into adult life.

In the UK market data reinforces this picture. Mintel (2006a) tell us that 58% of 20-24 year olds; 56% of 25-34 year olds; 46% of 35-44 year olds; 39% 44-55 year olds, and; 17% of the over 55's are videogame players. And in an overview of leisure activity Mintel (2006a) also demonstrate that 17% of adults (over 18) play video games in any one week. To illustrate the 'importance' of digital play, Mintel's (2006b) analysis of UK leisure also indicates the very limited amount of time adults have for such activities. Their data suggests that 33% of working adults have less than 2 hours day leisure time and 70% have less than 4 hours. For those with families, over half have less than 2 hours a day and only 17% more than 4 hours. Even at weekends half of adults with families have less than 4 hours leisure time. Leisure time is precious it seems and the videogame industry are keen to let us know that more adults than in the past seem to be choosing videogames to fill it. Perhaps this tension between the need for videogame consumption to be seen as 'normal' and even 'everyday' (and therefore not the potentially damaging obsession of anti-social teenagers) and yet also a desire for them to be 'special' and 'worth more consideration' (i.e. significantly different from other established leisure activities such as reading or watching TV) is a better justification for the study of videogames than simply market size? Although market data tells us that videogames

are popular with adults and perhaps a normal part of their leisure 'diet', we know little about adults' experiences with this media form.

Despite the care the industry is taking to promote videogames as economically important and culturally 'normal', there remains a strong discourse in the media of videogames as an unhealthy, childish activity. Poole (2001) cites a range of research linking violent behaviour in children to playing videogames and those interested in the development of the medium have expressed concern that much of the limited research on videogames takes this stance (Herz, 1997; Poole 2000; Newman 2004). The media pick up on this research, presenting videogames as socially undesirable and this has prompted Southern (2002) to suggest that there is a "*battle to prove that* [computer games] *are worthy of serious critical analysis, and not a lower art form*".

A good example of the popular belief that videogame play leads to violence is the suggested link between the game *Doom* and the Columbine high school shootings in the US in April 1999 (see King and Borland, 2003) and such coverage persists. For example Harris (3rd December 2006) writes in the *Daily Mail*: '*Playing violent video games makes children lose their self-control, a shocking new study has revealed*'. And Newson (20th August, 2005) in *The Times* writes: '*Gamers are rated as more hostile by their teachers, are more likely to argue with authority figures and are likely to be involved in altercations with other students at school. They also tend to perform more poorly on academic tests*'. These articles revel in the 'dangers' and disadvantages of playing violent games and the apparent links between games and violent crime. Another *Daily Mail* article claims: '*Violent video games can 'desensitise players* [this time students, not children] *to the horrors of real-life brutality after just 20 minutes of playing, scientists have discovered'*, (17th August 2006). Media coverage continues to promote links between specific crimes and perpetrators' videogame play. So for example the *Daily Mail* presents us with '*Student's cannabis rampage emulates ultra-violent computer game'* (15th May 2007), and '*Crash teen's video game turns to deadly reality'*, (16th February 2007). *The Sun* follows up a story about a killing linked to a videogame with an 'investigation' which reveals a '*sicko games scandal'*, (The Sun, 2004) where high street stores sell 18-certificate games to teenagers despite the 'dangers'. When not reporting a link with violence or poor school performance, the media may also present games as problematically addictive. For example BBC News online report: '*A clinic that offers treatment for people addicted to playing computer games has opened in the Netherlands'*, (18th July 2006). And then Bruner and Burner (2006) give us: *Playstation Nation: Protect Your Child from Video Game Addiction* in which we are warned that 20% of children will become '*addicted to violent and damaging game content'*. 'Negative' videogame stories dominate press coverage. Apposing views barely register, but there are some, for example Davey (January 27th, 2006) in *The Times* reports '*Video games have been much maligned but*

could be used to help to teach serious subjects such as quantum mechanics and history in school'. However, like coverage of violence and addiction, such stories continue to position video games as largely a 'youth issue' rather than a 'legitimate' adult activity.

The persistent framing by the media of videogames as a 'problem' has recently prompted a large study - including of adult players - by the British Board of Film Classification (2007) to inform classification systems. Perhaps inevitably the findings suggest that there is no simple pattern to the preference and use of digital games, although they do highlight that games are a form of 'escapism' and 'distraction', and that the form of escape and need for distraction varies considerably by individual. The report also places an emphasis on education to inform parents that games may contain adult themes, but in doing so also acknowledges a legitimate adult interest in playing videogames – including those with violent content – similar to that accepted for film. In fact, in addition for the BBFC system, the ELSPA offer their own rating system for videogames to allow parents to assess their suitability for children (ELSPA, 2007). A consequence of this is that some games are now explicitly designed for and aimed at older teenagers and adults (Hertz, 1997, Poole 2001, Mintel, 2006b). The quasi-legal system of age classification confirms an adult market.

A focus on violent games also masks the broader range of videogame contexts and themes. Videogames are often classified by genres such as 'beat-em-ups', driving, sports simulations, adventure, role-playing, and 'god-games '(Poole 2001). Mintel (2000) presents a similar break down and highlights that the most popular are actually adventure/strategy games, accounting for 24% of the market, followed by driving games (20%) and sports simulations (17%). 'Beat-em-ups' - the games most often cited in the context of violent content - make up only 12% of game sales and when the BBC News (29th December, 2006) reported on the best game of 2006, their experts chose only one 'shooter', but two adventure games and two sports titles. It would therefore be hard to maintain an argument that the games industry and players themselves are obsessed with violence. So although it may be possible to produce normative arguments that some videogames may be 'undesirable', or 'damaging' to children (just like some films), such criticisms cannot be generally applied to all videogames.

Another 'myth' of videogames is the popular perception of them as the preoccupation of the disaffected 'loner' when it actually seems that videogames players of all ages frequently play in social contexts (Poole, 2001, Sherry, Lucas, Rechsteiner, Brooks & Wilson, 2001). They play *with* friends. Many people (66% of children, 16% of adults) report that they like to play against another person rather than against the computer (Mintel, 2000) and some games allow for many players – potentially thousands – either through linked machines, or via a network. The development of networked PC games and now cheaper, networked consoles has created 'virtual communities' of games players (Poole, 2001). Most recently, for example

Blizzard, the makers of *World of Warcraft* claim over 9m players (2007). Online play is now seen as an important part of the profitability of games consoles for some time (see Gunther, 1999).

So the videogames market is complex and diverse and relatively few games contain extreme violence. Videogames are also routinely played by adults - including women - and far from videogames being a solitary activity for the 'socially inadequate', evidence seems to suggest that they are at least potentially highly social. It is perhaps only this slightly mundane 'normality' of videogame play that prevents the take-up of such a reality by the media – ironically, stories about violence and addiction make for more compelling reading. Yet the adult consumption of videogames is still relatively new and beyond the drama of media coverage and industry hype I believe there is still interest in better understanding how such practices are incorporated into everyday adult life. For example, videogames are evidence that adults desire to play, and that some of that play is based on what may seem like childish fantasy (casting spells, fighting aliens, or being a racing driver or elite sportsperson) despite popular media coverage that seems critical of such activity. Videogames also suggest that this desire for adult play may be facilitated, structured, or even exploited by a sophisticated media industry. So we have a complex interaction between consumer cultures, more implicit play cultures (that are possibly overshadowed by a popular discourse of adult play as 'frivolous' – see below), and sophisticated media technologies.

2.2. The purposes of play

If the adult use of videogames suggests a desire amongst adults to play, then it is necessary to examine the concept of play in more detail to account for such activity. However, when we start to examine play we find that even a simple definition is elusive. Sutton-Smith's (1997) review of play notes a wide diversity of approaches to understanding play. Similarly Huzinga highlights that "*play is a function of the living, but is not susceptible to exact definition either logically, biologically or aesthetically*", (1938:7). Then Caillois declares, "*The multitude and infinite variety of games at first causes one to despair of discovering a principle of classification capable of subsuming them under a small number of well-defined categories*", (1958:11). And later Spariosu writes, "*Despite an ever-growing interest in play and countless attempts to explain its nature and function, the play concept remains today as elusive as it was two thousand years ago*", (1989:3). One result of this for Sutton-Smith and for Spariosu is that they turn to consider the ways in which play has come to be evoked in various discourses. This is consistent with Hunnicott's (2006) view about the evolution of a discourse of leisure. He suggests: "*The major texts in leisure studies have long agreed that leisure is an historical product: that there was a time... when leisure was unknown, and that at some point*

leisure emerged as a cultural category, initially identified by new words and in institutions, rituals, myths and so on" (2006:55). So language emerges from observations about changes in society where there is a need to place greater emphasis on a specific aspect of behaviour and both play and leisure may therefore be understood as ways of describing one particular set of activities in opposition to another.

Historically, leisure time (time for play) derives from a recognition that individuals may have times when they are 'obliged' to act, for example to find and consume food, to rest etc, and when they are 'free' to act (for example see Van der Poel, 2006). However as Van der Poel also highlights, we may have doubts about the extent that any apparent freedom is outside normative constraints. We are 'obliged' to choose leisure activities that society considers 'normal' and I have already highlighted that for videogames this process of 'normalisation' is ongoing and promoted for commercial interests. Additionally we might recognise a 'formalisation' of the division between work and leisure time. Until recently work was emphasised as the key aim in life but more recently we see an emphasis on work being the *means* by which leisure is achieved, with leisure becoming the purpose of life (Hunnicutt, 2006). Leisure is therefore in an iterative relationship with non-leisure activities. As Van der Poel puts it: "[Leisure] *is part and parcel of daily life. It is influenced by the other things we do during the day, the week and the year and it has its own impacts on these other activities*" (2006:102). With the necessities of life catered for, leisure may become the location of searches for meaning in life (Hunnicutt, 2006). This line of argument also dominates Cohen and Taylor's (1992) view of a life-world divided between routine, mundane 'paramount reality', and individuals' endless attempts to 'escape' in order to find the 'real them'. We have therefore become obliged to create 'free time' for ourselves and to fill that time with self-defining activities. However as Cohen and Taylor (1992) also observe, there is a tendency for apparently successful escape attempts to produce new routines from which a further escape may seem desirable. Hence when leisure becomes ordinary - just another obligatory aspect of life - the quest for new games becomes pressing. It is this opposition to 'normal' and 'routine' that makes play so hard to define precisely. The result is that play is restless, or as Huizinga explains it, play is a result of our desire to transcend 'ordinary life'. And from this we may get the idea that play is no less than the generation of culture itself.

The idea of play as transformation of the ordinary - a phenomenon that results from the recognition of 'free time' and goes on to produce existential angst - seems compelling, but is not uncontested. As Sutton-Smith (1997) explains, a major ambition of *many* studies about play has been to answer, 'what is play?' and 'why do we play?' These are the philosophical endeavours that attempt to uncover the essence of play. For example Spariosu (1989) considers the way play has historically been used in a range of philosophical and scientific discourses beyond the conceptualisation of 'leisure time', noting an ongoing struggle in

thought between pre-rational and rational approaches that continuously introduce change in the way we think about and explain the world around us. Other studies of play are content to consider the forms and types of play and players, seeking to understand the significance of specific play practices. These studies ask: 'why do *these people* play *these* games at these times?' Or to put it another way, what is it about the everyday lives of individuals that results in specific types of play? For example, Caillois (1958) considers a classification of play-forms (*agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*) that may be used to map the world of play and the pleasures of players.

According to Sutton-Smith (1997) the result of this diversity is discipline-based rhetorics, or persuasive discourses about play. In reviewing them Sutton-Smith encourages reflexivity, asking us to consider why we should accept a particular explanation of play. For example, why is the use of videogames 'frivolous play', when the use of other software is 'useful work'? We might recognise that this is only the case because of cultural conversions that encourage us to 'see' these actions as different based on an unquestioning sense of what play is. In this sense play is a 'frame' for cultural activities that are outside of routine and obligation and that therefore oppose them. In defining play we are therefore also framing routine and obligation and we then use these assumptions to understand the activity we are observing.

A key 'practical' outcome of Sutton-Smith's review is an explanation of the range of activities that may be termed play, and of how these activities link together through a variety of conceptual approaches, i.e. an elaboration and extension of Caillois's play forms and explanation of the role of play in society, (although Sutton-Smith doesn't present his own review as an update). I will now consider Sutton-Smith's seven rhetorical positions - *fate, power, identity, imaginary, the self* and, *frivolous* - in more detail. Each rhetoric assumes a definition of play, therefore implying a purpose to play and a range of play forms, (although as we shall see there is considerable overlap), but they are further grouped according to 'ancient' and 'modern' and therefore also partially represent the historical development of thought about play, (although recognising that newer ways of thinking about play never completely replace older thoughts). I will start with the ancient rhetorics of fate, power and identity. Although Frivolity is also seen as ancient, Sutton-Smith separates this rhetoric as an assumption about play that all other approaches oppose and I therefore leave this to last.

2.2.1. Play and fate

The most ancient play rhetoric - fate - well illustrates the difference between play as a category of behaviour and something more ontological. Play as fate has its roots in the idea that external forces (for example gods) direct human existence. In modern times it would be

unexpected that scientific explanations of behaviour were based on the will of a deity, but as Spariosu (1989) highlights, during the 20th century our understanding of physics was transformed from a largely ordered and predictable Newtonian or Einsteinian view of the universe, to a more unpredictable and chaotic quantum explanation. To Spariosu this is evidence for the idea that thought-systems periodically vary between order and chaos and evidence that our current period of thinking in many areas increasingly favours a view of a chaotic, playful world - a world at play and full of chance.

Chance, or *alea* is also one of the four main classifications of play suggested by Caillois (1958). Although fate as 'play of the gods' may no longer be used as an explanation of the world, it is still a popular and widespread form of play. Gambling and chance-games are common and even sought after experiences in modern society as players abandon rationality in favour of 'fate'. Caillois also follows Huzinga (1938) in suggesting that games of chance lie at the heart of commerce and therefore that the structures that produce commerce are based on contingency, rather than rational progress as they are elsewhere assumed to be. It may also be that consumer culture is attractive at least in part because individuals enjoy pitching themselves against the element of risk inherent in commercial transactions (although neither Callois or Huzinga develop a thesis of play as a foundation for consumer behaviour). There may be many examples of consumer risk-taking for pleasure, for example dangerous sports and leisure pursuits. So some consumption practices – and we might include videogames here – may be ways of experiencing 'controlled risks' in a rational society where fate is no longer an appropriate way to see life.

2.2.2. Play and power

Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of power also maps onto one of Caillois's types of play: contest or *agôn.* Most obviously sports (both played and played vicariously as a spectator) are a significant part of many people's lives and digital play also often simulates 'everyday' and more exotic forms of contest. But this rhetoric is more than just a discourse on competitive games. It also captures one way that play has been conceptualised as something fundamental to culture itself, although Sutton-Smith notes a distinction between play as a structuring, controlling activity (the maintenance of culture) and as a disruptive, resistive activity (changes in culture).

The first approach sees play as a civilising force. In particular Huzinga (1938) argues that contest lies at the heart of the development of culture, and that play therefore has a role in ordering society into rules. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) provides one such account of play as power. He explains the way in which 'formal' play, or rituals are used to structure and control social groups by describing the various transformations required in pre-modern

societies. He noted that periods of change were often accompanied by ritualised periods and/or spaces that he termed liminal, such as the 'rites of passage' from boy to man, or single to married as well as transitions from one season to the next. The role of rituals was to manage such transitions. This may be seen as a form of power because it suggests that the ability to control which rituals are performed is also the ability to maintain specific cultures.

Although something of the liminial ritual may still exist in modern societies, Turner also argues is that these formal spaces have been replaced by more fragmented and individualised 'liminoid' (liminal-like) spaces that are experienced as moments of *individual* change or disorder. Unlike the liminal, the idiosyncratic disorder of the liminoid therefore often works in opposition to existing structures. In this way, Turner suggests that modern society has lost something of the formal use of play as a controlling force than maintains a consistent order, and instead produces play-forms that are more chaotic in the way they introduce change. This is consistent with Spariosu's (1989) observation of the friction between Apollonian, rational order and Dionysian, chaotic and irrational play. For Spariosu our current post-modern moment is the reawakening of the Dionysian in society that signals that playfulness cannot be captured and contained as easily as it might where societies are structured through collective rituals and festivals. We now find the potential for transformational play to be everywhere and such play leads to power by subverting or dismantling accepted rules. Caillois also captures this idea, describing rule-based play as *ludus* and imaginative, unstructured play as *paidia.* Individualised play where the emphasis is on freedom to choose seems more like paidia. So we see videogame play as a set of practices arising out of a Dionysian consumer culture.

Play as power describes a process of continual flux between structure and chaos that we also see in works on the management of everyday life. For example Cohen and Taylor (1992) see individuals as 'trapped' in routine – from daily habits, to their entire life-plans – the awareness of which prompts various 'escape attempts'. The lives of individuals are then divided into a set of routines, 'scripts' in Goffman's (1959) terms, and various attempts to disrupt or deny those routines through play. Although not all of Cohen and Taylor's escape attempts are games (they include moving house, changing job, or having an affair), they are all deliberate attempts by individuals to create some limioid space. This sociological sentiment is also present in Bauman (2001). Here the individual has lost the 'public' and is therefore unable to account for their problems by reflecting on social structures, only by considering individual circumstances. Bauman therefore calls for critical theory to 'swap sides'. Rather than reflect the system (the rules), he asks for a reflection on the status of the individual (the player). In play as power then, we may see adult play as the management of everyday life where broad structures of order are punctuated by deliberately and idiosyncratically chosen spaces of identity renewal through disruptive play. This is play as

resistance to the routines of everyday life, but perhaps the broader social structures that seem to allow our consumer society to persist do so because of considerable freedom to play different games, none of which present an overall challenge to the system itself. Cohen and Taylor (1992) seem to acknowledge this by suggesting that it is not so much the endless attempts to escape the routines of daily life that seems curious, but the persistence of 'paramount reality' in light of such attempts.

The rhetoric of play as power therefore talks to a society bound by a culture formed from a consensus about what behaviours should govern everyday actions. But these are never fixed: there is always a creative process to change and undermine them. It is easy to imagine that today's ever changing, individualised consumer culture is a result of increasing difficulty in maintaining shared, ordered experiences and ever more opportunities for individualised, spontaneous behaviour. We are therefore left with a question about the degree to which digital play may allow new forms of resistance to dominant, normative discourses in society and the degree to which these may be ordered and 'managed'. So for example Turkle (1995) the potential for games to raise consciousness about broad social issues, and in the study of 'serious [video]games', Frasca (2003) also argues that videogames can apparent and therefore critique dominant ideologies.

2.2.3. Play and identity

The boundary between play rhetorics is blurred and this seems especially true of power and identity. Here identity-play refers to group identity (individual identity is dealt with as a 'modern' issue: as a 'rhetoric of the self') encompassing approaches to understanding group-play and festival. Sutton-Smith notes that: "*the more powerful group induces the subordinate group by persuasion or example to play the hegemonial group's games*" (1997:96) By accepting the play forms of dominant groups, subordinates may also accept a broader set of values and in this respect the link to power is clear.

It is possible to imagine a range of contemporary celebrations that serve to maintain group identity. These could be the cup-final football match and other sporting activities, but may also include the 'festival' of the January sales that reaffirm our status as shoppers and formally signal the end of one consuming year and the start of the next (with eagerly awaited new products). Other modern consumer events might include the celebrations of the '*Oscar*' awards or the *MTV* music awards, both reasserting the importance of another year in media and marking the significance of the previous period's achievements. Another example may be the launch of the latest videogame console as a clear mark of technological progress. It is also possible that modern festivals may seem to reject consumer culture. Klein (2002), for example describes the organised anti-capitalism demonstrations that became regular and

popular at the end of the 20th century, and Kozinets (2002) also considers the inversion of consumer values that is presented at the annual *Burning Man* festival in America. However Turner (1982) observes that carnivals of inversion often serve to maintain order by clearly stating their temporary nature and therefore the inevitable return to a normal, 'natural' order. In other words we might not mistake a ritual of reinforcement for an opportunity for rebellion and resistance. Festival may serve a conservative role by framing behaviours that are not normally tolerated in society as just that.

Other than these 'festival events' we also observe games associated with specific groups or even social classes (football versus polo, for example). Videogames as 'group ritual' or group identity seems harder to identify, perhaps confirming their status as largely individualised 'liminoid' experience. Alternatively as Massive, Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) become more popular their role in forming new group identities may also be significant. For example Steinkuehler & Williams (2006) provide evidence of online games as a 'third space' where players are exposed to a diversity of views about the world that their otherwise privatised and individualised lives deny. Yet as a consumer activity, we note that the media industry has been successful in ensuring that the direction of adult play activities ensures the need to keep buying the latest technologies and software. Here we might argue that the meta-game is consumption and that the group identity of 'consumers' remains enforced in the otherwise potential subversive activity of adult videogame play.

The 'ancient' rhetorics of play firstly give us the idea of play being events that are outside the individual's control (play as fate). This is play as a loss of agency and capitulation to forces beyond individual influence: the excitement of contingency. If adults desire risk taking in a society where risks have been 'sanitised', it may be that videogames can provide such experiences. Secondly there is the idea that play is not trivial, but rather may describe the way in which societal norms are both maintained through ritual and 'chipped away at' through resistive play. So we might ask how videogames change cultures. For example, do they restate the legitimacy of play for adults? Or do they confirm the importance of the market as a key provider of games? Or both? Thirdly play can be the voluntary surrender of individual identity to a group. Hence we may consider what is it to be an adult 'gamer' and the degree to which adults may publicly display their game playing activities and in particular the degree to which they may play together. These ideas about play are at seemingly at odds with play defined by the 'modern' rhetorics.

2.2.4. Play as progress

Play as progress dominates 'modern' play discourse by presenting play as having a developmental role. For example, play is how infants learn to be adults. An implication of such a conceptualisation is that for a 'fully developed' adult play has no useful role. Chick sums up the logic here: "*Recent studies suggest that play is essentially a juvenile activity and that the retention of neonatal characteristics into adulthood results in playful behaviour throughout the adult lifespan*" (2006:43). Adult play as no more than retained childishness is probably responsible for our modern use of a series of euphemisms such as hobbies, recreation, sport, pastimes, or entertainment to describe adult play behaviours (we may note, for example, that the European trade association for videogames calls itself the European *Leisure* Software Publishers Association). So adult play is no more than a temporary regression to childhood. Adults work rather than play this rhetoric may demand.

However Sutton-Smith also notes a form of play-as-progress that makes further claims that play aids the survival of the species. This discourse acknowledges that even adult play activities are practice, experimentation, and preparation for the 'real thing'. Through play humans speculate about a range of possible activities in anticipation that any of them might be useful. The 'chattering' brain tries things out in play in order that it might know what to do should such events occur for real. It may also work to actualise speculations that it finds particularly useful. Although this may be a compelling explanation for adult play that brings it into a broader discourse of usefulness and progress, we may see an immediate problem in continuing to account for play in these terms. What are the 'real' activities that adults are preparing themselves for when they play golf, watch football, or play videogames? This discourse may have limited luminary power when it comes to accounting for such culture. Ultimately it reduces the complexity of human behaviour to a simple story of progress. Yet there are a growing number of studies that aim to demonstrate the educational value of digital games (for example see Gee, 2004) and in doing so help to justify games in a society where ideas of progress are assumed and desired.

The dominance of this conceptualisation of play is probably also responsible for the problems many non-players of digital games have in accepting that this might be a 'normal' adult activity. Play as progress subordinates play to other purposes and positions play as 'not real', but simply about real things (play fighting as practice for real fighting in animals, for example). I will return to this problem of play and reality later, but Cohen and Taylor (1992) provide illustration of the care we might take when 'dismissing' play as in this way. They reflect that their own language has contrasted 'escapes' with 'paramount reality' and seems to therefore present play as in opposition to 'real' life, yet the playful escapes undertaken by

individuals 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 'real' life is preparation for play.

2.2.5. Play of the imagination

If play as progress hints at the speculative, experimental aspect of play, this is better captured in play of the imaginary. Neither Huzinga or Caillois directly deal with play as fantasy, instead focussing on physical structures and behaviours, but the imagination is frequently implicit, for example in the non-materiality of the 'magic circle' described by Huizinga, and in Caillois's *mimicry* (the role-play of actors). Performance Richard Schechner is more explicit about the role of imaginative play however. Schechner (1988) describes aesthetic drama as an outlet for fantasies that cannot be actualised in everyday social life because of taboos or conventions of behaviour. For Schechner, art is a way to explore the norms of society, to speculate, and to deal with these issues in a way that might feed back into everyday social action. Here the emphasis is on imagining what the world might be, rather than scenarios that might be practiced in anticipation of a later 'need'.

Our current view of play of the imagination has its roots in the Romantic period starting at the end of the eighteenth century and refers to conceptualisations of all kinds of artistic endeavours. Sutton-Smith highlights that from this perspective play is seen as something that captures the flexibility of human thought. The Romantic Movement, according to Sutton-Smith, was a reaction against the growth of industrialisation and urban lifestyles. Again we see resistance in play and Spariosu's idea of the friction between the rational and the pre-rational thought. As thought and behaviour is increasingly ordered through industrial work-practices, a movement grows to free individuals from these constraints. This is a perspective of play which again places it at the heart of the human experience and gives it ontological status - playing as 'being human' - and epistemological status as a concept that may at times be rejected in order to serve the existence of objective truth, or evoked to undermine the objectivity of knowing. As the 'truth' of science and progress seems to falter, post-modern critics draw on play as a more central metaphor to explain society. So for example Derrida (1970) declares that science is no more than a play of language – an imagined truth rather than *the* truth, and Baudrillard (1981) suggests that as individuals we now inhabit an imagined, simulated hyper-reality where one play of signs simply reflects another. In this environment the individual lives in a daydream created by the media and fed by advertising. This seems uncomfortably close to how critics may describe videogame use.

Ultimately Sutton-Smith is critical of the nihilism that can result from such conceptualisations however, suggesting that this is too much of a description of passive, manipulated individuals and noting Derrida and Foucault as theorists who acknowledge that

individuals are by no means powerless to change the rules of the dominant games that culture presents them with.

Play of the imagination is perhaps not surprisingly also implicit in much of the research into digital games. For example Turkle's (1995) view of games (and interactive media in general) as spaces in which new identities may be imagined and acted out, therefore allowing new ways of 'being' to be experimented with and as we shall see later the ability to actualise the imagination may be a significant characteristic of videogames as well as a defining feature of 'modern' consumption practices. So videogames clearly require imagination and a certain about of role-playing, but the question remains about the degree to which this 'romantic sentiment' is used by adults to account for their own behaviours.

2.2.6. Play of the self

The last 'modern' rhetoric, play of the self, is most closely associated with the individual modern subject. Here play is a quality of experience that individuals 'desire'. This may even extend to play being seen as an individual's freedom to create themselves through their chosen experiences: play as the performance of chosen identity. Turkle (1995) again highlights that the computer may have a specific and new role in this process by allowing individuals to project their once hidden daydreams onto the screen. In interpreting this view Sutton-Smith suggests (1997:178): *"There can be no doubt that virtual worlds are a new play form allowing adults to play almost as amorphously as children"*. Again the porosity between Sutton-Smith's rhetorics seems obvious.

Play of the self as self-actualisation also means that through play individuals achieve 'ultimate enjoyment' in life. Sutton-Smith draws on Csikszentmihalyi's work in particular as illustrative of this view. Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1977) suggests that there is a specific 'optimal' psychological state – 'flow' – that individuals can reach when they play their chosen games. However Sutton-Smith notes that although such a state might be observed, it is another form of reductionism to suggest that *all* peak experience, however gained might amount to this same thing. We might still ask why members of a particular society choose specific ways to achieve flow? Sutton-Smith also points out that such theories of self-actualisation gained from chosen activities sit all too comfortably with secular, consumer lifestyles and that this in fact accounts for its popularity. Play as 'freedom' conveniently avoids analysis of the normative pressure society places on specific leisure activities. In the study of digital games flow is also a way to avoid the ideology of games by focussing on the pleasures produced by an 'ideal' balance of skills and challenges (for example see Juul, 2005). So play of the self isolates play and therefore the player from social contexts.

Overall Sutton-Smith rejects approaches to conceptualising play *only* in terms of individual experience, highlighting the importance of the various cultures that play continues to produce, and that often *undermine* the freedom of players to engage or otherwise in certain types of play. But he also notes the phenomenologists' (especially Gadamer, 1960) views on the individual's experience of play. They "*introduce the notion that play is characterised more by desire than by freedom, more by wish and hope for the future and by optimism*" (Sutton-Smith, 1997:197). In this respect, play of the self ends up like play of the imagination in placing an emphasis on speculation and creativity, and the aesthetic experiences that these produce. For videogames we might still consider issues of 'self-actualisation', satisfaction in achievement and a sense of freedom through play.

Modern conceptualisations of play may be seen as reflecting and supporting modern social structures, in particular the role of science as a progressive activity (Spariosu, 1984), but perhaps also the legitimacy of the market as a structure that provides pleasure for individuals. Play of the self may be an idea that can be used as justification for, and explanation of the structuring of society around liberal democracy and market capitalism. But we might be cautious of the drift towards hegemony that this discourse can produce acknowledging what Turner (1982) refers to as 'anti-structure', those periods of play that allow individuals to be outside the obligatory, ordered 'rules' of behaviour that society imposes. Again, this is exactly the point of play-as-escape suggested by Cohen and Taylor (1992). So again, we might consider adults experiences of videogames in this context. Are they understood as a romantic form of escape, or an aid to flow, or a way for adults to learn new skills?

2.2.7. Play as frivolous

Although 'ancient', the rhetoric of 'frivolous' play is separated from the others because it is opposed to and denies them all. Sutton-Smith makes clear that this is not so much a conceptualisation of play, but a way of emphasising the importance of 'something else', by placing it in opposition to 'meaningless' play. He notes in particular the role of the Protestant ethic in presenting play in this way. Work is useful; play is non-productive, but in fact each play rhetorics implies 'good' versus 'bad' play and so attempts to persuade that a certain view of play is 'right'. This reminds us that through discourses of play authors are often presenting their view of something other than play. For example: accepting play as progress promotes the very idea of progress and therefore also the potential for some types of play to prevent progress (this is what we see in many articles on videogames in the press, for example); idealising imaginary play (literature and poetry) leads to a rejection of mass sports, or mass-

market games as trivial and superficial, and violent media as vulgar and meaningless, and; in play of the individual there is a distinction between 'peak' experience and other kinds of 'wasted' time and therefore an obligation on the part of the player to play their best in order to be their best.

Sutton-smith makes another key point under this section: the general absence of the term play in books on human behaviour (representing the general rejection of play in science) despite Spariosu's claim of a current re-emergence of play in scientific discourse. As play is generally seen as frivolous, academic work that considers play as more than just a useful metaphor is tarnished with the same superficiality. Spariosu (1989) illustrates this point. Literature is presented as play - a fiction, or 'lie' - in order that science may be presented as a truth. Science therefore needs a clear and accepted view of fiction (play) in order to promote itself as somehow genuinely 'true'. In this respect the 'frivolous play' of stories is a lie that hides the absence of a truth. In a society that gives so much weight to science and progress, it may therefore be undesirable to play as central to culture and more broadly to our understanding of the world.

The persistence of the discourse of 'frivolity' is also seen in many of the studies that explicitly aim to demonstrate the damaging effects of digital play and is perhaps even more apparent in the absence of 'serious' studies into adult videogame use. After all, what would be the point of such a frivolous project? Yet of course we must also allow for the possibility that videogames *are* frivolous and of little significance even to the adults that play them. It is possible that even adults who play videogames also find more compelling games.

2.2.8. Play as the purpose of life

Having explored the diversity of play rhetorics Sutton-Smith opts for a definition of play as a useful evolutionary development - 'adaptive variability'. This seems disappointing given that the limitations of play as 'instinct' were dismissed by Huizinga even in the opening page of *Homo Ludens*:

> *If we call the active principle that makes up the essence of play, 'instinct', we explain nothing; if we call it 'mind' or 'will' we say too much. However we may regard it, the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself.* (1938:1).

But 'adaptive variability' is not *really* Sutton-Smith's conclusion. More importantly he demonstrates the value of play theories as a way to explain the complexities of human existence, both on an individual and social level. Play captures something fundamental about human actions, making them accessible to our understanding. Each of the rhetorics tells us something useful about the way we understand the world. So at times when religion or

superstition structures society, play is conceptualised as fate, more recently scientific progress has encouraged play to be seen as developmental, and more recently still play has a focus on the imagination and especially in our consumer society the focus is on the self and individual experiences.

Sutton-Smith updates Caillois by extending the range and types of activities that may be called play. We can map Caillios's (1958) play forms as follows: *agon*, covered by Sutton-Smith in rhetorics of power in particular; *alea*, present in rhetorics of fate; *mimicy*, present in rhetorics of performance and especially identity, and; *ilinx*, present in discussion about the 'other world-ness' and freedom in play and especially in non-competitive sports and activities (and therefore perhaps also the play of the self expressed in 'flow'). Such consistency suggests that whatever 'grand' purpose of play we might wish to adopt, the forms that it takes can be articulated in a small number of classifications such that they can be grasped and understood. I will return to these play forms in the discussion of consumption as play to consider how they are already at the heart of much consumption practice.

Sutton-Smith also updates Huzinga, by reflecting a broader range of theoretical perspectives and relating these to the much wider range of play activities. But Sutton-Smith's central message is the same as Caillois's, Huzinga's, Turner's, Schechner's, and others: play, however problematically defined, lies at the heart of the development of culture and is a significant and pervasive part of human experience. Perhaps another difference between now and the time of Huzinga's work is that this idea seems much less radical. And this in turn may be explained by our familiarity with many postmodernist writers (Spariosu's return to playfulness recent philosophical thought). Play is now used to explain the ever shifting, changing culture we can observe but can no-longer believe is taking us anywhere in particular - hence Cohen and Taylor's (1992) observation that however successful an escape attempt may seem, there is a tendency for the new situation to produce routines from which a further escape may seem desirable. In a response to several essays on videogames Schechner makes this point more bluntly:

> *The interactives, the soaps, and the news are all products of an underlying actuality: a craving for immortality in a world where many people no longer believe in an afterlife. The flow of experience is our collective afterlife, ironically lived 'right now'. The afterlife of postmodernity has dramatized current events in a positive feedback loop with open-ended games* (2004:195).

Sutton-Smith's final definition of play probably also captures this quite well:

> *Think of play as a lifelong simulation of the key neonatal characteristics of unrealistic optimism, egocentricity, and reactivity, all of which are guarantors of persistence in the face of adversity"* (1997:231).

Play, as a phenomenon that captures, or mediates both chaos and structure (playfulness/game, or paidia/ludus, or Dionysian/Apollonian/, or speculative virtual reality/mundane reality, or escape/routine) replaces ideas about an objective progress towards some ultimate human goal. At the same time and perhaps un-coincidentally, a dominant force of contemporary life - consumption - also gives up explanations based on progress and rational, utility-based decision-making and offers itself as playful. At a time when postmodernists would have us believe that there are no grand purposes to life, play presents itself as a worthwhile purpose and an explanation for the fragmented, individualised, but still meaningful experiences of the consumer.

2.3. Play in theories of consumption

If play is an idea that helps us to understand the maintenance of and resistance to cultural norms, then in a society largely structured by the market we might expect to see consumer culture as playful. We might expect to see marketplace 'games' reflecting dominant ideas about society and we might expect to see resistance in at least some consumer play. In this section I want to explore discourses on consumption for their playfulness as a way to potentially understand videogame use as a consumer practice.

For researchers considering contemporary consumption there appears to have been something of a 'playful turn' in thinking similar to Spariosu's (1989) analysis of a recent playful turn in philosophy and scientific thinking. However in most cases either a narrow view of play is taken (for example just one of Sutton-Smith's rhetorics), or play is used to describe just one aspect of consumption (assuming that most consumption isn't playful). For example Baudrillard (1970; 1981) makes a specific critique of consumption through the description of a 'play of signs'; Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) write about experiential consumption (of which play might be only one type), and elsewhere about 'hedonic' consumption as an alternative to utility-based purchasing (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982); Campbell (1987) suggests that consumption involves the imagination of 'dream-artists', as does McCracken (1998) and Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003); Holt (1995) considers play as a type of consumption practice that focuses on socialising; Elliot and Wattanasuwan (1998) explore 'consumption and the symbolic project of the self', (consumers playfully exploring their identity), and; Csikszentmihalyi (2000) comments on 'good' and 'bad' consumption experiences in terms of their ability to produce playful 'flow'. Even Fine (1997) points out that 'consumption as play' is only an analogy. But Fine's rejection of all 'rational' analysis of consumption activity in favour of it's playfulness seems at least consistent with Spariosu's 'prediction' of the cyclical return to the Dionysian. Fine declares:

> *The attraction of consumption as play is that these* [existing] *perspectives are immediately seen to be inappropriate or, at least, incomplete. Consumption becomes chaotic, unsystematic, random, and innovative, deliberately evading, subverting, and even overturning any norms that are established* (1997:8).

And Fine's further claim that child's play simply gives way to adult consumption also seems to hint that our understanding of consumption as playful is subtly masked by language of progress. Grayson (1999) also does more than most to presents play as central to the interactions of market players by considering the ways in which consumers and producers play games with each other.

In many of these studies playful consumption is used to distinguish between the material use-value of goods and their hedonic or symbolic meanings. For example Barber (2007) dismisses much of the later as 'infantile' play, and argues for more emphasis on the former.

A sociology derived from play might make broader claims for the ways in which consumer culture is playful. So rather than consider play as one type of consumption, we may consider the different types of play that are practiced in a consumer culture as well as the rhetoric's of play that may be used to account for such activity. To achieve this I draw from a text that sets out to do for consumption, what Sutton-Smith has done for play.

Like Sutton-Smith's review of play, perhaps the first thing that might strike a reader of Gabriel and Lang's (1995) *The Unmanageable Consumer* is the diversity of often-contradictory approaches used in explaining consumption. Like play, studies of consumption deal with both attempts to capture the 'essence' of consumption, and attempts to explain the diversity of experiences that might be described as consumption (everything from shopping, tourism, education and politics). For example, Ekstrom and Brebeck suggest: "*Not only the disciplines studying consumption, but also the actual act of consumption itself, have become more and more porous. Consumption is gradually trickling into all areas of human life*", (2004:1). Gabriel and Lang also encourage reflexivity in researchers, asking that they examine underlying assumptions that lead to specific statements about the meaning of consumption and again this is appropriate as the basis of a phenomenological study. Gabriel and Lang articulate nine different conceptualisations: *chooser, communicator; explorer; identify-seeker; hedonist or artist; victim, rebel, activist* and *citizen*. As with play rhetorics these conceptualisation relate to historical trends in thinking, with chooser perhaps the oldest, and identity seeker, artist, activist and citizen all newer views, although again like play, this may be better described as a struggle between perspectives rather than a clear trajectory. Just as Spariosu described the tension between pre-rational and rational play, we might observe a similar conflict in conceptualisations of consumption, with structured, rational consumption, seeking never quite successfully to dominate the more chaotic forms.

2.3.1. Consumption as choice

Gabriel and Lang (1995) start their review with an idea at the heart of economics, and a central justification for the organising of society around capitalism: choice. Rational consumer choice drives efficiency in markets, encourages innovation and drives down costs. Discourses on choice 'require' consumers to understand options and then make the 'right' decision, and chastise consumers who choose frivolously or badly. A better life for all is realised through competitive markets if we all just choose wisely. 'Consumer as chooser' is therefore a rational discourse of progress and presents consumption as an adult activity that must be taken seriously.

However choice may also be linked to several types of play. Firstly, consumer choice may be seen as a highly structured 'puzzle game' that challenges consumers to pit themselves against the market. Seen in this way however, the seduction of the consumer by what amounts to minor, arbitrary preferences – a pointless challenge – produces many critiques. For example Baudrillard (1970) describes consumers as trapped in a system where 'real' choice is denied them, but they don't realise it because they see so much 'illusionary' choice all around them. This also evokes a power relation in that the game consumers are 'forced' to play seems to be *market-defined* choice. So consumption as choice defined by the market is an example of 'play as power'.

In choice there is also the question of *which commodity is best?* Choice without perfect information therefore involves the consumer in a more 'ancient' game of chance, or *alea.* Every purchase decision is a risk that may be reduced but never eliminated by the application of skill. This 'flaw' in the system of choice is often presented as a problem for consumers, but the same consumer who is 'at risk' from imperfect information, may also be the consumer who spends on the many forms of gambling available precisely to enjoy risk (chance). And if choosing is risky, why do consumers continue to consume beyond that which is absolutely necessary? So 'choice' as a key idea that underpins markets, asks us to balance chance and competition and in doing so also highlights a system that persuades us of the importance of progress. As a way to understand consumption choice provides plenty of opportunities for different forms of play, but as an explanation of consumption it is incomplete. Although most, if not all consumer decisions require choice – and we might acknowledge that the vast range of digital games and related technology offers consumers of these things abundant choice – the underlying discourse of rational decision-maker seems a narrow view of an ordered consumer culture that fails to acknowledge more resistive, or chaotic forms of play.

2.3.2. Consumption as communication

Despite the popular view of the consumer as utility seeking, even from the 'birth' of the modern consumer society there have been alternative explanations. As early as 1899 Veblen suggested that commodities were purchased for their symbolic value and this at the heart of the consumer as communicator. Veblen suggests that goods are primarily consumed as a conspicuous demonstration of 'pecuniary strength' suggesting that status may be achieved via the visibility of one's 'wasteful' consumption (like the ancient ritual of the potlatch). Veblen accounts for consumption as a desire amongst lower status individuals to emulate their superiors by adopting their consumption practices. With its rules, ranks and competitive drive it would be easy to see Veblen's theory of consumption as a agonistic game and such 'games' of consumption have endured in explanations of consumer motives. More recently Baudrillard (1981) has suggested that symbolic consumption has become entirely self-referential, where the symbols now refer only to each other and have lost their basis in 'real' difference. The game Baudrillard's consumers play is perhaps more like hide and seek, with consumers forever looking for elusive meaning in the different things they consume. In between these extremes anthropologists Douglas and Isherwood (1978) suggest that whilst competitive forces are too narrow a view of the communicative power of goods, the use and selection of goods can serve to encode social events. Meaning is given to life through rituals created by the use of commodities that become as props in social dramas. The meaning of these goods is not based on their utility, or even universally accepted symbolic meanings, but on their roles within the rituals of their owners. Meaning becomes fixed, but the development of agreed rules in these selections and uses is more arbitrary.

These views express a significant development in the way consumption has been understood. Gabriel and Lang (1995) draw from Baudrillard's arguments to express the tautological nature of needs-based explanations of consumption. Campbell (1987) also considers this. In explanations based on needs or wants the existence of the need or want is used as the explanation for it, i.e., demand is all the evidence needed for the explanation. Yet Gabriel and Lang confirm that: "*The word 'useful' is surely being stretched to excess when applied to video games, olive pate, kitchen gadgets, cigarettes as well as numerous other objects we consume daily*".

But there is also a problem in suggesting that goods are entirely separate from any use-value. Consistent with Douglas and Isherwood, Lee (1993) suggests that any theory of consumption needs to reconcile both the economic system and the culture that meet at the point of consumption. Or to put it another way, if some consumer culture has a tendency to *paidia* (freedom, chaos, creativity), economic structures and especially the grounding of much consumption in physical needs (food, shelter, etc) represents an underlying *ludus* (structure,

rules). This tension is seen more recently in Lusch and Vargo's (2004) call for a service-dominant logic in marketing. They do not dismiss the material nature of consumption but rather see material goods as a *resource* in 'value-creation' that results from collaborations between consumers and producers, although we might substitute play, or 'culture creation' for 'value creation' here. If consumption is symbolic communication and ritual creation we might ask what videogame use can communicate and what rituals and meanings adult may attach to them.

2.3.3. Consumption as exploration

Baudrillard's presentation of the consumer as constantly looking for meaningful difference also finds its way into Gabriel and Lang's (1995) explanation of the consumer as an explorer. Baudrillard grants the consumer a 'universal curiosity', possibly the same curiosity at the heart of *homo Ludens* and captured particularly in the discussions of play of the imagination. Perhaps this curiosity is also Cohen & Taylor's (1992) desire to escape routine and the explorer-consumer seeks this in the shopping mall or superstore. Such consumption-spaces are not organised for efficient shopping, but to present unexpected delights to a consumer captivated by new discoveries (Gabriel and Lang, 1997; Gottdiener, 2000; Falk & Campbell, 1997). Although this seems to be a recent development, especially as a mass activity, older stories about the consumer as an explorer are found in Benjamin's *flaneurs* who playfully explored the arcades of nineteenth century Paris (Featherstone, 1991). Lehtonen and Maenpaa (1997) also highlight the pleasures of serendipity, or chance, indicating again that *alea*, or 'fate' forms part of the shopping experience. The purpose in shopping is therefore to not to find the best bargain, but to experience something new, so Lehtonen and Maenpaa (1997:158) claim: "*The excitement of the mall comes from an anticipatory enjoyment of possibly coming across something one might find pleasant, something one might desire*" and Gabriel and Lang argue that: "*the experience of exploration can be genuine, even if the object is simulated and the subject knows that it is simulated*" (1995:78). This suggests that the materiality of a commodity *is* less significant than the game of finding it and that shopping is a form of 'controlled chance'. So here is consumption as a way for consumers to re-engage with fate rather that 'perform' as rational chooser and it seems likely that at least some of the attraction of videogames lies in their novelty and the presentation of new spaces to be explored. WE might note, for example, the popularity of the adventure genre.

However Baudrillard (1970) still raises concerns about our consumer society based on his suggestion that consumers are 'forced' into specific, but arbitrary explorations - a consumer puzzle-game. Caillois defined puzzles as a *ludus* play-form and this suggests that consumer explorations are a structured form of play, unlike that of 'real' explorations into the

unknown and it is this lack of authenticity that produces a source of criticism, even though Gabriel and Lang (1995) and Lehtonen and Maenpaa (1997) are 'kinder' in acknowledging that 'fake' or not, consumers can find an outlet for their desire for difference and originality in journeys to the mall. Through these explorations they may still be able to discover something about themselves. In fact in light of the strength of these arguments for the role of shopping – and the numbers engaging in the activity weekly – it's surprising that Cohen & Taylor (1992) did not place more emphasis on this activity as a key location for 'escape' from routine. Here we are also tempted to compare the explorations in the mall with explorations in digital space, and also of course deal with the issue of their constructed and arbitrary nature. The managed adventure in the mall might be similar to a safe adventure via a videogame.

2.3.4. Consumption and identity

The idea of self-discovery is the main theme of the consumer as identity seeker, a rhetoric that is consistent with aspects of both play as identity and play of the self. The view of the consumer creating who they are through the things they consume also equates with Caillois's *mimicry* play-form. So Identity has for some time been something to 'play with', but this is a more recent discourse in consumer behaviour. Both Bauman (1988), and Firat and Dholakia (1998) highlight that the modern consumer has become isolated from traditional sources of identity (ethnic or religious group, or even occupation), instead seeking to construct an identity from consumption practices. This is more or less the same observation as Turner (1982) makes about the transition from liminal ritual, to liminiod practices, but with more emphasis on the role of the market. Individuals have few opportunities to capture any enduring identity within the constantly changing backdrop of the marketplace. Instead a consumer must answer the question 'who am I?' through their consumption of goods, carefully chosen for such purpose. So we might as 'who the adult videogame consumer, for example? Gabriel and Lang cite Giddens (1991) to explain the process of identity construction. Giddens sees identity as a project to sustain ongoing stories about the self, which can be endlessly re-written if necessary. The props and resources for this story are frequently commodities. Although Gabriel and Lang acknowledge that the use of objects as extensions of the self is nothing new: "*Owning a unique object, a sword, or a crown, might have been as solid proof of forensic identity as any branding or distinguishing mark*" (1995:88), what is new is the *degree* to which *consumer* goods may be used to construct identity. However this may produce a fragmented and elusive sense of self: a central theme for postmodernists. The reduction in the belief in 'grand narratives' of progress results in an inability to buy with confidence goods that represent an individual's role within those narratives and the result, according to Garbriel and Lang (1995), is that individuals choose

lifestyles that connect them with forms of 'group fantasies' in order to imagine some temporary connection with an identity. So identity can be 'opted into' through purchasing from a range of consumer goods. However because 'authentic' identity is never achieved consumers continue to buy in a never-ending quest to create who they are. The apparent pointlessness of this process may produce damning criticism of consumption (see Barber, 2007), but Campbell argues that:

> *"Consuming should no longer be viewed as a desperate and necessarily futile response to the experience of meaninglessness, but rather as the very solution to that experience. The suggestion being that consumption itself can provide the meaning and identity that modern humans crave and that it is largely through this activity that individuals discover who they are"* (2004:42).

So here playful consumption is a successful way of escaping the apparent pointlessness of daily routine and this again highlights that play stands as a key activity for humans that is easily directed to projects of individual role-play supported by the many props available in the marketplace. We may suspect that this includes digital games that are rich in the potential for identity-play. So the system of consumption that has done so much to undermine traditional sources of identity is now looked to provide a solution to the 'void' of meaning it has helped create.

2.3.5. Consumption and the imagination

Whereas the creation of identity might be seen as a diary of 'who I am?' the imaginative consumer writes stories about 'who they dream of being?' So for example Cohen and Taylor (1992) explain that unfortunately we are all too clear about who we are - society gives us scripted life plans to follow - but what we imagine when we escape to the 'inner theatre of the mind' is that we might be more than these roles. This is a general observation about the significance of the imagination in everyday life consistent with the role of imagination in play. What the sociologists of consumption add is the detail of how the market provides the source material for the imagination and this makes imaginative consumption a powerful discourse when considering consumption as a form of play. Later we will also see that the imagination is of key importance when considering the digital virtual environments of videogames.

McCracken (1988) argues that goods may act as bridges to desired, but 'displaced' meanings. Individuals create idealised states of being in their imagination that are then deliberately removed from the everyday context to avoid the possibly that they are revealed as less than what is imagined. Consumers then use commodities to access these desirable, imagined situations. Like play of the imagination, this suggests a speculative and 'wishing'

mind, discontented with everyday arrangements and when described like this the strategies to build bridges to displaced meaning also seems consistent with Schechner's (1988) blocked performances and the aesthetic outlets for the fantasies they produce. Imagination-based consumption is therefore a form of aesthetic drama and the implication is that consumer play of the imagination is more than simple distraction, but rather an activity for meaning making and personal transformation.

Campbell's (1987) detailed explanation of consumption is consistent with this discourse. He describes a form of 'modern hedonism' that has developed from a Protestant ethic that suppressed overt desires and discouraged instant gratification. This flourished as indulgent imagination as a result of a Romantic influence. Modern hedonism is therefore self-illusory, and consumers are dream-artists who "*employ their creative, imaginative powers to construct mental images, which they consume for the intrinsic pleasure they provide*" (1987:77). This resonates with characteristics of play. For example Huizinga's (1938:9) definition of play as 'freedom', 'unreality', and 'outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites'; and Sutton-Smith's (1997) 'play of the imagination' that is based on the same Romantic foundations. For Campbell pleasure is derived from emotional experiences created by the imagination rather than sensory (physical) ones, but modern hedonism is not, as Boden & Williams (2003) suggest in their critique of Campbell's work, only a disembodied-mentalist experience, but one where daydreaming *may* result in actualisation in the form of consumption. Consumer goods allow for daydreams to come true and therefore anchor abstract thoughts to the material world. So Campbell's consumers become skilled in continuous consumption-derived 'escape attempts' and the link between play of the imagination and the marketplace becomes explicit. This also suggests that a range of enquiries into the role of play for adults and into an activity that structures much of our society start to merge into one story of the individual who performs an 'ordinary' life, but often imagines something more fantastic and may now explore that fantasy through the consumption of videogames

However for Campbell 'fantasy' feeds from an 'unlimited' use of the imagination, and unlike the 'daydream' that is bolted onto material objects or experiences, the result is that fantasy creates no sense of longing, is short-lived and therefore a problematic way of escaping mundane reality. So the potential to actualise a daydream makes it more compelling overall. As Belk et al (2003) explain, desire requires there to be hope that the object of desire can be obtained. Cohen and Taylor (1992) express it like this:

> *Our sense of the specialness of our inner life, coupled with our fears about allowing it to 'run away with us' may lead us to attempt transformations of reality by bringing our fantasies into the real world. In other worlds, instead of allowing fantasies to be mere adjuncts to existing scripts, we*

> *actually set out to script our fantasies, to give some concrete expression to our imaginings* (1992:109).

These 'fantasies' are therefore more like Campbell's daydreams. Similarly, Martin (2004) has suggested that the 'real' is used by consumers as a basis for imaginings. So the stating point for fantasy is the actual, and the ready availability of novelty in the marketplace has made it easy for endlessly renewed daydreaming for commodities to become a key focus of such activity. Belk et al (2003) also confirm such linkages between desire and the socio-cultural context; desire is not attached to an object because of its intrinsic qualities, "*but on the consumers' own hopes for an altered state of being, involving an altered set of social relationships*" (Belk et al, 2003:348). Society therefore has an accepted view of what may be desired, including and especially commodities, although Campbell also recognises the potential for novels, films and TV to provide individuals with the raw material for daydreams. We might now want to add digital games to Campbell's list of media and question their role as source material for desire. In particular we might not their ability to actualise fantasy in some way.

Campbell also notes as wanting rather than having is the source of pleasure objects of desire are often deliberately difficult to obtain. Just as abstract fantasy may be rejected as too difficult to actualise, easy actualisation is also rejected. Although reviews of Campbell's (1987) ideas have focussed on the disenchanting nature of material objects as a source of desire (see Belk et al, 2003; Shankar & Fitchett, 2002; Gabriel & Lang, 1995), it is actually the loss of the daydream that stimulates desire for another commodity. Or as Cohen and Taylor put it in a more general sense: despite initial promise, all escape attempts may all too easily become part of the routine from which escape is desirable. Even our fantasies may become boring and dull. Hence it is the attempt that matters, the *hope* of an altered state of being. This may also be significant if we are to see videogames as a 'difficult' and 'fantastic' development in consumer culture. It suggests that in a consumer society where so much may be had so easily, the need for challenge that can produce a pleasurable 'want' may be pressing.

One curious aspect of this play of the imagination is its 'hidden' nature. Although all adults fantasise, this is rarely acknowledged publicly. Cohen and Taylor explain: "*our lives are run through with fantasies.*" (1992:90), yet they then add: "*Not that one would realise all this from reading sociological texts*" (1992:91). The reason is perhaps our desire to appear rational in a rational world.

Finally, a problem with privatized consumer fantasy for Gabriel and Lang is that the dream artist is ultimately narcissistic, and therefore loveless. The society this produces is violent and sadistic and we might note here that these are the same criticisms that are levelled

at videogames as a form of imagination-based consumption. Spariosu also highlights pre-rational play's violence and although ritual fighting may actually take the murder out of fights (for example see Sutton-Smith, 1997), concerns about how the consumers' imagination is constructed means that this discourse need not reduce consumption to 'harmless fantasy', for example we might consider the violent trajectory of 'consumer' behaviour presented by JG Ballard in *Super-Cannes* (2001), or alternatively, like Aldus Huxley (1932) we might imagine that a focus on excessively complex consumer-games is a very effective way to pacify a population. Such issues seem well rehearsed in the debate over the effects of violent videogames.

2.3.6. Victims of consumption

So many of these conceptualisations of the consumer allow for critiques that implicitly suggest some overall 'play as power' game in market engagements. Gabriel and Lang (1995) consider criticisms of the consumer society more explicitly in exploring the consumer as victim. The games consumer culture produces may cause more general problems, for example damage to the environment (this is Barber's, 2007, complaint about wasteful and infantile consumption in the West), but within these games individuals may also experience loss through dishonest business practices. For example Grayson (1999) picks up on Schechner's (1988) idea of 'dark' play that may relate to forms of trickery, pranks and frauds. This then, is another rhetoric of consumption than may be related to play as power.

There are plenty of example of companies' 'abuse' of play: Nader (1966) exposes how American motorists' safety was compromised in order to improve the profits of car manufacturers; Packard (1957) has suggested that marketers subconsciously influence buying behaviour with subliminal advertising; Marcuse, (1964) has argued that the market has alienated individuals from their real needs, leaving them only interested only in commodities; and likewise, Fromm (1976) highlights that a focus on 'having' rather than 'being', i.e., on owning commodities, rather than experiencing life, ultimately separates consumers from their emotions.

More recently Caru and Cova (2003) complain that 'experiential' marketing means that every aspect of experience is now the target of marketing, leaving the individual without 'ordinary time'. This might be another way or arguing that in a consumer society, the novel and spectacle (endlessly reproduced by the market) has become the routine from which escape may be desirable. Greyson (1999) makes a similar complaint, highlighting Geertz's (1976) idea of 'deep' play, where players themselves lose a sense of the autotelic nature of play.

We might compare these complaints with Caillois's view that within any play-form there is the potential for corruption. For example, sports can become violent, games of chance can become superstitions, and 'thrill seeking' can become dangerous addictions. In the consideration of losers in consumption then we are identifying the potential for consumption games to 'go bad' and therefore the apparent need for external moderation and control. And Gabriel and Lang highlight the many agencies that now act to protect consumer rights and even to protect consumers from their own corruption. These 'referees' range from national and even international bodies that decide the broad rules by which the consumption game should be played, (for example regulations on product safety and advertising), to local courts that may intervene in specific disputes. We might add organisations like the ELSPA and BBFC who both set out to ensure that consumers are not 'damaged' by the games that they consume. However Gabriel and Lang also suggest that it is now less fashionable that it was to present consumers as victims, reflecting the relative lack of popularity of the 'ancient' power rhetoric in play compared to more recent attempts to present consumers as autonomous individuals.

2.3.7. Consumer rebels, activists and citizens

So opposing any Frankfurt School-style view of the consumer as weak, manipulated individual, ready to accept the rules as defined by others, the consumer as rebel uses consumption to create their own culture. The consumer as rebel perhaps best represents the idea of paidia-play in consumer culture. For example Fiske (1989) argues that consumers are capable of creating counter-cultures from the artefacts presented by marketing. If powerful corporations set the rules of consumption, rebel consumers set out to break them, including by stealing. This is also Grayson's (1999) line of argument. Gabriel and Lang point out that a considerable percentage of the population have stolen from shops at one time or another. But these acts of theft are not a full blown attack on a consumer society: *"for they are primarily rebellions against a system which denies its bounty to those who cannot afford it, but they seldom challenge the value of the bounty"* (Gabriel and Lang, 1995:144). We might compare this with what Caillois says about a cheat: *"The cheat is still inside the universe of play. If he violates the rules of the game, he at least pretends to respect them. He tries to influence them. He is dishonest, but hypocritical. He thus, by his attitude, safeguards and proclaims the validity of the conventions he violates, because he is dependant on others obeying the rules"* (1958:45). So consumer rebels as cheats may cause problems for other players, but are not a threat to the game itself. Both Fiske (1989) and Grayson (1999) also point out how marketers have become skilled at turning rebellion into new commodities to sell, e.g., torn jeans become the latest fashion. And if videogames were once 'dangerous', or presented room for consumer

resistance to society's 'leisure norms', we now witness *their* transformation into 'legitimate' media business and adult pastime.

Even forms of rebellion where individuals remove themselves from everyday consumer society tend to be temporary and therefore confirm consumption as 'normality' in the way that Turner (1982) has described the ritual as temporarily reversal, but then ultimately reinforcement of the 'normal' rules of a social system, and that Featherstone (1991) has linked to consumption by describing its carnivalesque qualities. For example, Kozinet's (2002) review of the Burning Man festival in America concludes that the anti-consumer event is no more than a temporary catharsis; a symbolic rejection of a system that participants then return to. Belk and Costa's (1998) also comment on temporary rejections of the market in their enquiry into America mountain men re-enactments suggesting that far from a complete escape from consumer society, these events contain all the trapping of competitiveness and desire for the most 'authentic' commodities. More broadly Cohen and Taylor (1992) explain that such is the disciplinary power of society that all almost all escape attempts seem futile. The consumer as rebel, constantly trying to cheat and change the 'rules' in order to gain personal advantage, or alternatively constantly looking for new outlets where their own form of consumption places them in a 'better' position relative to others therefore captures much of the *paidia* present in modern consumer games that results in it gaining new life.

However some consumers groups aim for a more systematic destruction of the consumer society. These are consumers as activists. Activism, according to Gabriel and Lang may be seen historically to be in at least it's forth wave. Again *paidia* seems to periodically assert itself. The most recent form of activism suggests that corporations have a global, ethical, environmentally responsibility. We might compare these activists with spoilsports – those who reject the game *and* choose not to accept the rules (Huzinga, 1938). However, as Huzinga points out, a problem for spoilsports is that they may likely find themselves with no game to play, so the problem evident for those who refuse to play consumption games is where that leaves them in a society structured by consumer culture. Firat and Dholakia claim: "*the market works (only) when everyone agrees to participate in it*" (1998:91) arguing that attempts to escape the market fail, and are so easily incorporated in it because they tend to present only a different modernist view of progress, so actually still reside within the system that produces capitalism. The range of consumption games we have access to is therefore a result of a dominant social mindset that is less often questioned and alternatives are therefore often (necessarily) isolationist which reduces their impact. This is more or less the same conclusion reached by Cohen and Taylor (1992) in their review of escapes that attempt to evade the routines of everyday social life altogether by physical separation.

Firat and Dholakia do, however, see some hope in attempts at emancipation from the market in cyberspace because they *may* reject modernist ideals. The potential for cyberspace

to produce variety and difference means that individuals may have the ability to 'dip' into and leave different modes of being within these new 'communities': *"as modes of life that do not mediate all relationships and interactions through the market are sampled and found to be meaningful, as they become experiences that are sought and preferred, therefore repeatedly returned to, they will begin to account for growing portions of one's life space*" (1998:145). Here there is optimism for the transformations that digital media may allow.

Gabriel and Lang's final conceptualisation of the consumer is as citizen whose main form of engagement with politics is via the market. This is also dealt with by Bauman (2001) in *The Individualised Society*. Consumers get to 'vote' when they shop and so tend to ignore collective responsibility and action. Firat and Dholakia (1998) also make this point when they argue that consumption has become individual, private, alienated (from production) and passive resulting in the neglect of public forms of consumption (including trains, parks, and public buildings). This again raises questions about the degree of isolation that videogame consumption may produce. However, Gabriel and Lang point out another aspect to the consumer as citizen where consumers are made aware of the implications of their endless desire for cheaper goods and asked to take responsibility for this. Consumers may therefore 'vote' in the marketplace according to social, or green issues. At the heart of these decisions is still the consumer's *individual* right to choose and act. Such is the importance of consumer issues that politicians regularly articulate policies in terms of what is in the interests of 'the consumer' and government's main role becomes one of ensuring 'fair play' in the market. In this sense governments' role becomes that of structuring play to produce 'rules' that are acceptable to the majority (of voter-consumers). For videogames we have on the one hand, the industry's lobby for better trading terms and IP rights, and on the other hand an implied regulatory need to prevent the 'dangers' of the 'wrong' sorts of play. We might also consider who adults may frame their use of videogames in the context of pressure to be a responsible 'consumer-citizen'.

2.3.8. A sociology of consumption derived from play

Gabriel and Lang (1995) highlight various contradictions amongst the different conceptualisations of consumption. Foregrounding one tends to dismiss the other and therefore like rhetoric's of play, they tend to produce opposites, (such as rebel versus victim). The result is that no one view of the consumer captures all the forms and meaning of consumption for individuals. Nor does any *one* view produce clear explanations for either the persistence of consumption as a system that structures society, or the variability and chaotic nature of markets. Gabriel and Lang term this 'unmanageability', although I might suggest

that 'playful' also captures the conclusion well. The consistency between ways of thinking used to inform consumption and those use for play more broadly seem obvious.

Gabriel and Lang do though make a clear distinction between the future wishes of consumers and those of corporate managers: "*there is a disparity, however, between the fantasies of industrialists and retailers and those of consumers themselves. The former ever dream of managing consumers, while the latter's dreams make them ever unmanageable*" (1995:191). This summary could be a direct reference to the way that 'playfulness' creates the consumption forms we experience. On the one hand, through reference to the grand structure of global capital, managers and governments seek to turn consumption into *ludus*: manageable, predictable and rule-based games. Consumers, on the other hand, are always looking for new and original forms of play, or 'escape' from their routines and habits. They therefore constantly undermine structures placing emphasis on *paidia*. This is of course a simplification: consumers may also seek structure and corporations, through competitive activities may add randomness into the market. For example, just as Gabriel and Lang seem to give up on the market's ability to keep consumers interested – suggesting the possibility of the end of the consumer – a whole new range of digital technologies are introduced. videogames are new, unpredictable and exciting and that makes them risky. The angst that such *paidia* produces can be seen in both media and academic reports.

In considering conceptualisations of consumption as well as of play I am recognising that a study of adult videogame use might not be isolated from the social context in which it takes place. Like Kline et al (2003) I am recognising videogame use as a consumption practice with all the potentials that I have just described. This includes celebration of the potential for thrill, imagination and transformation, but also critique on the basis of isolation, lack of authenticity, and passivity.

Perhaps not surprisingly, if we accept a sociology derived from play we are able to see how consumption is also derived from play and doing so foregrounds the restless nature of consumer culture. But there has also has been a 'playful turn' in conceptualisations of the consumer where consumption as play is explicitly recognised and elaborated in competitive activities, in contingency, in identity work and in resistance. Such approaches to understanding our consumer society accounts for the variability of consumption practices, but also the 'strength' of consumer culture as an overriding structure. Of course this argument is open to the criticism that all I have done is replaced the vague and broader range of conceptualisations of consumption with similarly vague discourses about play. What is clear is that the huge variety of consumption forms has allowed many scholars the opportunity for their own language games in creating explanations for what they see. Terms that we might associate with play are common in many studies of consumption, including references to games, rules, fantasy, playfulness, etc.

The synthesis of conceptualisations of play with conceptualisations of consumption reveals the preoccupations of researchers studying consumption (Spariosu's competition between rational and pre-rational though) and also therefore the ways in which society may make sense of this activity – which is more significant for my project. In particular it highlights the early dominance of discourses of power in consumption and the more recent focus on consumption as 'play of the self'. It also shows that identity play has produced a strong theme in consumer research and that even the romanticism of imaginary play has informed a stream of understanding about why people consume. If Caillios's construction of play types is a fair representation of forms of play, what is evident is that the thrill captured by ilinx, is less well explored by consumer researchers, although it can be found in descriptions of the thrill of shopping (for example throughout the chapters in Falk and Campbell, 1997). We see then that consumption has fragmented into various games along the lines of established play-forms, and continues to do so with the introduction of digital games. The explanations of play that suggests its fundamental manifestations in structure (rules, game, *ludus*) and also its desire to destroy and change rules (playfulness, *paidia*) accounts for the nature of changes in consumption practice.

This produces a system that invites change and innovation, producing ever-new experiences for consumers. Viewing our consumer society as a manifestation of the more fundamental desire of humans to play – to see consumer culture as play culture - removes the need for the various conceptualisations suggested by Gabriel and Lang to complete. No longer do we have alternative explanations of why people consume, but rather explanations of the different ways in which play may be manifest in consumption. The playfulness that modern capitalist structures also allows for critiques of consumption - as deep, false and dark play, in Grayson's view, (1999) - but explains the enduring attractiveness of such a seemingly imperfect system to so many people. Consumption provides so many opportunities for engaging play that few individuals seek total emancipation. Again, play as a form of escapism - a way for individuals to deal with a recognition that their lives have become routine and ordered, as suggested by Cohen and Taylor (1992) - tends to look to the all pervasive market for solutions rather than to look for isolation outside the system. Yet as Caru and Cova (2003) suggest, this has possibly resulted in an acceleration of consumer play that leaves consumers potentially exhausted by the need for extraordinary experience (or alternative 'infantilized, according to Barber, 2007). Such complaint may prompt us to question how the consumption game has got so apparently out of hand, and where its trajectory might take us. We might also consider where videogames fit into such views of consumer culture.

2.4. The trajectory of the experience economy

In both the rhetoric's of play and conceptualisations of consumption I suggested a trajectory in thought that I now want to explore further. The playful turn in theories of consumption seems to be a recognition that consumer culture has become fragmented and chaotic and that rational models of consumer behaviour can no longer account for consumer practices. This would include videogames that are especially hard to justify in terms of 'real needs' (for example see Barber, 2007).

There have been a number of attempts to account for the growth of videogames (Herz, 1997; Poole, 2001; Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 2003; King and Borland, 2003). Often writers provide nostalgic histories that romanticise the individual, erratic efforts to produce games from more serious technology. For example Herz, (1997) illustrates that the 'birth' of digital games took place at the hands of researchers in Universities and Government research departments. However these histories also make clear links between early digital games and the big business that has from the very start attempted to see them as a source of profit. Technologies reflect as well as transform the society in which they are developed (Woolgar, 1996) and videogames are therefore products of a consumer culture (Darley, 2000; Kline, et al, 2003).

Digital games are of course not the only digital technology that may be used for play. Shields (2003) highlights that the history of technological developments in general has had a bias towards simulation, and liminal play. And others noted early in the web's history that commercial interests were served by an attention to entertainment rather than information (for example see Ghose & Dou, 1998). Venkatesh (1998) has gone further to highlight the reconstruction of the playful web into a predominantly marketing space, and Shields provides a specific example when he declares that suburbia with its homely comforts has suffered an invasion of cyberspace where "*commercial websites offer children free games in return for youth consumption information*" (2003:98). So although my focus is videogames, we may see these as a specific example of the trajectory play, consumer culture and technology that has led to what has been described as the 'experience economy'.

2.4.1. The rise of the experience economy

Desmond (2003) has highlighted the importance of the Enlightenment in shaping our current consumer society. The Enlightenment placed a focus on rationalism and suppressed the emotional, producing a dominant discourse of progress that I have already suggested also defines modern views of developmental play. Then as Campbell (1987) points out, this suppression of overt emotions encouraged individuals to use their imagination as a place for exploring emotions. This gives us another of the 'modern' conceptualisations of play – play

of the imagination. In other words, the same trends that produced our current recognition of a consumer society also produced contemporary views of play. Of course the story of consumption is not complete. Desmond, like others highlights that we may now be moving to an era of rejection of modernist assumptions. With postmodernism, play is more prominent as an explanation of structures and behaviours; the restlessness of the consumer society that makes it hard to state that we progressed 'from there to here', is inherently playful. So play may be now used more 'openly' as an explanation of consumer behaviour, but we might also note that the use of play to describe culture highlights both the development and destruction of structures, as Gabrial and Lang put it: "*all of these* [images of consumers] *are too civilised and one-sided, failing to come to terms with the fragmentation, volatility and confusion of contemporary Western consumption*" (1995:4).

This playful turn in consumer culture gives us themed consumption spaces such as shopping malls and even large shops themselves (for example see Gottiener, 2000, and especially Sherry, Kozinets, Storm, Duhachek, Nuttavuthisit and DeBerry-Spence's, 2001, study of the spectacle of ESPN Zone in Chicago) and many pre-planned and themed tourist activities (e.g., see Urry, 2002), together producing what is now referred to as 'experience economies' (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), but which might also be called play-based economies.

Shopping malls and superstores are not organised for efficient shopping, but have becoming centres where consumers learn to play (Gottdiener, 2000; Rojek, 1995). Gottdiener gives examples of themed restaurants such as *Planet Hollywood* or the *Hard Rock Café* that allow visitors to experience fantasies, and cites Las Vegas as an obvious example of a hyper-real entertainment-based consumption space. He then draws from Baudrillard to suggest the increasing potential for media-created fantasy to dominate consumption. Similarly Featherstone (1991) highlights that shopping malls serve a similar function to medieval fairs and festivals, and Urry (1995) notes that playful leisure activities are themselves incomplete without opportunities to consume. If Lee (1993) and others highlight the move towards consumption as leisure, Urry, suggests the importance of consumption opportunities during leisure activities. The two are becoming parts of the same game. In highlighting the way the tourist's gaze is constructed and created, rather than 'discovered' naturally, Urry also confirms the increasingly constructed nature of consumer experiences. Campbell & Falk put it this way:

> *Mass culture transformed experiences into marketable products while advertising turned marketable products into representations, images and then, over time into experiences once more. The consequences of all this has been that the consumption of experience and the experience of consumption have become more and more indistinguishable* (1997:8).

If the medieval carnival was a liminal ritual used to manage the structures and therefore identity of society, the shopping trip is a liminoid ritual used to manage individual identity. Consumers gain 'benefit' from the routines of work and home, (the full rejection of which may result in feelings of loss rather than escape), but routinely engage in playful consumption activities that promise temporary 'escape'. Consumer-play becomes where the roles and scripts that make up 'paramount reality' are suspended, in Cohen and Taylors' (1992) terms. Transactions in the marketplace are increasingly understood in terms of access to experiences. In effect then, if it is accepted that play lies at the heart of human nature - as Huzinga, Caillois and Sutton-Smith suggest - consumer behaviour has evolved in line with society's general bias towards certain types of playfulness.

Consumption practices may be seen as a result of the ongoing balance between *paidia* and *ludus*, or escape and routine, and may experience most radical change at times when this balance is most disrupted, including our current postmodern moment and the 'shock' of new digital technologies. Videogames lie at the most recent end of this trend in consumer culture. In connecting marketing, culture and technology as the three circuits which together give us digital games and by drawing from analysis by Lee (1993), Kline, et al (2003) suggest that video games are the ideal commodity form of the postmodern, postfordism era.

It is possible to develop this trajectory further. During the era of growth in mass production in the US between the turn of the century and the 1960s high factory wages were paid in order to allow workers to afford the products of those factories. Henry Ford's car plant is typical of this arrangement; hence Fordism may be seen as a social system, not just a mode of production. During this era *material* wealth in the form of an expanding number of household goods increased dramatically and the media promoted the benefits increased 'standard of living' that could be achieved through acquisition of commodities. Consumer goods were therefore established as an attractive 'escape' from the dull routines of daily life with their promise of progress through higher living standards. But this didn't last. In the 1960-70s, markets became saturated and everyone eventually accumulated all the commodities available. Growth in production could not therefore be sustained by increases in demand. There was also a growth of cheap imports and an oil crisis, resulting in a decline in manufacturing in the West that was now expensive compared to elsewhere in the world. According to Lee (1993) efforts to maintain Fordism's virtuous cycle of growth failed largely because the focus was on reducing social spending (on a workforce no longer needed in factories) and encouraging the already wealthy to consume ever more.

So Fordism is a problematic social system. It represented a period of homogenised, standard products for standard lifestyles that lead critics at the time, for example Marcuse, to label society as 'one dimensional'. From Cohen and Taylor's (1992) perspective, it is easy to see individuals coming to recognise consumer culture as simply a new and mundane routine.

And subsequent segmentation of market offering may mean that the market place has become both too complex to ever know with any certainty, yet with little real novelty, resulting in desperate unknowable sameness (for example see Schwartz, 2004). Consumers expect to see new commodities as desirable, but this demands an ever more skilful imagination on their part, and we have therefore witnessed a move away from satisfaction through 'useful' commodities and towards the novel experiences of the 'experience ecconomy'. But even this approach has its limits as consumers increasingly find that they have experienced 'everything' that the material world has to offer (See Scitovsky, 1976, for example). And such a line of thinking prompts Fitchett and Shankar (2006) to present consumption as producing miserable, ennui-suffering consumers. Drawing from Ballards's (2000) *Super-Cannes*, Fitchett (2002) even suggests the violent possibility for future consumer culture as consumers search for ever-new experiences. One direction marketers and consumers might take to remedy this is to explore digital entertainment where death and violence remain virtual.

A new era of ICT based business promised a way out of the fixed structures of Fordism, but in order to maintain the circuit of capitalism in this post-Fordism era, constant innovation is required. 'Ideal' commodities in the post-Fordism era are used up during their consumption or are by nature temporary. They are also, ideally, the product of intellectual labour. The emphasis is on offering new experiences, or new escapes from routine – new games – rather than a better life through commodities that save labour, for example. The result is a constant and never ending series of new consumption experiences and therefore a solution to the problem that consumers may have already bought and done everything. So Featherstone (1991) highlights that modern economies are no longer about increased efficiency in production, but in finding ever more imaginative ways to use up what is produced, suggesting, "*to control growth and manage the surplus the only solution is to destroy or squander the excess in the form of* ***games, religion, art, wars, death***" (p22, my emphasis).

This new situation is also not without critique. Debord (1967), for example warned that spectacles such as those that dominate experience economies remain tools of pacification, deploiticisation and therefore control. The passive consumption of spectacle prevents the individual from acting in ways capable of challenging existing political structures. The consumer only reproduces the commercial consumption act so that "*Rather than vent anger against exploitation and injustice, the working class is distracted and mollified by new cultural productions*." (Best and Kellner, 1999). Baudrillard in particular has suggested that in the current era, substance evaporates and we move into hyberreality where the material commodity no longer has relevance to consumers other that as part of an endlessly shifting series of signs. Alternatively for Caru and Cova (2003), it simply results in a loss of 'ordinary' time and produces a fear of boredom and an endless desire for more and more consumption of experiences

For Kline, et al, video games perfectly represent the spectacular more-real-than-real experiences that Baudrillard (1981) suggests consumers are now invited to negotiate, and with their knowledge based, high technology production and constant innovation, heavily promoted through the media, they represent something of Lee's ideal commodity form. A current trend in digital gaming illustrates this even further. Online games are paid for on a monthly subscription. The result is that a consumer is offered perpetual new experience in return for regular payment: a perfectly smooth circuit of capital. This is the emphasis of discourses on digital games that focus primarily of their ability to create economies (for example see Castronova, 2006) and such views are also consistent with recent commentary on the practice of marketing. For example *Experiential Marketing* by Schmitt (1999), and *Experience Economy* by Pine and Gilmore (1999) articulate an experiential approach to marketing management. Under this advice, transient, but compelling consumption events seem ideal.

2.4.2. Change and technology

So the tension in this history is between the ancient play rhetoric of power (consumers are played by markets) and the modern rhetoric's of progress and then the imagination (consumers get better life's and then re-enchanted lives). This issue is also worth further discussion as we seek to understand the experiences of adult players.

Desmond (2003) observes that theorists tend to polarise their analysis of our consumer society into either an acknowledgement of benefits, freedoms or progress gained, or of restrictions, alienation, and damaging over-consumption. He illustrates this dichotomy by contrasting a history suggested by McCracken (1988) with one provided by Ewen (1976). Ewan's history is one of the entrapment and oppression of the working class by captains of industry for their own benefits from the 1920s onwards. From this view individual consumers are 'created' from the destruction of family units and are therefore separated from 'meaningful', traditional communities; the focus is on what has been lost. McCracken on the other hand, sees the development of consumer society as a slower and more liberating force, freeing individuals from the *restrictions* of community life, the demands of a ruling, feudal class and the obligations of work. Similarly in describing the history of Western leisure, Hunnicutt (2006) notes that although work was once the primary location for meaning in life, more recently, and as a substitute that fills the void left by a rejection of religion as a life-guiding principle, leisure offers "a challenge to work's hegemony, offering a more traditional, humane and democratic alternative" (2006:70) This is a focus on what might have been gained in a consumer society.

According to Desmond, a central theme in these otherwise contradictory loss/gain stories of consumption is the development of individualism (the third of our modern play rhetorics after progress and imagination), a transition examined in detail by Bauman (2001) who argues that there has been a reduction in societal control (a belief in a just society), in favour of *individual* rights and responsibilities. Bauman argues that whereas previous 'top heavy' modernism places responsibility for progressive change on society, recent 'bottom heavy' modernism places responsibility on the individual to make decisions to better their own circumstance. This is like play of the self and the move from liminal to liminoid in Turner (1982). So here we are asked to consider whether digital media presents the individual with new freedoms or further alienation through the play forms it offers.

In assessing digital games Kline et al (2003) warn against a tendency for technological determinism that they link directly to the discourse of progress that underpins the view of the consumer as utility-seeking individuals – technological change as improvements and 'further' liberations. From this perspective technology is often portrayed as a solution to problems in society, ignoring the possibility that technologies may produce new problems. For example one unforeseen 'problem' that Shields (2003) highlights is the way that technology brings work into the non-work space therefore making the private space of the home public. In doing so technology may reinforce the importance of work over play. Watson, Berthon, Pitt and Zinkham (2000) make a similar point, highlighting an irony that although interactive media *may* be seen as playful, chaotic, disruptive and fragmentary, these technologies are the very much the product of a rational belief in progress through innovation. This could be seen as a good example of *ludus* and *paidia* in agon. A technology is produced as part of an ordered attempt at progress (towards a utopian world of free communication), but at the hands of human users, chaos and creativity soon attempt to turn it into something disruptive and anarchic.

Overall, like Shields, Kline et al (2003) are suspicious of claims that interactive media produce new freedoms, drawing from Frankfurt School theorists to demonstrate the manipulative potential of new media. They maintain that although Marxist interpretations of the media are frequently considered obsolete, neglecting to account for the motives of the owners of media fails to reflect the full impact of media on society. Like Firat and Dholakia's (1998) assessment of overall trends in consumption patterns for example, they warn that videogames may increase isolated, individualised consumption experiences. *Interactivity*, when presented as control and choice for the user, hides this isolation and the fact that individuals' experiences remain subject to the influence of the market. Kline et al's broad overview is in effect a discussion of power and a reflection of marketers' agenda to manipulate demand and maximise profit.

Kline et al do however also highlight that new media technologies can lead to change in society by allowing for new experiences. Shields (2003) frames this in terms of liminal activities that allow a reassessment of reality, and similar points are made by Gee (2003) when considering education, and earlier by Turkle (1995) when considering identity. So we start to see interactive games and other playful, digital media as part of the trajectory of an increasingly playful consumer culture that may produce practices through which further change may occur.

Kline et al argue for the inevitability of change based on the observations that Innis and McLuhan make about the disruptive tendencies of new technologies and the Birmingham School of cultural theorists' views that media users actively create culture. From this perspective digital games are mediated, cultural texts offering a variety of subject positions to be explored. Cultural theory suggests that the media does not therefore easily manipulate the audience. However Kline et al also point out that such a view has tended to be reduced to seeing the autonomous viewer as just like the sovereign consumer. Assumptions of autonomy therefore deflect criticism away from media that no longer has *any* power to persuade. Again, interactive media may be even more open to this analysis and hence easily seen as a source of freedom even though we may still question, for example, the options available to female players, or access to technology itself by the poor. In any case, freedom to act only within the predefined confines of a videogame seems rather limited. For example although Taylor (2005) has illustrated that players of MMORPGs may criticise the game and its commercial owners, these actions are restricted to tactical battles over the players' 'rights' rather than the market that produces them. Shields (2003) also highlights the increasing lack of freedom *not* to engage with technology.

The result of Kline et al's analysis is familiar: opposing tendencies in theory resulting from either an intellectual focus on structure and control (*ludus*) as represented by the Frankfurt School, or a more chaotic and disruptive focus (*paidia*), as represented by Innis and McLuhan's analysis of the development of media and by cultural theorists. The focus on cultural theory however, is also indicative of the tendency amongst researchers to focus on the modern play rhetoric of the self, driven by recognition of the individual and of liminoid spaces in modern society.

2.5 The consumption of videogames

I now want to further consider the ways in which play rhetorics are articulated through the study of digital media, acknowledging that although videogames are the product of a consumer culture, they may produce experiences that may not be reduced to any simple, and especially rational 'consumer behaviour'. In the previous section I noted the tensions between

commercial interests and possible resistance as a play of power and we might also expect the other ancient play rhetorics to be present. So Newman (2004) is typical in acknowledging group play that we may see as part of group identity in contrast the individualised consumer society that is often articulated. Other studies also note group identity in online games. For example Taylor's (2006) ethnographic work in *World of Warcraft* notes the potential for performances of national identity and rejection of 'the other'; Steinhueheir and Williams (2006) consider online games as 'third spaces' for sociability and diversity (in seeming contradiction to Talyor), and; Malaby (2006) comments on social capital used within multiplayer games and beyond (albeit within a broader system of commerce and material capital). We may have to look more closely for the most ancient rhetoric of fate, although it is there in references to chance - for example see Lauwart, Wachelder and van de Walle's, (2007) commentary on the pleasures of *repens,* the desire to explore, and for surprise in videogames (although even here one outcome is potentially 'better' learning and so the modern rhetoric of progress again). What seems clearer is that the modern rhetorics of play of progress, of the self and of the imagination may easily be articulated.

2.5.1. Digital play and progress

The persistent focus on consumption as progress has produced a body of work on digital media that argues for interactive media's role in 'improving' commerce. For example Korgaonkar & Wolin (1999) claim that the common perception of the Internet is that it is used to gratify consumers' need for information. This is supported by Eighmey (1997), Ducoffe (1996), and Schlosser, Shavitt & Kanfer (1999) who all suggest that Internet advertising is mainly informative, and by Weiber and Kollman (1998) who suggest that online, information is a key source of 'competitive advantage'. This perspective is indicative of the enduring conceptualisation of the consumer as rational chooser and therefore regards playful online behaviour in general as frivolous, and unworthy of investigation.

An exception however is where play is framed 'brand engagement', i.e., learning about new products and services: another rational view of play that aligns it with progress. So for example Nelson (2002) offers videogames as suitable for brand placement messages; Li, Daugherty and Biocca (2002) suggest that videogame-like representations of brand influence product knowledge and even purchase intention; and Jeandrian (2001) highlights that 'experiential shoppers' prefer game-like virtual reality stores. These approaches aim to help managers provide consumers with 'better' choice through more sophisticated websites, something Turkle (1995) defines as the 'modernist computational aesthetic'; the assumption that, what goes on during the use of complex technology can be unpacked and understood logically. There is therefore, ultimately a 'right' way to programme to produce predictable

outcomes – in this case increased sales. The idea behind much managerialist research making this assumption is therefore one where interactive media improves the efficiency of markets, thus providing users with a higher quality of life - a hangover from the Fordist deal. This is also reflected in the policies of many Western governments who promote interactive media in the belief that it will bring economic benefits (for example see Skillset, 2004). So at best videogames will help produce economic progress, providing new markets and new opportunities to provide information to help consumers to make better decisions and when we consider the account of players we may look for signs that they make sense of their behaviour in these terms.

Alternatively Csikszentmiharlyi's (1975), concept of 'flow' as optimum self-rewarding experience has also be applied to videogames to describe their pleasurable challenges (Juul, 2005), and to better understand 'good' game design (Johnson and Wiles, 2003). Digital games seem to be very good at producing flow and outcomes include increased learning, positive feelings and a desire to return to activities that produce flow. Without directly evoking flow, Gee (2003) also highlights the way that successful games are designed to adjust rewards according effort and ability and therefore maintain a balance between the two, thus ensuring that the player is sufficiently rewarded for their efforts, but always aware for further goals. Flow then is a positive thing and experiences that produce it might be encouraged.

This more recent discourse of 'games as learning aids' also presents them as 'useful' to society and there is a growing body of literature on the educational value of games. For example Jayakanthan (2002) notes that students 'weaned on computer games' may usefully have that interest diverted to educational purposes; Ko (2002) explores the ways in which games develop children's problem-solving skills; Paras and Bizzocchi (2007) highlight that reflection on digital play may produce effective learning, and; Virvou, Katsionis and Manos (2007) find games to be motivating for leaning and in particular useful for students with 'poor performance'. Research on the educational value of games frequently claims that videogames can produce 'better' learning (eg Corbeil, 1999; Gee, 2003). Gee (2003) starts his explanation about the learning principles built into game by asking how it is that games are becoming more difficult to play (and therefore learn), but also more popular. Gee's view is that games are 'accidentally' constructed as very effective learning tools because they were not produced by educators with a knowledge of education principles, but rather through the 'creativity of capitalism'. In order to sell in a competitive games market, games must be challenging, but also highly rewarding, exactly the key principles of effective learning.

Gee also explains that we are used to learning, and therefore seeing the world, in certain ways, based partly on the way we learn. In particular content in videogames is dismissed as frivolous because it does not easily fit into what we might think of as useful content. But videogames may be more about *experience* of 'content'. Gee argues that this produces

'producer-like' understanding, whereby a learner knows about a topic from being a user of knowledge as an 'exploratory problem solver'. He therefore suggests that by offering different ways to learn and learn more deeply, videogames may offer different ways of seeing the world that involves changes to identity and a reflective approach. Turkle (1995) also illustrates this aspect of play by explaining how, even as a professor, she had struggled to understand postmodern theory until she was faced with MUDs on the Internet. The experience of playing in MUDs made the abstract theory more understandable because she was living it. In addition, a player is more able to experiment in the learning space of a videogame because actions are not 'permanent' as a game may be replayed. For example Gee recalls regret at making his in game character do something that he did not feel was 'true to her', (and therefore not true to himself), but relief at being able to put things right by playing the game again.

So here digital play is understood as a potentially 'good' way to learn about more than just the market or even traditional school subjects, but play as learning may still be seen as a discourse that attempts to place digital play within an overall framework of progress. The focus is on the 'utility' or otherwise of playing videogames rather than play for its own sake.

This stands in contrast to the dominant agenda for videogames that considers play as 'anti-progress', or 'risky' and 'damaging' and therefore in need of control. Such arguments represents an attempt to suppress 'risk' and are a 'side effect' of modern projects of industry and technology (see Beck, 1992). Shields (2003) notes that a theme in the contemporary conceptualisation of risk is it's virtual nature. Hence risk is not actually calculable and therefore controllable, but it is virtual, imagined and speculative. So here videogames are presented as potentially harmful.

Grodal (1998) reviews a range of effects literature to find that many suggest that individuals may learn violent behaviour from the media (including games) and then copy this in real life. Such research continues. For example this is the finding of Anderson and Dill's (2000) lab studies, and of Anderson and Bushmans' (2001) meta-analytic review: aggressive games lead to increased aggressive behaviour, and less 'positive' social behaviour. More recently Carnagey, Anderson and Bushman (2007) present a study that demonstrates a 'desensitizing effect' of violent videogames. However effects research has been criticised for its narrow approach to understanding behaviour (see Gauntlet, 1998), and in any case research into effects is often contradictory. Grodal also highlights research that suggests that some individuals may seek out videogames as an outlet for violent behaviour – a catharsis effect. And Sherry (2001) suggests that any effect from violent games may be less than from violent television shows where the representation is more realistic. Bensley and Van Eenwky (2001) are equally cautious. In addition to noting the absence of studies of adults and violent games, they find that current evidence does not support the idea that violent videogames lead

to real life violence in children. So although the discourse is clear – games are a potential problem because they make you violent – the evidence is inconsistent.

Another concern about videogame use is addiction. For example Salguero and Moran note that "excessive use of video games is associated with a number of problems which resemble a dependence syndrome" (2002:1601), and Grusser, Thalemann and Griffiths (2007) present 'disturbing' evidence that nearly 12% of gamers may be addicted. The reason for this concern that children may be 'playing games too much' is made clear by Cummings and Vandewater (2007), who seem disappointed that their survey study didn't support the idea that games lead to social isolation, but still managed to note a possible neglect of school work amongst gamers.

Shields (2003) however dismisses such views as no more than a rehash of the various moral scares surrounding pop music, early TV and even serialised novels, or as Williams (2003) puts it, games are a 'lightning rod' for social tensions. As younger generations accept new media, older generations tend to fret about change that may undermine what they have come to see as the proper actions of individuals.

So society has an implicit sense of what constitutes progress and feels a need to eliminate risks to that project. Yet individuals *do* enjoy considerable risk through play, for example from online gambling activities, and Shields (2003) also cites playful phenomenon such as 'web-cam' girls who flirt with sexual risk from the safe confines of their bedrooms. The picture of a risk-averse society therefore seems apparently at odds with behaviour. And in terms of videogames themselves, the elimination of risk, and therefore the certainty of success, seems even less appropriate. However, video games may present 'controlled' risk (for example see Eskelinen & Tronstad, 2003) and are therefore perhaps part of the process of the elimination of actual risk from individual's lives. As with other areas of play then we see both new ways to apparently control and structure *alea*, but also new risks to be taken. This is of course a broader characteristic of contemporary consumer society. As Lehtonen and Maenpaa (1997) put it: "*shopping is* [...] *where the plurality of possibilities are fundamental*". Novelty is always sought, but in a controlled and predictable way. Like videogames the mall offers "*a controlled degree of novelty and controlled adventures of taste with a predictably happy ending*" (Lehtonen and Maenpaa,1997). And Featherstone (1991) confirms that the experience of shopping involves controlled de-controlling of the emotions suggesting that this becomes more important the more everyday life itself is made safe and predictable. That which is increasingly excluded from culture escapes through carnival because it becomes an object of desire. In effect controlled decontrolling allows the ever more regulated adult to become child-like again, to see the world afresh and enchanted.

Sp research on digital games - and therefore our ways of understanding them - is dominated by the modern rhetoric of play as progress. Videogames may either aid markets or

improve learning or they are harmful and therefore a *hindrance* to progress. The former view justifies investment; the later justifies control and together these also suggest a play of power as games as seen as either helping the economy, or potentially disrupting society via violent or addictive games.. We also see in the link with flow and 'optimal' experience and self-improvement. This is a link to play of the self – another modern rhetoric. Yet these modern rhetoric also seems at odds with an apparent desire to re-engage with chance, or risk (albeit controlled) that games also allow. This is perhaps what we might expect from a sociology derived from play, a tension between modern ways of accounting for play and more ancient forms of play negotiated via the market.

2.5.2. Digital play and transformation

If we are to avoid reducing videogames to an aid or hindrance to progress, how else may we understand them? The process of repetition and exploration of 'what if's' described by Gee is also discussed by Frasca (2003) who takes a broad view of the potential for games to transform the individual by encouraging the exploration of ideas. Turkle (1995) also considers such activity, arguing that by coming to understand the 'built in rules' of a system players experience a form of consciousness-raising about the simulations apparent in 'real' life. Kline, et al (2003) also acknowledge this, although they warn that such insight is by no means certain. This brings us to games as a way for individuals to respond to the routines of their everyday life by escaping into digital play that allows for speculation, imagination and role-play. Aside from educational claims, Gee suggests that in creating 'projective identities' video games have the potential to alter a player's hopes, values and fears - i.e., the content of their imagination and the third modern play-rhetoric.

In-game 'projective identities' are a negotiation of a players actual, 'real-world' identity and the identity their in game character. The result - similar to Barthes' writerly texts (e.g., see Fiske, 1989) - is that meaning is co-created by player and game designers. A player is 'forced' by the game to consider and reconsider their views on a range of subjects. They do this because they are asked by the game to make choices that have 'real' implications in the game-space, but ultimately the player is responsible for creating meaning form the experience.

This points to a key characteristic of videogames. As a form of virtual reality digital games ask us to consider that there may be more than one reality that individuals may inhabit (Poster, 1995). Shields (2003) describes videogames as liminal, halfway spaces between the imagination and material existence. Whether the focus is on violence, education, or the exploration of identity, virtual spaces appear to be spaces for reflection on and of mundane reality. They may temporarily separate individuals from their ordinary lives, change them in

some way before returning them. Although an understanding of digital media has largely been developed from the narrow perspective of progress – both in terms of managerial agendas and the effects agenda, including education – there is also the suggestion that digital media have allowed individuals to return to forms of pre-rational, free play. Kline et al capture this in their expression of the tension between a Frankfurt School approach to understanding digital media in terms of manipulation and a Birmingham School approach to granting autonomy and freedom to the audience by placing emphasis on understanding the experiences of the players. Simon (2005) similarly argues against formalist approaches that focus on the game content, advocating the need for a broader understanding of players and their experiences.

A sociology derived from play suggests a complex and seemingly contradictory consumer society that has brought us a regulated life where we work, but where our dreams are met through aesthetic performance in the marketplace. Our work is ordered and regulated, as is much of or lives, yet through play we can 'find ourselves' again and videogames may offer the player-consumer an opportunity to 'act out', or actualise the imagination as an escape from routine. Of course other experiential consumption and aesthetic media may do something similar and we therefore need to establish that videogames are in any way 'special' in their ability.

Turner (1982) explains the 'serious' potential of such role-play: "*to perform is to complete a more or less involved process rather than a single deed, it is about bringing to completion, it is to accomplish*". Schechner (1988) also considers performance as a following through, describing a process whereby fantasies are produced by the blocking of performances that we may be prevented from enacting because of normal conventions of behaviour. This is again like Cohen and Taylor's (1992) escape attempts: the recognition of restrictions in the routines of daily life result in individuals developing speculative fantasies that eventually find an outlet in defined spaces such as the theatre. For Schechner theatrical performances are a 'public dreaming', just as for Falk and Campbell (1997) shopping itself can be a public daydream, a way to act on the imagination in acceptable ways. Such performance has a 'management role' in allowing individuals to imagine, actualise and then come to terms with cultural change. But we may note that where as the theatre may be truly 'public' the trend in consumption is for increasing privatised fantasy aided by interactive media.

Performances involve a kind of double consciousness (see Carlson, 1996). Bauman (cited in Carlson, 1996) explains this as a mental comparison between the actual execution of an action compared to an ideal or potential. In this respect performance is again an action that is considered and imagined first and therefore acquires a reflexive constituent that makes it possible to reflect not only on the act, but about oneself (Tuner, 1982; Turner, 1986) and while 'performance' suggests the need to a have an audience, sometimes including god, or

simply 'others', (Bauman in Carlson, 1996; Schechner, 1988) for videogames in an individualised society this may be oneself, for example where a player is invited to watch their own avatar's performance.

For the sociology of consumption we may note that the market is a prime location for aesthetic performances. For example Campbell (2004), explains that shopping facilitates a monitoring of likes and dislikes of objects found in the marketplace and through this pleasurable and speculative 'testing' and exploring, individuals achieve a realisation of who they are. We see here the act of looking, browsing and sometimes buying as a reflective practice. And elsewhere the extent and complexity of consumers' capacity to conjure whole dream worlds is also revealed in McCracken's thesis of displaced meaning and consumption: "*individuals anticipate the possession of the good and, with this good, the possession of certain ideal circumstances*" (1988:110). McCracken's consumers create ideal worlds for themselves, perhaps in the past, perhaps the future, or even in some far away and exotic location. And this later practice is considered by Urry (1995) who highlights that for the tourist the experience of a place is always the re-experience because they have first consumed that location in their imagination. Another way of viewing Urry's tourists is as performers acting out the fantasies that they have already thought through (but that were scripted for them by the tourism industry). Together then these authors present experiential consumption as an aesthetic, imaginative and reflective experience. Here I am simply re-highlighting the centrality of playfulness to our understanding of contemporary consumer behaviour.

If consumption spaces such as mall are already places where the imagination can be developed and actualised, Turkle (1995) suggests that the significance of videogames is also dramatic; life on the screen permits us to:

> *Project ourselves into our own dramas, dramas in which we are producer, director, and star.... Computer screens are the new location for our fantasies, both erotic and intellectual. We are using life on computer screens to become comfortable with new ways of thinking about evolution, relationships, sexuality, politics, and identity* (1995:PN).

Shields (2003) explores in detail this relationship between the real and the imagined, highlighting that performance may now take place in digital, virtual spaces as something 'in between'. Building on Bergson, Deleuze and Lefebvre, Shields (2000) presents an 'ontological tetrology' that positions both the virtual and the material as 'real' and opposed to the abstract and probable as 'possible'. Whereas the virtual and abstract are 'ideal', the material (or the 'concrete present' in a later version, Shields, 2003) and the possible are 'actual'. This questions the previously accepted dichotomy between the real and the virtual where priority is normally given to the material world as real, making the real more akin to what is natural and the virtual merely the illusion or the copy (see also Doel and Clarke in

Crang, Crang and May, 1999; Crang et al., 1999; Burbules, 2004; Shields, 2003; Proulx and Latzko-Toth, 2000).

Things that exist firstly in the imaginary lead to performances in material space, but now also digital, virtual performances. For example, the practice of buying a car (in a material sense) is *actually real* and as consumers may imagine that it is *actually possible* to buy a car, this event is 'probable'. The *actually possible* may be seen to set a barrier on the daydreams of consumers (although they may stretch this to its limit), representing those things that the market could help to actualise. Campbell's daydreams, or most of Cohen and Taylor's escapes (with the exception of 'mindscaping') are all things that we feel are in some way probable. The development of the digital virtual however, may invite an individual to 'buy' a virtual magic staff in a game such as *World of Warcraft*. Magic swords are real but *ideal* - until played with in a game where this *idealised reality* is also actualised. In this way *abstract*, *possible* ideas can be made real in the imagination first, and then actualised by playing a digital game. So videogames may be a mechanism for the encouragement and actualisation of abstract consumer fantasy *beyond* what was previously probable. Hence consumers may contemplate new fantasy (perhaps prompted by the media) to create enjoyable scenarios that they then seek to actualise via videogames. This provides an aesthetic explanation for adult videogame use that is a potential alternative to the rational discourses of progress that currently seem more common, yet struggle to account for adult play in anything other than negative terms.

Shields ontological tetrology highlights the various positions we may experience, but he also suggests that we may have a drive to 'visit' each. Likewise Prolux and Latzkho-Toth (2000:6) explain that "*the actual and the virtual are in a circular productive relationship*". This again seems to be consistent with the idea of a liminoid and highlights a relationship between Turner's and Schechner's social and aesthetic (theatrical) dramas where one feeds into the other. It is what is 'behind' the action in social dramas that is the stimulus for the theatre (and rituals) as acceptable outlets for blocked display, or if you like, an 'escape attempt' always has something that is escaped from, and according the Cohen and Taylor, returned to (*ludus* and *paidia* again). Aesthetic dramas are an acting out, or seeing through of issues in society, but the result is insight that invisibly feeds back into society. So in social dramas we make use of the experience of theatrical dramas and vice versa. Of course this is to conceptualise material as social and virtual as theatrical and Carlson (1996) highlights this criticism of such a relationship that preferences the social as the place which aesthetic experiences emanate from and are responsible to. Cohen and Taylor demonstrate similar angst when highlighting the problematic way in which 'paramount reality' is seen as somehow the 'natural' state of being. Perhaps this is a further implication of the transition from liminal to liminoid. The liminal at least acted as though there was value in maintaining

the everyday, stable structure of society; now distinction between the two has eroded, but the iterative connection remains with performances in each space reflecting each other.

2.6. Digital play and the management of routine

In conclusion then, a sociology of consumption derived from play, and that is cautious of the dominance of the modern rhetoric of progress, suggests that individuals have come to enjoy the market as a resource that provides a sense of 'self' through play. In consumption spaces in general there is the opportunity for endless little transformations produced by the inversions, speculations and ultimately playfulness of something that might usefully be called liminoid, or an escape from routine. Through these escapes consumers may experience who they are, fixing meaning by use of commodities. But the rapid development of digital virtual spaces has opened up considerable new opportunities for these sorts of transformational spaces and therefore new forms of pleasure and experience based on wider speculation. What we are only just able to see and document are the range of new practices that such spaces allow.

Mundane daydreams may become elaborate fantasies with a demand that the market satisfies them. Some consumers may long for a large home, filled with designer commodities. In other cases they may long for a lifestyle that eludes them because they lack the skills, or the social connections. They may dream of being a racing driver, an astronaut, a footballer, a warrior or a hero, or simply socially successful, with attractive, admiring friends. There may be other consumption activities such prostitution, theft of luxury goods, or drug dealing that are taboo, and that therefore cannot be openly practiced (performed), but that might still inhabit our imaginations (this forms the basis of novels such as J G Ballard's *Super Cannes*). The enduring popularity of science fiction and fantasy in the media may even invite consumers to fantasise about even more amazing experiences (to be a wizard, a Jedi, to go back in time, or to travel though space). In a predictable and secure life, these are now exciting *possibilities* and consumers may look to the market to help them actualise such speculations. This is Campbell's (2004) consumption as emanationism. Our reality is created from a series of desires for experiences that we dream of as an escape from the routines and limitations of our everyday lives. Developments in markets result from this collective desire with a market created once enough people desire something similar.

The play economy provides the potential for many different spaces for playful consumption, but some of these may be more obvious than others because they are contained and packaged as 'theatrical sets' where consumers are invited into a pre-staged drama – an obvious example being videogames - purposely framed as recreational activities. We can even see examples of consumption-like performance in many of the most popular. For example *Gran Turismo* is one of the best selling console games of all time with world-wide

sales of up to 30 million units (Gamezone, 2004). Although usually thought of as a driving simulation, the game also simulates aspects of buying and owning new automobiles. Another example is *The Sims* series of games. These are considered to be the best-selling PC games of all time (e.g., Howson, 2003) and have also been described as 'virtualised consumerism' (Kline et al, 2003). The Sims invites players to create a virtual household. Players are free to create a wide range of characters and family units. They are then required to build a virtual home and to fill that home with household goods. Further Examples are found in MMORPGs. In Western countries, *Everquest* was until recently one of the most popular massive multi-player online game (MMOG.) At its peak there were 500,000 players signed up to the game each paying £100 a year subscription (The Times 2003). Now *World of Warcraft* is even bigger, it's publishers claiming 9 million users (Blizzard, 2007). The growth rate seems staggering. In *Everquest* or *World of Warcarft* players aim for magic spells, enchanted armour, powerful swords and other such fantasy and buy and sell these in a virtual marketplace. They may also choose the race, gender, skills and strength of their characters from a range of options, as a consumer may choose a new outfit. So videogame development is driven by endlessly renewable *consumer* fantasy; by consumers demanding ever more elaborate, but acceptable outlets for fantastic desires and by the market responding. But of course there will be also be other 'non-consumption' fantasies accessed by videogames; fragments of individuals' lives that are yet to find satisfactory actualisation such as violent and sexual desires that may add richness to the adult consumption of digital games.

My attempt in this chapter has been to explore the nature of play as something more than 'childish'. In doing so I have also considered a sociology of consumption derived from play that may account for the complexity and variation in conceptualisations of the consumer and a playful turn in consumer culture and therefore ways of understanding it. I have highlighted a wide tradition of discourses on play, highlighting the potentially 'serious' and transforming aspects of adult play behaviour and the links between play forms and broader culture. I have further highlighted the playfulness in theories of consumption, arguing that consumption forms may easily map onto conceptualisations of play. And therefore I have restated the experiential nature of contemporary Western consumption as a broad context for understanding adult videogame use. Although why not call it playful rather than experiential and therefore let it be enriched by established insights into play forms? Finally I have examined a range of research into digital games, noting a bias towards a view of play as progress, but preferring a view of videogames that allow for an aesthetic, imaginative performance for the actualisation of daydreams *and* fantasy. What remains absent however are accounts of the actual lived experiences of adult players that demonstrate the nuanced and detailed ways in which games are used to negotiate or manage escape and routine in every

day life, and therefore also new consumer practices at the 'sharp end' of the trajectory of consumer culture. I now turn my attention to addressing this gap.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

I want to consider the practices of adult videogame consumption as a specific form of playful consumption that has only recently emerged. This is a broader study of videogames than most that tend to focus on the game form, the act of play itself, or on narrow aspects of the outcome of play (learning, or violence in particular) and is consistent with Warde's (2005) call for a study of consumption that considers the overall performance of a consumption practice as it is located within individuals' lives – i.e., the development of a consumer practice. As Warde also suggests, we can see this research as capturing consumer practices at one moment in history, in this case a point where the playful, or experiential turn in consumer culture is apparent and where the implications of digital media are just unfolding.

3.1. Philosophical and Methodological considerations

Creswell (1998) suggests a need for qualitative researchers to locate their approaches within specific research traditions (biography, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, or case study), each with a defined set of processes and assumptions, but with considerable scope for flexibility and innovation (both theoretically and methodologically). In the context of consumer behaviour, Goulding (1999; 2005) also suggests that it is insufficient to make a general claim of an interpretive approach, and that more consideration of philosophical underpinnings is required by researchers. The purpose for the researcher in this 'location' is to identify the specific ontological and epistemological basis for their work, or to consider the nature of reality being studied and the nature of knowledge being presented.

Like Creswell, Mason (1996) believes that qualitative research is self-evidently valid and therefore it is unnecessary to 'defend' such approaches against the accusation that they are somehow inferior, or a soft option when compared to quantitative work, but that instead the research should reflect on the nature of knowledge produced through their endeavours. However, despite this appoints acceptance of interpretive approaches, Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom (2001) highlight that interpretivism is far from the dominant paradigm for researchers in many disciplines and I observe that much of the work done on videogames (especially when related to violent effects) remains quantitative in nature, as does much of the work on consumer behaviour. This might suggest quantitative, positivist traditions are embedded in both areas. Nevertheless, through institutions like DiGRA and new journals such as *Games and Culture,* I also recognize a growing acceptance of a range of methodological and theoretical approaches to games. The acceptance of qualitative research in consumer behaviour studies is probably also sufficiently well established for qualitative approaches to be recognised (for example see Arnould and Thompson's 2005 review of Consumer Culture

Theory). In the following sections I therefore want to reflect on my approach and to establish the philosophical and methodological basis for my current study.

I have highlighted Shields (2003) ontological dualisms as a way to distinguish between material and imaginary existence and to reject the normative view of the real as primary and the virtual, as some 'poor substitute' that only ever seeks to 'be like' the real (virtual as 'almost', or 'not quite' the real). An obvious opposition to such a claim is that the dualism is simply 'created' in order to argue for specific attributes of one or the other mode of experience (in Shields' case 'ideal', sounds better than 'actual'). Yet in a 'common sense' way we might expect that most of us recognise both material experiences and those that only exist in our imaginations. For example when we drive a car we 'know' we are not imagining driving a car and when we daydream about driving a car, we 'know' that we are not actually doing so, but rather are 'only' imagining a possible material experience. This would be unlike imagining what it may be like to fly, which we might know is not probable. Shield's ontological positions therefore usefully articulate the ways in which individuals may make sense of different experiences and imaginings. Again drawing from Shields, I have also implied a temporal ontology that argues that we use memory (which is virtual, but a product of our experiences) to project into an imagined future (which is also virtual), in order to act in the 'concrete present' material world. These assumptions about existence therefore also imply an epistemology; our knowledge of the world is gained through a combination of our concrete experience *and* our imagination.

This means that it is desirable to understand the broader experience and imaginations of adult videogame players and not simply their play practices. The practices of playing involve more than just what happens when sitting at the screen. Although I may observe individuals playing games, this would tell me little about what they might imagine or do before, during, or after they play or how those things were experienced. In addition, prolonged observation of an individual or family in a home would be impractical. This limits any ethnographic approach, such as those used by Turner (1982; 1986) to form an understanding of the liminal, ritual process. Assuming daydreams and fantasies that might accompany play are not normally discussed with others (as Cohen and Taylor, 1992, suggest), 'everyday' conversations are also unlikely to generate much data. So although the structures that I am looking for are social in origin they may not be directly observed through the interactions of social groups. In the absence of any way to directly read imaginations, I must therefore rely on individuals telling me about their experiences.

This leads me to a phenomenological approach, or rather as Holstein and Gubrium (2005) explain, an approach to understanding social action that has a phenomenological root that goes back to Husserl, but that has been modified by his student Heidegger and by Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty, and subsequently made more social by Shultz and more social

and ideological by Holstein and Gubrium themselves (1998; 2005). Although Husserl's original intention was to produce a transcendental point from which science could be produced, this was later reflected on by Heidegger and Gadamer who recognized that the researcher's own experience can never be escaped. Hence an acceptance of existential phenomenology and a focus on a researcher as a questioning being who puts their own pre-understandings and traditions deliberately 'at risk' in order to understand the lived meaning of the experiences of others (Dahlberg et al, 2001). However for Holstein and Gubrium (2005) there is still more to be done with this insight in terms of connecting it to broader social histories and discourses with an explicit desire to encourage readers to see the world through the experiences of others.

It is not my intention here to reproduce in full the philosophy of these people as my focus is on methodological approach and analysis. Hence Creswell (1998) confirms that phenomenological approaches are suited to research that aims to understand the meaning of experiences. Whereas Creswell suggests (from Wolcott) that 'ethnography is establishing what a stranger would have to know in order to be able to participate [in a culture]' (1998:60), phenomenology might be closer to what a stranger might need to know in order to experience the world like another individual.

According to Hirshman and Holbrook (1992), Husserl's phenomenology suggests a 'tying together' of an object and the thought of that object in the form of an experience. In this way consciousness is never separate from what we experience, but rather it is 'intentional'. This includes knowing, imagining and remembering: all have a specific focus on 'something', but that need not be material. We construct our sense of the world by understanding our experiences in the form of 'essences' of things and this process is always ongoing. Similarly Carroll and Tafoya (2000) explain Shultz's 'taken-for-granted' attitude under which individuals accept things for 'what they are' with associated values and meanings. Similar terms are also found in Gadamer, who uses the idea of 'traditions' and 'prejudices' and Husserl who considers the 'natural attitude' (Dahlberg *et al*, 2001). These terms capture the sense in which the ways we make sense of the world are accepted without question. The task in phenomenology is to explain how these 'taken-for-granted' aspects of experience are constructed and used to make sense of experience. This could equally be driving a material car, or flying a spaceship in a game. In phenomenology, we avoid the need to argue the ontological status of one over the other, instead focussing on how they might be experienced.

A key aspect of this is the recognition that a thing and the experience of that thing are co-constituted such that when we apparently recognize a car, for example, we are both constructing it and also coming to understand it in terms of the thing that we have just labelled it as. The thing and our understanding of it are therefore inseparable from that

experience (Holstein and Gubrium 1998). Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) explain this in terms of metaphors. The Cartesian view of mind and body produces metaphors of 'the machine' (in which the structures and mechanisms of the mind may be understood), or 'the container' (in which the body is only a vessel for a separate and independent mind). Phenomenology however suggests metaphors of 'pattern' (in which a whole cannot be separated from the individual elements which make it up), or a 'figure/ground' metaphor that expresses the inseparability of an object from the experience of that object. Using the example of a visual trick in which an image may be seen as either a vase or two faces, Thompson highlights that you cannot see one without the other also being present. Although our attention may move between the two, this is not the same as separating them. Applied to phenomenology Thompson further explains:

> *Consider a mother and child shopping in a store. Initially, the mother is focally aware of the store's offerings and the child is in the background of her experiential field. Let the child begin crying and, suddenly, the store recedes into the background...* (1989:136).

In this example the focus of experience can change according to the specific aspect of the context that is fore-grounded. For the mother, there is no abstract 'shopping', or 'child', but a highly contextualized experience of either. From this Thompson explains that experience is a dynamic process where specific issues stand out in the individual's life world whilst others recede.

Creswell (1998) further explains that phenomenology is the search for the structure and underlying meaning of experiences that contain both an outward appearance and consciousness. Hirschman and Holbrook (1992) link this way of thinking about experience to the aesthetic and hedonic experiences of consumers that I have already highlighted. So such an approach removes the need to think about mind and body (subject and object) in a Cartesian way. There is no object and then separate consciousness of that object, only an experience and individuals 'collect' a pool of experiences with which to create meaning. For some forms of phenomenology this focus on the social is more explicit, for example Holstein and Gubrium (1998) describe social phenomenology with reference to Shultz. They state that:

> *Shultz noted that an individual approaches the life world with a stock of knowledge composed of common-sense constructs and categories that are social in origin. These images, theories, ideas, values and attitudes are applied to aspects of experience, making them meaningful* (1998:139).

They further explain that these stocks of knowledge are essentially incomplete and modifiable, or as Holstein and Gubrium put it:

> *Whereas conventional sociology orients to rules, norms and shared meanings...ethnomethodology* [a concept closely related to phenomenology] *turns this around to consider how members themselves orient to and use rules, norms and shared meanings to account for the regularity of their actions.* (2005: 486).

Holstein and Gubrium (2005) explain that individuals establish a context in which their actions take place in order to logically account for them. By accepting that individuals must make sense of videogame experiences as they do any other experience, we might consider *how* it is that individuals do this, especially given the broad discourses that I have reviewed in the previous chapter.

Phenomenology is neither objective (as in positivist science), or subjective (relativist). It takes the point of analysis as the experience of individuals. Hence the psychology of that individual is also not an issue. Therefore we don't ask about 'personality', and we don't measure an amount of 'stuff' or its nature, we only ask how things are experienced (Dahlberg et al, 2001). In addition we can accept that this is a 'reflexive' process for individuals as accounts of actions are explained in terms of the context that they themselves have shaped.

Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) highlight that interpretative consumer research may often take an implicitly phenomenological approach, but that greater reflection on the implications of this 'way of seeing' consumers would be productive. Goulding (1999; 2005) similarly argues that consumer behaviour researchers are often careless in their use of interpretative methods, paying too little attention to philosophical underpinnings. For Thompson et al (1989) phenomenology seeks to describe consumer experiences as they emerge in specific contexts in contrast to positivist approaches that aim to 'decontextualise experience' by identifying specific aspects of it in the assumption that once abstracted, insight can be generally applied. From a phenomenological perspective this is problematic because once something is abstract it no longer says anything about the specific lived experience of an individual. Just as the subject cannot be separated from an object and then broken into component forms, nor can the object be analyzed separately from the individual experiencing it. So formalist approaches are also 'flawed' in their assumption that we can say anything useful about an experience by analyzing the component parts of what is experienced (i.e., understand the experience of playing games by only looking at the games themselves). In producing a phenomenology then, the emphasis is on a detailed, contextual, 'first person' description of individuals' life-worlds.

As this focus on description is a key criticism of phenomenological approaches (for example see Thompson et al, 1989; Schwandt, 1998) it may be useful to explain this further. Firstly Thompson et al, make a distinction between 'third person descriptions' often assumed to be the basis of description by positivists and 'first person descriptions'. Third person

descriptions may be seen to be pre-theoretical in that they are based on observations by the researcher that are subsequently accounted for by theory. It is the explanations in this 'accounting for' that create theory and that are the role of the researcher. With a phenomenological approach however the description is provided *to* the researcher by the participant, and therefore the participant is doing the 'accounting for' of their own actions. The researcher is not then abstracting this, but examining the descriptions to produce an 'analytic account' of the lived experience of individuals that allows a reader to understand how they experience the world. This is not a theory as such as it is not intended to be a general 'rule' of behaviour.

Schwandt (1998) also suggests that phenomenology is criticised as lacking 'critical purpose' because it is based on the 'status quo' of the participant's experience and therefore downplays the potential for their frames of reference to be changed, or for critical commentary on the social processes or individual histories which may have resulted in specific ways of experiencing the world. A response to this is for the phenomenologist to engage in further critical commentary on the themes produced. Once the life-worlds of individuals are described, the researcher re-socialises them through reference to (especially) historical accounts of the social experience which frame these individual ways of experiencing the world (Thompson et al, 1989). In a development of the ontological bracketing common to phenomenology, Holstein and Gubrium (2005) further describe an approach to analytical bracketing which calls on the researcher to move between the rich descriptions of the life-world of participants and the broader historical and critical insights into society's structures; a distinction between *discursive practice* (the lived experience) and *discourse in practice* (those common understandings of play and consumption that I have already articulated). The result is a distinction between theory, which aims to predict why something happens, and analytics that aim to account for experience. For Holstein and Gubrium 'tentative whys' can only follow from much more specific 'whats' (discourses in practice) and 'hows' (discursive practices).

In summary then, I can only attempt to suggest (tentatively) why individuals engage in digital play once I have considered in detail the socially produced discourses that are *at* play in these behaviours and located these in individual and specific lived experiences. This leads Holstein and Gubrium (2005) to consider interpretive practice, as a form of enquiry into social action that combines the 'how things are experienced' approach of phenomenology and ethnomethodology with a more ethnographic, or Foucauldian emphasis on social discourse, recognising that social discourse is a resource for social interaction as well as the result of that interaction. In this way, although I start my analysis by describing first-person experiences, I am also able to integrate an analysis based on the sociologies of consumption and of play, for example.

3.2. Approaches to data generation and analysis

Despite growth in the acceptance of qualitative methods in consumer research over the last 20 years (for example see Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Goulding 1999), phenomenological approaches remain uncommon. They were first advocated by Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) and Thompson in particular has become associated with phenomenology and the related hermeneutical approach (Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994; Thompson 1996; Thompson 1997; Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). However Goulding has highlighted that phenomenological studies do not always adhere to the methods Thompson describes. So although Thompson, et al (1990) demonstrate the approach (for example by examining the experience of choice amongst married women) others claim phenomenology, but produce something slightly different. For example O'Guinn and Faber (1989) claim to present a phenomenological study of compulsive buying, but start by *classifying* and *theorizing* compulsive activity before (in addition to interviews) surveying consumers to produce statistical accounts of these predetermined classifications of behaviour. Likewise Mick & Demoss (1990) produce a claimed phenomenology of self-gifts by using a survey of predetermined concepts and questions. These seem far removed from a 'neutral' stance and focus on the life-world of individuals.

Other consumer researchers, although not explicitly claiming a phenomenological approach, do draw on the lived experiences of consumers. For example Belk and Costa's (1998) investigation of the fantasy consumption of mountain man retreats; Woodruffe-Burton's (1998) study of male fashion consumption; Kozinets's (2001) study of Star Trek culture; Kozinets's (2002) investigation into the Burning Man Festival; Holt's (2002) investigations into consumer resistance to brands; Belk, Ger & Askegaard (2003) investigation into consumer desire; Martin's (2004) study of players of Magic the Gathering, and; Stevens and Maclaran's (2005) study of the use of women's magazines to evoke the imagination. What these studies have in common is an aim to provide insight into consumption practices though the reported experiences of consumers rather than by measurement and classification, and such studies also seem to illustrate the ways in which the market creates a liminoid space, whether that be science fiction conventions, myths of 'living wild', or even apparently anti-consumption lifestyles and festivals. In all cases the market either aids the 'escape', or re-imposes itself after a temporary, playful period. The result is an acknowledgement of the value of detailed descriptions of consumer experiences, an established connection between playful activities and the market, and a range of qualitative and analytical approaches that might be used and understood in such studies (Thompson, 2005; Goulding, 2005; 1999).

A key aspect of the phenomenological approach is the use of interviews (e.g, Holstein & Gubrium, 1998). I am assuming that individuals are able to describe their experiences through language, but because an individual's description of events is recalled, it is actually a description of what they now imagine happened. I am assuming that this 'translation' into spoken explanation is a reasonable approximation of experience and that I may imagine these experiences from their language-based descriptions because of an assumption that language is a shared basis of creating meaning. As Thompson explains:

> *The stories consumers tell about their everyday experiences create temporal trajectories in which a past event is relived in relation to present concerns and projected towards an envisioned future. This temporal ordering creates relationships between a consumer's contemporary understanding, his or her personal history, and a broader field of historically established meanings* (1997:442).

Hence these recalled experiences represent a process of broader 'sense making' by participants which renders them satisfactory as a basis for understanding their lived experiences. However an implication is that although there might be considerable consistency between my understanding of language and any other individual's, anything I subsequently write about what they have told me is a mix of their and my imagination. This seems very different from a presentation of some 'objective' truth. For Carroll and Tafoya (2000) this focus on meaning 'contained' in language brings phenomenology close to the project of the post-structualists but with an important difference. They argue that the 'problem' with post-structuralism is that it dismisses the idea of 'self' in favour of a system of language and this focus on the discourse (which they feel can lead to a new type of formalism), distances the interpretation from the life-world of individuals. So although the focus is on the language used to describe events, the idea is to 'conjure up' an experience based on these descriptions.

In order to create a 'close translation' of the experiences of the individuals that I talk to, there are practical steps that I may take. Perhaps most importantly I need to 'bracket' my own views and experiences. This is what Husserl terms the deliberate suspension of the researcher's ontological assumptions so that they avoid interpreting the lived experiences of participants in terms of what they themselves consider to be 'correct', or 'normal' (Thompson et al, 1989). Heidegger and Gadamer later modify what this means in practice however, recognising that complete suspension of pre-understanding, or traditions is not possible because you can never think outside of ideas that are so taken for granted that they are not normally reflected on. Traditions 'condition' our experiences, such that we don't seek to understand our tradition, but rather we understand *with it.* However tradition is not fixed, but rather is enacted through lived experience and is therefore filtered through the present. It is this filtering of the whole (history) by the present moment of experience that produces a hermeneutic ontology. In questioning our own understandings we could never be sure that

traditions are fully suspended, but may still be able to see phenomena from different perspectives (Dahlberg et al, 2001). Carroll & Tafoya further explain this as similar to the notion of theatrical 'suspension of disbelief', highlighting that:

> *From the phenomenological reconstructed point of view, all phenomena are left open to an investigation into what makes them phenomena, what makes them phenomena of a particular sort, and what makes them count as real, meaningful objects for ordinary experience* (2000:7).

The researcher attempts to minimize the impact of their own experience on the translation of the experiences of others. Linked to this, Dahlberg et al (2001) warn the researcher to be suspicious of the feeling that an interview 'went well' as this feeling may be produced by satisfaction that the respondent said the 'right' things. Interviews that do not 'go well' might indicate a greater distance from the interviewers own pre-understandings.

Thompson et al (1989) explain the nature of a phenomenological interview and subsequent analysis of the data generated and this has informed my study. In analyzing the recordings of interviews the interviewer takes a hermeneutic approach where individual aspects of the interview are related to an overall picture of the life-world of the participants in an iterative movement between whole-part-whole. Phenomenological interviews therefore require that participants are allowed maximum leeway to talk about what interests them and therefore involve broad and open questions. During the interview the emphasis is on the participant's reflections of actual experiences. Direct 'why' questions are problematic because they ask participants to rationalize, or abstract their behaviour, or feelings in a way that moves the discussion away from lived experience and instead asks the respondent to behave as a 'naïve scientist' attributing one aspect of the experience as a cause of the recalled behaviour (Thompson et al, 1989). Instead, phenomenology wants to know a detailed account of life as it is directly experienced. So rather than ask 'why do adults play videogames?' the phenomenologist focuses on accounts of specific experiences. Similarly Dahlberg et al (2001) highlight an objection to 'idle talk' which is again not grounded in experience, so the researcher needs to probe claims that 'things are just like that, or just happen' with requests that the participant recalls actual experiences. Thompson et al (1989) also highlights a need to get respondents to talk about their 'whole life' in order to develop a hermeneutic approach to analysis. So for example when Thompson et al (1989) seeks to understand married women's experiences of choice, they report separate discussions where both the whole life-world of participants and specific experiences of choice are covered.

A phenomenology seeks to reveal patterns or 'global themes' that are built through a hermeneutic process and supported by direct references to the reported experiences. As a result the analysis remains closely tied to the specific data generated, or as Thompson et al (1989) explain, analysis remains in the 'emic' world of the respondent. One implication of

this is that external verification of the data is impossible. The hermeneutic process means that individual experiences are understood in terms of a whole - the 'life world' - which in turn is modified with each experience until a point where clear themes are generated, or as Hirschman & Holbrook (1992) explain there is a 'coming together' of the text and the researchers understanding of that text. Once this is achieved for each interview, the task is then to consider themes across different interviews. Here as Thompson et al (1989) note, similarities in 'global themes' are understood as similarities in how different individuals might experience different events. In their example, 'restriction in choice' may be experienced as a consequence of a lack of time with one participant, but a lack of money for another. Although the experiences are different the theme of restriction is experientially similar.

At this point Thompson et al (1989) note that the researcher is creating just one of many possible stories about the participants' lives, in this case what it is to be an adult videogame player. This doesn't present problems as long as the account is grounded in the actual data, but it does mean that different researchers may produce quite different phenomenologies from the same data so that the research is an interpretation rather than reductionist, or final, 'truth'. If the task was to produce theory, this would be a significant problem (how could many different theories be produced from the same data?), but the task is rather to produce an analytical account that explains the lived experience of respondents. The 'success' of such a task lies in whether or not the themes produced mean something to a reader. In a sense then a phenomenology breaks down some of the assumed differences between scientific 'truth' and works of fiction (for example see Thompson, 1997). Accepting this, issues relating to the reliability of the research or its validity seem redundant and instead the focus is on the care and rigour with which interviews and analysis are undertaken. As Schwandt (1998) explains, the researcher makes no truth claim, but rather *their* interpretation is just part of their hermeneutical existence and they offer the reader the text so that it might become part of theirs.

Once the themes are identified and articulated it is then possible to re-engage with historical and theoretical discussions of the phenomena in order to move from 'hows' to 'whats' and even 'whys' and I do this in the final chapter. Strictly, these later stages move beyond phenomenology to what Holstein & Gubrium (2005) refer to as interpretive practice. A purpose of such projects might be more than simply to describe behaviours, but rather to add to the reflexive resources of society whereby in recognizing that it is possible to experience the world in different ways, individuals might change their discursive practices and hence the nature of the socially constructed world. This positions the researcher as someone who encourages readers to see the world differently, recognizing that simply doing so changes its construction, which might be to see the process of presenting research as a

specialist form of discourse which creates an aesthetic drama (as articulated by Turner, 1982 and Schechner, 1986) in which the researcher identifies a breach (a gap in our understanding), articulates this so that it becomes a crisis, then moves the reader through the process of redressive action until the gap is closed by the transformation in the understanding of the reader. The result is a joining of the researcher's hermeneutic process in accounting for their research and the hermeneutic experience of the reader.

3.3. Participants and practicalities

For a phenomenology sampling is based on the ability of participants to relate their experiences of the phenomena under investigation in detail. For idiographic hermeneutic analytics the focus may be on just one individual and a small number of these may be sufficient to arrive at global themes. Thompson for example (1997) considers the lives of working women with just four individuals, and elsewhere considers choice for these women from 10 1-2 hour interviews (Thompson 1990); Woodruffe-Burton (1998) considers male shopping using case studies of three men, and; Holt (2002) considers consumer resistance to brands using 12 participants. Ideally a researcher simply continues to interview participants until no new experiences or ways of experiencing are revealed and this focus on 'exhausting' the range of experience is more appropriate than set sampling numbers. Holstein & Gubrium (1995) also highlight the issue of 'positional shifts' in respondents that in effect mean that the same respondent is capable of reproducing several different ways of making meaning. The result is that the researcher needs to be sensitive to exhausting the range of discourses produced more than the number, or length of interviews. It is also important to talk to participants in an environment that is conducive to them discussing experiences at length, which may include their homes.

The desire to comment on a range of adult digital play practices and experiences means that I needed a sufficient sample to cover adults of various ages and domestic arrangements. For this study I therefore interviewed a total of 24 adult videogame players in order to generate detailed narratives of their experiences of videogames. In selecting participants the only criteria used were: being over 18, and, being someone who plays videogames. Participants were recruited from: an email sent to staff and students at a university (7 participants); notices in two local videogame retailers (6 participants), emails send to staff at local businesses on my behalf (4 participants); a note asking for participants at a local school (2 participants), and; from 'snowballing' participants from those already recruited (5 participants). These approaches were designed to ensure a wide range of ages, social backgrounds and life-stages. Participants lived between Southampton and Weymouth on the south coast of England and as far north as Swindon and were aged between 18-57 years old.

Some were unskilled workers, others students, and others professionals in business and academia. Some were married, some had children and others were single. Most were male, but not all of them. They also varied in terms of overall experience with games and in terms of how much they currently play. Most played weekly or daily. Some were new to digital gaming, but most had been gaming since childhood. Hence as Warde (2005) suggests, I was able to account for the range of behaviours and experiences and how these may develop over time to constitute a 'consumption practice'.

Discussions took place between mid-June and the end of October 2006. In total I spent over 63 hours with participants and recorded nearly 50 hours of data from 34 separate interviews. Participants were given considerable freedom to discuss issues not directly related to games. Interviews were started by asking either about games currently being played, or how participants first got into videogames. From here the participant and I would discuss their experiences, often covering a personal biography of their use of videogames. In each instance the emphasis was on producing a 'natural' conversation, hence no prompts or interview guides were used and no formal agenda covered. In one instance (Robert and Ann) a couple were interviewed together, but in all other instances only the participant and myself were present. Interviews took place in participants' homes or workplaces, or in some cases at the University and all participants were assured of the confidentiality of the research. I have changed names and some key information (such as place of work, and names of family and friends) throughout the findings in order to protect anonymity. An overview of the sample is shown in Table 1. The interpretation of the latter criteria was left to participants. The breakdown of these can be seen in Figure 1.

In addition to interviews, and at times during the interview I also played videogames with some of the participants, or observed their solo play as we talked. Again, this took place as part of a 'natural' conversation, for example when participants offered to show me a game, or invited me to play as we talked. Prior to the interviews and in preparation for the study I had familiarised myself with the best selling games from recent years (taken from ELSPA best-seller lists) and spent time on my own playing these games (although I have played videogames on and off since childhood). The benefit of this during interviews was clear: participants quickly recognised me as a videogame player and therefore someone who may understand their experiences. Throughout, participants used specialist game-related jargon and/or references of genres and games that a non-player would have limited ability to understand.

Consistent with practical advice offered in Silverman (2006) field notes were taken at the time of the interview. Immediately following each interview I made brief notes about key experiences, about participants' homes including AV equipment and games collections, and

especially comments made by them that were not recorded. I also noted my initial understanding of the interview in the form of a brief summary of themes discussed.

Table 1: Sample

Name*	Age	Occupation	Life-stage	Interview dates	Time spent (mins)	Time recorded (mins)	Games hardware used
Elaine	18	Student	Single	27/10/06	125	110	PC, consoles
Colin	19	Leisure worker	Single	09/09/06	135	105	Consoles
Dylan	20	Student	Single	11/10/06	90	80	Consoles
Mike	20	Student	Single	13/10/06	135	90	PC (online)
Susan	20	Student	Single	27/10/06	120	90	PC (online)
Dick	24	Postman	Couple	29/07/06	130	115	Consoles, handheld
Mandy	25	Web developer	Couple	28/07/06 & 12/09/06	210	185	Handheld
Theo	25	Web designer	Couple	31/07/06 & 20/10/06	145	115	Consoles
Matt	26	Soldier	Couple	05/09/06	130	120	PC, consoles
Grant	28	Technician	Single	14/09/06	150	120	PC (online), consoles
Rich	28	Marketing	Couple	28/09/06	120	90	Consoles
Luke	29	Web designer	Single	31/07/06 & 08/09/06	250	175	Consoles
Max	31	PhD student	Single	13/06/06 & 14/07/06 (x2)	300	160	PC, consoles, handheld
Douglas	31	Administrator	Single	04/06/06 & 11/08/06	240	200	PC, consoles
Duane	34	DJ and musician	Family	09/08/06	180	160	PC (online), consoles
Stephen	35	Project manager	Couple	22/08/06	120	100	Consoles
Robert	38	Programmer	Family	13/07/06 & 19/09/06	290	245	PC, consoles
Ann	38	Trainer	Family	13/07/06 & 19/09/06	With Robert	With Robert	PC, consoles
Malcolm	38	Data manager	Family	19/08/06	120	100	Consoles, handheld
Alex	39	Househusband	Family	19/07/06 (x2)	240	115	PC, consoles, handheld
Janice	39	Forklift Driver	Couple	28/07/06	120	80	Consoles
Carl	40	IT Support worker	Family	05/07/06 & 13/07/06	240	175	PC
John	44	Management	Family	17/07/06	120	90	Consoles
Stuart	57	Professor	Family	03/07/06	90	70	PC

* names have been changed to ensure anonymity

Figure 1: Participant Life-Stages

Analysis of the data took place between November 2006 and July 2007. In November 2006 an initial overview of key themes was produced from the field notes taken and by listening to each recoding. This served as a summary 'whole' against which each interview could be checked, modifying the key themes according to the detail of each interview as each was reviewed again in detail. Again, this is consistent with the process described by Thompson et al (1989) and practical advice offered by Silverman (2006). As the interviews were digitally recorded it was not necessary to transcribe them (although 8 interviews were fully transcribed). Instead detailed notes were made on each interview, marking the times of key themes on the digital recording. These detailed summaries were then reduced to summary overviews of each participant and key themes for each participant were identified. Although transcription may be seen an a significant aspect of familiarising oneself with the data, the advantage of working primarily with the electronic recordings was that I remained closer to the original data complete with tone, nuance that may be lost when it is translated to text.

As the intent was to understand the practices of playing games, notes were divided into aspects of the discussion that: related to descriptions of how individuals adopted and developed the practice of using videogames; related to current practices, including shopping, the physical times and places for play, and related practices that tended to involve times when play 'disrupted' other activities; and the experiences of play itself that included reports of achievement, imagining, socialising and also feelings reported as negative such as guilt or compulsion. Clearly there is overlap between themes such that several may be discussed at the same times so these three areas might be treated as no more than a way to ensure that the development of practices, the practices themselves and experiences of play are systematically covered.

From these a detailed list of themes was produced and checked against the initial themes identified from the field notes made at the time of the interviews. In the absence of more than one researcher to analyse the data this served as a check that all themes were covered and connections between global themes and individual cases identified. At this point individual cases were identified as illustrative of themes. In preparing the data each interview was reviewed a minimum of twice and in most cases three or more times. An example transcript can be found in Appendix A and an example of summary notes for one participant can be found in Appendix B.

In presenting the themes I will focus on the words of the participants themselves by making extensive use of direct quotes. These have only been edited to ensure anonymity and in places to aid comprehension.

Chapter 4: Adult videogame players

Most adult videogame players have a history of playing that have led them to their current practices. Some adults have now been playing games regularly or intermittently for over 25 years and almost all have gone through life changes that have influenced their play. In this chapter I consider these 'biographies' of adult digital play. I want to consider how it is that they first got into games and how they have maintained that interest. And I want to consider how life changes (university, work, marriage or co-habiting, and family) may impact on the way people play, who they play with, and the games that they choose. By doing so I hope to locate adult play behaviours in the broader context of their lived experience and to contextualise the more detailed analysis of play practices and experiences that follow.

4.1. Getting into digital play

In this section I want to consider the circumstances in which people start to play videogames. In doing so I will introduce many of the themes that adult players articulate when talking about their current playing, such as the social aspect of play, the influence of others in determining what is played and when, the ability of play to disrupt other activities as well as to compensate for something missing, and the view of digital play as frivolous and childish. Some players identify gaps in play where 'more important' activities are undertaken and this also highlights that the significance of time spent playing may vary throughout the lives of players. These personal histories of adult players don't follow the same chronology as the history of video game technology, but the history of the various computers and consoles, the links to education and the links to table-based games that the more formal historical reviews of games contain (for example see Herz 1997, or Poole 2001) are also accessible in the voices of the players that I interviewed.

4.1.1. Parents getting children into games

Adult players may recall encounters with computers around the time of their popularisation in the early 1980s. Such players have known digital games from their introduction during their schooldays. The 'specialness' of games may be recalled with some fondness. Some participants recalled their father introducing them to gaming technology. For example Grant tells me about his first memories of a *Sinclair Spectrum*. Grant is a computer technician in his late 20s. He lives alone in a small, modern flat in Poole that is packed with current technology, much of it in an apparent state of repair. He explains:

> *Really it was back in the days of the ZX spectrum, '83, '84, something like that. The old man came home with it one day and he spent ages having to - well obviously there were games you could buy -*

but there were magazines you could buy and it was all showing you the code to record to a cassette tape....mainly my dad 'cause I was still only seven...I just stood there and watched...He played games 'cause we were at that age; to spend time with us and whatnot.

Grant attributes his interest in computers and games to his dad's influence. Later he tells me that he is part of a family of 'tinkerers' and his interest in computers is put down to this early introduction by his farther. A similar story is told by many of the adult players that I have spoken to, including the younger ones, suggesting that from the 1980s onwards it has been common for parents to introduce children to computer and gaming technologies from an early age. For some, it now seems that there have always been games in their lives. Elaine is an 18-year-old media student who lives at home with her divorced mother. She recalls playing some form of computer-based game since a very early age and again her father is influential in introducing this technology.

I must have been about 5. It wasn't like proper games, it was like Chip's Challenge games. I was this guy called Chip and there are about 150 levels and you have to collect all these keys. That was the first game I played...I kept getting stuck on levels and my dad had to keep finding passwords for me for the next level because I just couldn't do it... My dad got me interested in the Internet and things from a really early age and I started doing things in my own time.

Duane, a 34-year-old musician and DJ elaborates further on the reasons for both parents and children to get into computers. He notes the introduction of computers into schools and how this gave him the opportunity to persuade his parents to buy one for the home.

My dad had already introduced this ZX80 which I thought, 'ha, if this is the future you can keep it for a while' [Duane would have been 8-years-old]. *And I waited until I found one that had something worth doing. Now we had a bit of a spat between the ZX Spectrum and the BBC Micro because the BBC Micro was four hundred pounds and the ZX Spectrum was one hundred and twenty nine, ninety nine.... I have a very good memory for things like that.... Now when I was at school they built a new block and as luck would have it all the machines in there where BBC Micros. So now I had a little wedge; all the computers at school were BBC Micros, I want a BBC Micro.... Which meant games basically. Now we farted around on the computer and we made silly lines and we typed a bit, but the only reason we had them was to play games.*

Parents therefore introduced these children to this technology, although possibly as a result of children first demanding it. The original motive, either of the parents or of the child, is for education, but this is 'subverted' for play. Actually the recollection of some adults is that education was simply an excuse and they knew full well that the main use would be games. This also highlights that in the early days of digital games, a programmable computer was the most likely hardware used. Players describe a process of establishing game playing habits and

then often abandoning any potential for programming or 'serious' use as they later buy games consoles. So the promise of education allowed digital games to enter the home and the first experience of games for many older adults is therefore that there needed to be an excuse to play digital games; that a desire to play was not a sufficient reason to invest in computer technology. In turn the parents in this group have also introduced their children to computer games (see below), but not always with the educational alibi.

Duane, the DJ, later explains another reason why he felt that his parents where happy to support his game playing, or perhaps rather why they may have turned a blind eye to it:

> *My dad would roll in at about eight and my mum would be busy with the other children.... My sister was an absolute nightmare, she had convulsions which meant that she had to be watched all the time and my mum had lost a baby in between, so she'd lost a little girl, which meant that she had to keep an eye on this one, you know.... So she was kept an eye on and with me, I was left to do my own thing, so that then meant that I had to amuse myself. So all these contributing factors made me think as a person, 'what's the best way I can enjoy myself with the least possible effort?' Now, games!*

Mike, a 20-year-old advertising student recalls something similar from his childhood ten or more years after Duane's. Mike's father was a company executive and away from home much of the time and for much of his childhood he lived in the Middle East. Mike explains:

> *My mum started working. She stayed at home until me and my sister – my sister is years older than me, my sister was 11 and I was about 5 – and my mum went back to work, and she thought she had better bribe us with something to keep us entertained from when we got home from school, so she got my sister a Gameboy, because that's what she wanted, and she got me a NES. That's what I wanted.*

In addition to the education motive, players may have been introduced to games as a way to pass the time in the absence of siblings or parents to play with. Attached to this is the recall that this may have been as a result of parents feeling guilty that they do not have time to play with their children. So games are given as 'compensation' for a lack of something else: time to play with a parent, or brother or sister. Mike also confirms that children now 'demand' digital games from parents. They have knowledge of them and a desire to own and play which requires parent's consent. So the desire children have to play digital games meets the needs of working parents to keep children occupied.

4.1.2. Getting into games at school

As Duane recalls, there was a negotiation between children and parents, facilitated in the early 1980s by the perceived educational value of early computer-based game systems and by

the desire to occupy childrens' time. But younger adults recall peer pressure from friends for the latest games (without an educational potential) to be a stronger influence. Colin is a 19-year-old who works in a leisure complex in Poole and lives at home with his parents (although he did rent a flat with a girlfriend for a while, a few months before I spoke to him). He explains his desire to get games based on their popularity with his peers:

> *I haven't been playing games like all of my life. I mean I know most people like me have probably been playing since they were like five or something, but I, I'm not a person who gets given things in life, if you know what I mean. I wasn't the person who was given a bloody Super Nintendo on his fifth birthday or anything. The first games thing I ever bought was an old Gameboy and I must have been about 13. I saved up all my money from doing my paper round to buy myself a Gameboy because all my friends at school were playing computer games and I'm just like, 'well what the hell are you talking about?', you know. So I did that...My friends would talk about it, and I'd go to their place and I'd play some of their games and I'd really enjoy it, and the best thing I could find at the time for the money that I had, which was like seven pounds a week or something off a paper round, was a Gameboy.*

And Theo, a 25 year-old web developer from Venezuela recalls his childhood there and the importance of video games for him and his friends that results in persistent requests to his parents for a games machine:

> *It was like when the Nintendo came out, you know, because it was like one of the big things: everybody had to have the Nintendo... You know, I just wanted to play. That was it. I asked my father a lot if I could get one and they didn't give me the Nintendo, but I got the next one for Christmas. I played at my friend's house and played before this, you know. Just playing. We played video games a lot.*

Younger adults recall that once they find friends at school playing games, peer influence becomes significant. Being part of the group means doing the things the group does and that includes playing the latest game so that it seems almost inevitable that even children whose parents can't, or won't buy them a console are likely to be exposed to videogames via friends. Games are established as part of children's cultural capital and an aid in the development of social capital amongst children. Games are something to play with friends and something to talk about at school. Being a part of a group of friends means being good at, or at least knowing how to play specific videogames. For many adult players, early memories of game play are dominated by these social interactions with school friends. These are fond memories too and therefore, like other early experiences of games a potential source of adult nostalgia.

So following the brief flirt with 'educational computers', games are established as children's play things and as such start to be seen to interfere with education rather than aid it.

Duane explains the way games resulted in a neglect of his schoolwork, for example. In the story, he tells me that he 'gets away with it' and passes his assignment, but his memory is of a 'lucky escape' because rather than spend time on his schoolwork, he preferred to play games:

> *I had this project at school, my end of term project, and we'd had the whole term to do this project and I hadn't even decided what to do and I had like one day to do it...and what I'd actually be doing is playing computer games. So that was the whole reason for not doing my project. The story was that I'd spend six months playing computer games, whereas other kids had actually been working, I had been doing my own work!*

Other adults raise greater concerns about the impact digital games had on their studies. For Elaine, the media student, the memory is more recent and more troublesome to her:

> *It's just we had all this time off, and you think 'I have this amount of time to do this', and you start playing something and you get to a certain place and you think, 'no, I need to do more', and you just keep on, keep on it really, and it's other things: you need to do homework and you should do the homework first, and you know you should, but you go on the game instead.... You feel fine at the time, but when I've finished, I'm, oh, I feel awful.*

Although Elaine later tells me that she hid the amount of time she played games from her mother, it seems that parents even in the early days of digital games were able to see the problems of 'too much' play and therefore impose restriction. Ann, a 38 year-old mother of two who works in staff development, explains that she tends to play games in the evening after finishing everything else that she needs to do. She attributes this to the way her parents restricted both games and TV to short periods in the evening.

So adult players recall that as a child, digital game play had the potential to disrupt other tasks (school work). Players learn early on that they have to regulate their digital play, or accept that play needs to be balanced with other tasks. One result of videogames taking precedence over other tasks is conflict with parents. Adult videogame players recall parental discipline when it came to spending time playing. Early memories of games include parents who restrict, or at least warn against long periods of game play, so playing games develops as a 'problematic' activity and one that needs managing, or else is managed by others.

4.1.3. Getting back into games

Despite a recalled enthusiasm for getting videogames as a child, recollections of playing games earlier in life also include periods when digital game play is dropped. For example, Janice, a 39-year-old forklift driver recalls a history of digital game play that includes gaps:

I got into games with Pong. I must have been about 16 or 17, maybe a bit younger. That was back in the early eighties wasn't it.... Dad bought a little unit home. And then I left it for a few years and then that was when the Sega came in. There was a gap. I was a teenager I suppose, just going out with my friends, you know, I wasn't one of those ones that had to be in playing games then. And I don't think I realised how it had moved on until my early 20's. And that's when I got hooked again I suppose.

Mandy, a 25-year-old web developer also recalls gaps in play, one large gap before going to university and one after. At university her exposure to games was via her boyfriends and was dependent on their play. Prior to that her father bought computers and only recently has she bought her own machine.

I'd kind of had a break from the whole gaming kind of lifestyle for about three years and when I was back at university my boyfriend bought us like a Sega Megadrive, you know one of those old type consoles and he always used to play Goldeneye. It had to be in my dormitory because if it was round his place his house mates would be on it all the time and he was kind of fearful that he would never get a go so, you know, he'd be coming round all the time and he was sat there playing Goldeneye and I was kind of like sat there going 'well what', you know 'what can I do?', I don't want to play games where you shoot things up, so I'm probably a typical girl where I like games where you collect things... I mean I had a Master System and all those kind of, and an Atari ST and all that kind of stuff before hand when I was little..., I think I had my Atari ST when I was about 11 and then everyone had a Commodore 64.... I don't know if it was more kind of advanced than a Commodore 64 but because the games were better on the Commodore 64, I was like 'I want a Commodore 64' so my dad bought one off his mate and he had like trap door games and I think it was called Jet Set Willy or something like that and it was like, well platform games really and puzzle solving games and things like that. So, well I guess that's what I've always been into and then I had a kind of break.... I think that was because I split up with by boyfriend and he took the thing away from me [laughs]. Yes, I wasn't allowed to keep it. My next boyfriend was very much into the arcade games like Street Fighter and things like that and him and his friends used to like sit round at 3 in the morning and they'd be playing all the kind of Street fighter and I'd be told that I wasn't allowed to play.... That was probably about just before I graduated so I would have been 21 so from the age of 21 probably until just recently I hadn't played any games.

And Rich, a 28-year-old Marketing executive tells a similar story of gaps in play based on financial limitations and changes in interests:

I suppose like most kids of my generation I had the old Atari, the cartridge one that went in the top.... My brother had it. I think I was probably about 3 when I started playing.... And then we went on to the Amstrad PCP464 with the tape.... And then I had a little break from games for quite a long time. I couldn't afford them. But then for Christmas I got a Commodore Amiga which was brilliant.... My mates used to have loads of games... My Amiga eventually blew up through over

use and then I had time off from gaming; maybe played the odd game on, you know, the worm game that was on the PCs at school.... I'm not from a particularly well off background you know, and I couldn't afford to buy a new computer....but I had a bike and I was outside and riding my bike and it was just like a natural thing. I didn't miss not having it really, but I probably would have carried on playing it if I still had it.... Well I've always played the odd game and my mates had Megadrives and that kind of thing and that new Sony one, not Sony, Sega Megadrive, and the Saturn and I used to go and play them, but I never really felt the need to get one for myself. I was never really that into it.

In addition to the detailed and nostalgic memories of early digital play, adult game players recall that they have not played games continuously since childhood, but rather that some went though a period in early adulthood, or as a teenager when they stopped playing. This is often not recalled as a conscious decision to give up, but simply as a result of other activities that came to dominate their life, or as a result of moving away from home and leaving the console and friends who are normally played with. So for example players report that when they start University they didn't take their console with them. It also seems that the expense of games consoles results in worn out machines not being immediately replaced. There is often some event that prompts games to be dropped. If a console, and/other players are available play might go on as a habit, but one that is easily broken. This seems quite different from the obsessive play that is often reported in the media. However digital game playing habits of childhood seem to re-emerge later – often when adults become financially independent, or when they again met others who play.

4.1.4. Getting into games later in life

We may think of videogames as a childhood interest that continues into adult life, but it is possible that for some older players digital games are something they discover later in life. For example Alex is a 39-year-old optician, who stays at home to look after his two daughters (who are both at school), whilst his wife works. He describes his early experiences of games. Alex got into games as a substitute for playing table-based role-playing and wargames after he is married. He tells me that as a teenager he rejected the videogames that his younger brother played.

I suppose I got into it through role playing games, Dungeons and Dragons, Traveller, that type of thing. When I got married and there wasn't the freedom of time, that all took a back burner, then, when the old Amiga computer was being marketed they brought out wargames for that, things like Perfect General and those sorts of games, and I saw that as a way of being able to go back into the wargaming without having to commit the time or you know, going to clubs, joining groups, that sort

of thing. So I was able to satisfy my desire for that type of activity but using the computer as an opponent rather than a real life one.

Robert, a 38-year old, married systems programmer also recalls this connection between playing tabled-based role playing games as a child and his adult fascination with digital role-playing games:

I've always liked those sort of fantasy games. I used to sort of play D&D. My friend [who Robert now plays World of Warcraft with*] was like our DM when I was like at school playing D&D. It's always been that sort of interest. It's something I'm not proud of [laughs]. I was a kid and that's what I did.*

Some older adult videogame players were already into their teens when videogames became popular and for one reason or another missed the popularisation of the home computer for education, and pressure from friends to take up games. But there was a potential route into video games that starts with another complex form of play. For some, digital games were an extension of an existing interest in the table-based games that were also popular in the UK throughout the 1980s. These individuals were already involved with a form of complex social play and transferred this to videogames. In these cases solo play with digital games is seen as a substitute for social play when other people aren't available. Like the 'electronic sibling', games are something to play with in the absence of people.

It is also possible that continued coverage of videogame technologies has resulted in older adults trying them out. Stuart, a married academic in his late 50s, explained to me that he had known about games for a long time through casual games like *Tetris*, but had initially dismissed digital games as a '*waste of time*' because '*you don't get much out of it*', but then about ten years ago:

It had to do with how fast the computers got and how much intelligence, AI, the computer could have and how good the graphics were. I mean I'm a visual person, despite being a computer scientist. So it's the graphics that really sucked me into that. And the first game I played was a strategy game called Age of Empires. The first version I played was a trial version given to me in a magazine and I thought 'oh I like that, I think I'll play more'.... I sort of got hooked into that and started playing that a lot and being a computer programmer I've a bit of a compulsive personality, and with instant gratification I started to get hooked. It becomes an obsession after a while.... In a game you are in an environment where you are in control of what is happening and I think that was happening at a time in my life where I was losing control and I felt it was almost a therapeutic experience.

Two developments prompted Stuart to take up games. Firstly, he began to observe technological developments in games through his regular reading of PC magazines and with a

trial version he was provided with an opportunity to play. But secondly he was starting to experience work as stressful and desired an escape from these pressures. He was looking for some activity to 'take him away' from what had become a depressing routine of antagonistic work. Having discovered games he continues to play.

John's recall of getting into games is in some ways similar. John is an IT management consultant in his mid-forties. He is married and has two daughters aged six and two. He explains that he was never really exposed to video games at a child, although he did play a 'boot leg' copy of a driving game on a PC in the early 1990s. He had bought a PC for work and to write a novel (which was never finished) and ended up trying a few games, but then stopped playing. John explains that he is into technology generally though. He tells me about the technology he owns, but also that it was his daughter that prompted him to buy a PS2 (when his daughter was 4 years old) and to start playing games again. We seem to have come full circle here. Just as Grant and others recall their early experiences with games being their father bringing a machine home, John tells me that he has done this for his daughter. He explains this when his daughter is with us:

> *There is an element of you [Isabel] being a surrogate son that I don't have so therefore you get some toys that a little boy would get too... We were thinking 'what do we get them for Christmas? What do you think about getting them a Playstation? Is she too young? What sort of games will she play?' Then we got the newer one, not the big one, but the smaller, designer - the neater one.... And so we gave it to her for Christmas and got a few girly games and I got Colin MaCrae's rally game for myself which I got to use on Christmas morning. We played Shrek for a bit and then I managed to elbow you out of the way so that I could play my rally game for a bit.*

Like Stuart, John tells me he is looking for something for himself that is 'not work', but also something that he can do with his daughter in order to spend time with her. He explains the adjustments he has made as a result of having a family, and he indicates a desire to find engaging hobbies that are not work and not family. He has tried getting back into motorcycling (and has a Ducati in the garage that he is trying to sell). He also explains his interest in motor sports (as driver as well as spectator), and a desire to go skiing that is not possible with a young family. He doesn't have time for these interests and realises that they would take him away from the family and away from time with his growing daughters. More and more of his spare time and interests are becoming focussed on his family. So his interest in technology draws him to digital games; something he thinks both he and his growing daughter can enjoy together.

Isabel and I played From Russia with Love on two different controllers and I had to promise not to kill her, 'cause there is this stalking level on there and being her father I promised I wouldn't kill her if I found her.

Interviewer: And did you?

I shot her, yes. 'Mummy, daddy shot me again' [laughs].... It's something to share, we can sit and play together.... I like reading to Isabel and I always try to read to her, but not princess books, I find I've turned twenty pages and haven't taken anything in...and now she's starting to read...but it's finding something you can share with them. I enjoy the Roald Dahl books and do silly voices and it's the same with games, playing one of these games with her, like Shrek or The Invincibles, I like doing that with her.

But John finds many games frustrating. He finds many simply too difficult to play. Although games were chosen as a hobby partly because of a lack of time for other activities, he also finds that he does not have sufficient time to play games, or to deal with the complexity of many of them. One result of these frustrations and failures is that John distances himself from being a committed player and explains that games are something he only plays '*now and again*'. He tells me he prefers films to games. Stuart also explains that he doesn't play many games and finds some frustrating:

Like a lot of people I'm probably not an avid player of games, I just have some special ones that I play.... Like there were a number of Star Wars games that I couldn't get into. It's like a book, you know, some books you can't get into and it was like this. So I just have a few games that I play.

Adults without experience of digital games from childhood can find themselves attracted to them, perhaps as a result of a broader interest in technology which lead them to the latest console and, as a result of the wider publicity that games have attracted, but also prompted by some change in life, that sets them on a quest for something new - especially a new hobby. But it seems that getting into games later in life may be difficult for some. Without a lifetime's experience of playing games the complex offerings on the market are confusing and parents whose time is already divided between work and children may lack the time, or the desire to understand this complexity. These players may find games frustrating as well as occasionally compelling. Their play is limited and they are conscious of their own lack of knowledge and experience. We also see from John that fathers buy consoles for children who are likely to be too young play them independently. Some parents therefore seem to use their children as a new excuse to buy game hardware.

Early experiences of digital play contain several themes that are seen to re-emerge in later experiences of play. Of course this could work either way round; rather than early experience shaping current play, existing experience could be the lens through which past

play is reconstructed by these adult digital game players. But either way this demonstrates the existence of a dominant series of ideas that players recognise as central to their understanding of the experience of digital play. Play is recognised as possibly frivolous and childish; something children do when they do not have schoolwork and it may therefore require an excuse in order to be justified. It may also need to be balanced with more important activities. We therefore see Sutton-Smith's (1997) discourse of the frivolousness of play as a key frame for these adult players from their first experiences of videogames. We also see that games have the potential to disrupt and negate other activities and in doing so bring players into conflict with others and themselves. As a 'waste of time', care is needed that not too much time is wasted. Games are also recalled as compensating for 'missing others' to play with which seems very different from the popular idea that they are themselves the cause of social isolation.

Alternatively, the social aspect of playing games with others is emphasised as an 'ideal' form of play. Through ownership of consoles and games and through skill, games may provide a sense of status within a group. Games may also be an important and well remembered part of childhood, but one that may be dropped or suppressed as a transition is made, especially on entry into adult life (the move to university, for example). As some players get older, they seem to grow out of videogames but rediscover them after a few years. Again, this seems to contradict notions of games as powerfully addictive. We also see that it is again transitions in life that prompts the adoption or re-adoption of digital games; a desired change in life's circumstances which games seem to facilitate.

So players generally have a history of play with videogames - a bank of experiences sometimes going back decades which culminates in their existing play-practices and preferences for games. Discourses seem full of complexity and contradiction, even from the dozen or so adult game players whose experiences are noted so far. Games are 'frivolous', yet there may be peer pressure to play; they are disruptive, yet may be dropped for other activities easily; they may compensate for the absence of others, yet are best when played in a group. One result is that we have to acknowledge the complexity of the practices that form around digital play and that these are subject to considerable change throughout life. As we shall see in the next section, even adult digital play does not settle down into a routine set of practices, but is subject to variation as adults find partners, have families and watch those families grow. We also see that digital play is also a set of consumer practices. Play is influenced by economic means and consoles are frequently bought as either self-gifts, or as presents.

4.2. Life stages of adult game players

As well as a biographical dimension, play has a domestic location and in this section I want to consider the various current domestic contexts in which adults play videogames. These may restrict play, or encourage certain types of play according to the type and amount of work a player does, and the people they live with. As players get older their domestic arrangements may become more complex; there are partners and children to consider and their influence replaces that of friends and parents. Although the complexity and variability of domestic arrangements means that simple classification is elusive, I have separated life stages into: play whilst still at home with parents; play when single; play when living as a couple, and; play as part of a family with children. There is a likelihood of further stages (and some of the players I talked with indicated these), for example play when children grow-up and play when retired, but given the history of digital games these are so far not common and were not captured here.

4.2.1. Playing in the parental home

There is a group of adult game players that have not yet left the family home, or have returned to it, for example after higher education. These include students, but also lower paid workers who cannot comfortably afford to live on their own. In some ways these players are 'independent' in that they have their own income and free time. But in other ways parents may still influence digital play.

I introduced Elaine in the previous section. She is an 18-year-old student who has lived with her mother in a small flat since her parents got divorced. It is clear that she lives in some financial hardship. She has no brothers or sisters and considers herself something of a 'loner' and rather shy. She explained that she was surprised that she had volunteered to take part in the research and was nervous about doing so. She also tells me that she lacks people that she can talk to about games and this was one of the reasons for taking part in the research. Elaine finds her peers' conversations to be frequently frustrating - they focus on fashion and relationships. She feels excluded from this 'girl talk' by her lack of interest and by her desire to talk about other things, including games. She explains:

> *I find I don't really do much with my friends. Going out costs a lot and I have a couple of friends that play games and I tend to see them a lot more than my other friends because we have that in common. Especially my friends that are girls, they just well, you just mention a game to them and they are just 'urgh', and they change the subject. It's, I don't know. It's annoying because they have never played a game, they just think they won't like it....I just bring it up in passing because me and one of my friends, Helen, we were both going out with boys that played LAN games and I would play and she would get really annoyed but whenever we asked her to join in she wouldn't and she*

would walk off.... I guess, I don't know. My friends just don't try because they think games are for guys, which I know most of my friends think and it's the main reason that they don't play it.

Elaine explains that she prefers playing games to going out with friends. Despite this, Elaine tells me that her mother frequently raises concerns about her game playing. Her mother complains that playing games is the cause of her not going out, but Elaine insists that she plays games because she doesn't like going out. She finds games to be a more interesting use of her time.

I tend to stay in a lot, which my mum puts down to me playing games.... I put it down to lack of money. I don't know, I just find it more interesting. I just tend to like to keep myself occupied in doors, rather than go out, I don't know why. It sounds silly when I say it.

Games are a source of friction between her and her mother. Elaine tells me that her mother feels that she should play games less. Worse, Elaine has no room for an additional TV in her room, so she plays on the family set. This means that when she is playing, her mother cannot watch TV.

I got a PS2 and that made things even worse, I got even more games and she got more annoyed, my mum. She calls it my brain because I just sit there the whole time and because I steal her television.... I have thought about getting my own TV for ages, but my room is about half the size of this office so it's very small. I don't have brothers and sisters and I suppose that's another reason why I spend so much time on the computer. Most people have someone to be with, but I don't really have that. Mum says I should go out more, definitely. And every time there is something on the TV about video games and violence, or video games and it makes people not talk much and because I don't talk much anyway, she's like 'ah, it's because of the computer games'.

Elaine also tells me about times when she has therefore 'hidden' the amount of time she spends playing games from her mother, and she confesses that game playing does interfere with her studies from time to time. She tells me that she worries that her mother works to support them both and that she contributes little to the home. This is an additional source of guilt. Elaine tells me that she feels bad when she has been playing games all day and her mother returns from work clearly tired.

I wake up and I go straight into the lounge and start playing some days and I don't stop until just before my mum gets home when I think I should go and get ready so she doesn't think I've been sitting here all day.... I'm still in my pyjamas.... My mum works a lot and my parents are divorced, so she brings in all the income and she doesn't earn that much. So whenever she comes home she's always really tired, she always can't really do much and I always feel bad if she gets home and she just sees me relaxing and I've been on this game all day whilst she's been out working.

These feelings of guilt about her own 'wasted' time playing games, the occasional comment from her mother about her play, and the rejection of digital games by her friends make Elaine concerned about what others might think about her as someone who plays videogames. The result is that she doesn't always disclose the fact to people for fear of seeming foolish or strange.

Douglas also mentioned this hidden and guilty aspect of adult digital game play. Douglas is a 31-year-old administrator. He lives at home with his parents, after studying at university for three years. Douglas recognises that games can be an escape from a life that he doesn't like, especially his 'dull', low paid job that keeps him at home. He elaborates the aspects of life with which he is unsatisfied. He tells me that he can't afford to move out but he wants to and feels he needs to 'sort out' his life. Like Elaine, Douglas was initially nervous about taking part in the research, but driven to it by his interest in talking about games. In the second interview (which took some time to organise) I met Douglas at his home and he explained that his mother had strongly advised him not to take part because she felt that he would 'look stupid'. He never introduced me to either parent and we talked in his bedroom, occasionally with hushed voices.

> *So I want to sort out my job so I've got my evenings free, start going to the gym yeh, get a bit fitter and then go back to martial arts.... But I'm still sorting out my job.... And that's why I don't really want to allow games to distract me from getting fit, you know. But I mean I like having games and, well, my mum said before you came round that she didn't want you to come round because she thought that you would think I was mad, basically. She said that you'd be thinking 'why has Douglas got all this stuff, why doesn't he like save the money towards a house, or something like that'.*

So Douglas is not entirely happy with his game-playing behaviour. Partly he is too tired to play games after work, but also his fear is that playing games means he won't 'sort out' other aspects of his life. Douglas doesn't like his current home or work situation and feels that games are a way of avoiding doing something about it. Like Elaine, Douglas identifies himself as a loner; he tells me that his mother blames games for his lack of friends and a girlfriend. But he also sees games as something he is good at and knowledgeable about and therefore something that has the potential to make him friends among other players. He has an extensive collection of games and tells me that when he moves out, he looks forward to sharing games with housemates and friends. He also explains that when he was younger, he was denied access to all the games he wanted, but now he can buy whatever games he wants. But he also describes game playing as an 'underground club' and something that you don't normally talk about. My conversations with Douglas were longer than any other player that I spoke to at well over 4 hours.

It's good to talk to someone else who is interested in games. I think it's kind of like; it's almost like a hidden world; you know that the games industry is worth all this money, but you never see people kind of talking about it in day to day life, or it being featured a lot on TV. It's almost taboo like the porn industry. You know you hear that it generates all this money so there must be all these people watching it, but it's all kind of done in secret.... It's still very generational and not widely talked about. You have to find like-minded friends and people who have the same interest.... We are the generation that have grown up with games, whereas my mum wasn't..., she doesn't appreciate what I get out of them.

For digital game players who live at home, parents continue to influence their playing habits, for example by encouraging players to 'get out more' or by restricting access to the family television. But for some of these players, games create a space within the home, but away from family company. Players at home, but with a wage, find themselves freed from the constraints of parents buying games and related hardware and may exploit this. However both Douglas and Elaine contrast their interest in games with the views of others, especially parents. For Douglas there is a doubt that games are an answer to his desire for 'a better life'. For Elaine there is a frustration with her peers and their rejection of games. So games are both a potential escape for these players and a source of achievement, but also a cause of friction with family and a potential cause of isolation from others and from a broader set of life goals.

4.2.2. Playing when living alone

At some point most adults leave home and they *may* take their digital game playing habits with them. Here university or work colleagues and friends may become a larger influence over how time is spent, including on games. For example Dylan is a 20-year-old student in his 2nd year at university, living in shared accommodation. He has played games since he was about 9 and explains that back home in Wales videogames were an important part of his childhood and something that he and his friends spent considerable time playing. He tells me that they were all 'a bit geeky'. Since coming to university Dylan explains that he does not have so many gaming friends (although he has 'recruited' some of his fellow students) and misses playing.

So friends will come round and we'll play a few rounds of Mariocart, usually like before going out. Well if it was me I'd rather stay in and have a few drinks and play games and then they would go out and I'd retire to my bedroom until they came but, I'd be happy to stay, have a few warm up drinks, and then have the rest of the drinks at home because they're cheaper and I like the games, so I could stay there playing games all night, you know, the times I do that is a hell of a lot of fun.

Dylan plays games less than he did before university because he lives in a shared house with a shared TV. He explains that he now longer has the freedom to play that he had and needs to negotiate use of the television with the other people that he lives with. He also indicates that his mother still influences his play. He notes that she will likely not approve of him spending some of his student loan on a *Wii*, for example.

> *If I struggle with money and my mother finds out she will be less than sympathetic, so she'd be 'why are your struggling with money, I gave you 250 quid, and you've spent it on a games console'. And she's never been that like - I mean obviously because I spent every day with my friends, at my friend's house playing games - she's not been, never been that enthusiastic about me playing games. And I think if I did play games a lot more, she would cite it as a reason for me not doing work and things.*

Dylan is caught up in a complex set of relationships that influence his ability to play. The purchase of a console must be negotiated with a parent, and the use of shared facilities in the house means access to a TV must also be by negotiation.

Luke is older, has more money than Dylan, but is also single. Luke is a 29-year-old web developer who lives on his own in a flat that he rents. Luke has been playing games since he was about 7 without a gap. He describes much of his play as habitual. He claims to play to stop himself getting bored. Much of his play is at the weekend and Luke is conscious that if he plays during the week it has the potential to disrupt his work.

> *With some games, with Tomb Raider, for instance, I won't bother in the week because I know I don't have the time to put into it because I know it's going to take me a certain amount of time to, well, here's the thing, I set myself a goal before I turn it on, I'll say, I'm going to do this level now. And I will play it until I get to the end of the level. So if it's in the week and it's late in the evening, I know that I won't, because unless I put in enough time I won't get to where I want to get, or I'll have to stay up until really early in the morning to do it. I usually play something at the weekend, probably for about 4 hours at the weekend.... I suppose I feel guilty whenever I stay in doors at the weekend, because I feel like I should be going out and enjoying myself. And part of the reason for that is because when I come in on a Monday morning and someone says 'what have you done over the weekend?', the last thing I want to say is that I spent four hours on Tomb Raider to get to the next level.... But the truth is that I don't really like going out to be honest, but anyway. But I do feel somewhat guilty, when I've played it all day long and it's got to 6 pm on a Saturday and I think 'what have I done with my day, I've been doing this all day?', that does feel like a colossal waste of time, sometimes.*

Luke goes on to explain that as a young single male, he feels a pressure to go out and 'socialise', even though, like Dylan, he actually prefers staying in to play games. He confesses an enduring interest in technology and his work is part of this. He likes knowing

about the latest developments in the web and in games, but he is often looking for new hobbies. He tells be about these, but in doing so also explains why videogames are attractive.

> *The trouble is I don't like to go out and do something that I'm not good at, so I tend to pick hobbies that that I can practice at home and get good at before I present them, as it were, to my colleagues. So I don't do much now, but I used to do DJ-ing. A lot of stuff I did was music based.... So it tends to be home-based stuff. I don't do any sports, I did join a gym, but I don't really go. And I used to do skateboarding actually, that was an outdoor activity. But again, that was one of those things where I could just never get good enough in my mind, so that died a death.*

Luke also tells me he is interested in films and has a collection of DVDs, again to stop him 'getting bored'. For Luke videogames are a resource he can use to fill time outside of work. Without the commitment of a family and with no partner Luke finds he has considerable spare time, especially at weekends. He has failed to find another hobby that has captured his imagination, so he keeps coming back to playing games. New games and new consoles are something he eagerly anticipates.

To some degree Grant tells a similar story. Grant is 28, a PC technician, and lives alone in a small shared-equity scheme flat. He tells me that he has a keen interest in technology and games are part of this. This interest is obvious from the flat that is furnished with a large black leather sofa filling the living area and facing a 42-inch plasma screen. Grant also has several computers, a sky+ box, and a surround sound system. He spends some time telling me about this PC and other technologies, presenting himself as a technical expert and frequently checking that I understand technical language. He further explains that games are 'something to do', and new games are 'something to look forward to'. Grant plays games but he is also part of a online game modding community and he spends a lot of time working on modding games, which he sees as part of his game 'hobby'.

> *Say I get home at six, first hour I probably just search through forums see what other people's problems are; if there is anything I can just chuck in there to help.... Or someone else will have released some stuff and say 'I've done this', and you can have a play with it and you know, the first hour just doing that and check my email and then probably sit there for a few hours just modding it, suddenly think 'I'm hungry, better get some food', and then probably work through' till about 11 or 12, and then think 'best get to bed'. So I could sit here of an evening 4, 5, 6 hours without blinking an eye.*

Grant notes that boredom drives him to play. He doesn't read much, but watches films. He has no other hobbies and doesn't drive. He notes that games are a frequent topic of conversation at work (he works in a high street computer retailers). Although he enjoys going

out with friends, he notes that this is expensive (and he doesn't have much money). He also notes that his friends sometimes '*take the piss*' about his game playing and this concerns him:

> *I don't care what people think, but then obviously you do at some level still think what people think, you don't want to be seen as that weird guy who just, who's the geek..., but then when I was playing a lot I was saving money, and I was only going out when I really wanted to go out rather than just go out 2 or 3 nights a week, getting pissed, doing this that and the other and just going out because someone said' we're going out do you want to?', 'yeah, alright'.*

We might see this as a form of resistance. Grant plays *despite* normative pressure from friends and as a result resists following a script of 'going out every night'.

Game players who are students away from home, or who are working and living on their own have potentially more time and freedom to play games. Students in particular find themselves with considerable free time that may be absorbed by play and use games to pass the time, but also to socialise. However students occasionally find themselves in shared accommodation that results in a need to negotiate time for videogame play. For others there is no one in the home to discourage play or with whom play must be negotiated. Young workers with money may fit games into a more general interest in technology and often have considerable audiovisual resource and interest. For this group, peers - friends and work colleagues, rather than school friends - exert some influence, either encouraging play of the latest games, or encouraging games to be neglected in favour of other social activities. Perhaps what we see here is a re-negotiation of life scripts; a transition from childish play, regulated by relationships with parents, to play more frequently seen as an opposition to work and a purpose of work. Work provides the financial resourses to buy a 'good life' in the form of high definition TV, surround sound system and latest games console. But Grant and especially Luke perhaps highlight something less positive - a life that is frequently boring and where there is too much free time. In this case games are a way to fill that time. Alternatively we see that in adopting the practices of a young adult, play comes under scrutiny as perhaps not an appropriate practice. This may be a mechanism for creating the gaps in play that are identified in players' histories.

4.2.3. Playing when living as a couple

When and if videogame players start living with a partner there are new 'complications'. To some degree friends and work colleagues may still exert an influence, but this is less than the immediate demands of a partner that may result in changes in playing behaviour. Matt illustrates this. Matt is a 26-year-old solider who has recently become engaged. He is stationed in Dorset and rents a house with his fiance Suzy. Her brother, Tim, also lives with

them temporarily. His fiance is at University and has studied away recently. Rob has also returned from a tour in the Gulf, so prior to their engagement they have spent some time living apart. Now Matt plans to leave the army and 'settle down'. Matt tells me he enjoys videogames and has played them since childhood, including when in the army. He initially describes games as 'time fillers'.

> *I met my fiance, and I was going back and forth, and I came back and she was at uni', and still is at uni', and I guess really it goes back to being a bit of a time filler really. I really enjoy playing with games, you know, I really do, but it sort of comes back to there's nothing on TV, or we're not doing something. I mean she does a lot of work obviously for university.... So she sort of closes herself off in the office, you know, until she's finished her work. So for me it sort of, I just sort of sit around and watch TV and play a load of video games.*

But Matt experiences a tension between his desire to play, and spending time with his fiancé. He explains that time together is precious. This impacts on this ability to play games. One solution he has tried is to get Suzy to play:

> *There is definitely a sense of guilt when I'm playing them. I think that was the reason why I kind of tried to sort of get her into it, but she doesn't. I thought she would enjoy the table tennis more, 'cause we've got a table tennis table in the garage, and we enjoy playing that, but she's not really very keen on it. So yes, definitely a sense of guilt. I'll put it on, and I'll just be playing it and she'll potter off to do her own thing and then I'll feel guilty that I'm not spending time with her you see, because we've had, I know this is a bit of a tangent, but because we've had a relationship where we met and we had 6 weeks together, well 6 weekends.... But she knew that I was going back to Germany and then on to Iraq you see, so we've nearly always been apart. We're quite jealous with our time you know, we guard our time together.*

He explains that he tends to play when his fiance is out, or away, but he also tells me that he would like Suzy to play games. So far, he has had limited success persuading her, but is able to play with Suzy's brother.

> *At the minute I'm not playing as much. Suzy got back from Portugal, so I'm spending a lot of time with her, you know, and we are just doing stuff together, just sort of watching TV together. I've been trying to get her into it, to play the odd game, because I find games more fun when you have got other people there and especially when you are competing or even if you are doing joint, you know working together.... I've been trying to get her to play and she loves the Super Nintendo and stuff, but she's not a gamer, you know. But we bought a game for her you know, Super Monkey Ball, and she enjoyed that and I did as well, it was quite good fun. It's a bit of a laugh. So we'll sit and play that, you know, and it's something fun to do, as opposed to just sort of sat watching friends for the 5000th time....but I'm not playing that much at the minute. When Suzy's in Portugal,*

I had so much time on my hands, I really did you know. So Tim would come down and we'd sit and play the Playstation together, like Fight Night Round 3 and Pro Evolution Soccer 5, which to be honest is a game that I absolutely worship. That and the Football Manager.... I'm quite a big fan of competing, even on the computer it's good fun to have a bit of competition.

Matt notes that playing with Suzy, is qualitatively different from playing with Tim:

When we play [Suzy], I don't compete as much, you know, because I don't go 'haha, I've won', where as when I beat Tim 7 - nil, you know, I bother him for about an hour and half, telling him how shit he is, you know.

Matt's fiance did not play games before they met and Matt now finds that spending time with her means playing less, but Mandy has a different experience. Mandy is a 25-year-old web developer. She lives with her boyfriend in a rented flat close to the beach. Mandy has played games on and off since a child, but has recently got back into them having bought a DS. She has also bought her boyfriend a DS and describes playing on her own, but also playing with him. Mandy has been more successful in persuading her partner to play videogames and as a result finds that she has more scope to play. She describes at length the time they spend playing Animal Crossing together:

Lately it's Animal Crossing and then again Darren got into like the whole world you know, 'I want to play it as well', so we ended up buying another version of the game so he can have his own little world and his own little character and you can do the whole, like the whole wifi connection... and you can go in each other's world and you can play around with the neighbours and stuff like that. And you write letters to everybody and it's just, it's just brilliant. I think we were up to about 12 o'clock last night?

Digital games are something they play together and provide an experience they can share.

It, but it's completely mad because you're sitting there and sometimes you will kind of like, me and my boyfriend are just kind of like looking at each other and go 'what are we doing', you know, we haven't spoken to each other [laughs], in two hours. The only thing we'll say is 'can you open your gates so that I can come in and talk to your neighbours', or something like that.

Although Mandy describes them being engrossed in the game, she also explains how the game provides something to do together. Mandy seems to recognise that Darren is playing the game so that he can spend time with her and she confesses that she is the main player and Darren is at times reluctant. She notes that the time she spends playing is time that she is potentially not spending with Darren. Like Matt, Mandy experiences a tension between her and her partner over her game playing. She notes that Darren has mentioned that she plays too

much on several occasions and her desire to play for longer periods than he does results in her hiding the amount she plays from him.

> *I mean he went out, he went to the beach, he went to dinner, he went training and he came back and for some strange reason I felt the need to hide my DS under my pillow because I was you know.... I've set the computer up so that it looks like I was actually doing some work and I wasn't at all and he's like 'So what have you done today?'. And then he went to sit down and I'm 'argh, don't sit there, don't sit there' and he's like 'what's there?' and he like pulls out the..., and he's 'how long have you been playing this?'*

Both Matt and Mandy are still negotiating time to play with their partners. Janice, on the other hand, has a more settled routine. Janice is a 39-year-old forklift driver. She lives with her partner, following a divorce. Again, Janice has been playing games since childhood and continues to enjoy them. Much of her play is solitary and when her partner is not at home, but Janice also explains that her partner will sit with her and watch, often in bed at night, and they both enjoy this.

> *My partner enjoys watching certain games, whereas some of the games I like - such as the racing games like Need for Speed, or Grand Turismo or something like that - I'll play them on my own. She's not interested in watching that, she's more interested in watching me play Lara or James Bond or something.*

Her partner often 'helps' by offering advice, for example. She explains that they have been playing like this for several years, starting with the discovery of the Tomb Raider series of games and Janice now notes that as well as 'her' games, she specifically buys games that she can play with her partner in this way.

> *I was living down in Devon in a little caravan and we realised it was out so we bought the current game, which I think was Lara Croft 3 – it could have been 2 – I think it was 3. So we started playing that and got totally hooked.... My partner enjoyed watching and trying to work out what we had to do. It wasn't just a game where you were going round a circuit, it was more interactive and doing stuff. And we just got totally hooked.... I'm controlling Lara and I'm going round and I might be looking in the top right hand corner at some funny sort of rock, whereas she might be looking down at the other side and she's seen I little shiny knob and she'll say 'oh, go and try that', and I'll be 'I'll go there in a minute', you know, that sort of thing, it's like two people looking at one game to try and figure out where the best place is to go next. That's how it works.*

A further development in the life script is the transition to 'couple'. Digital game players who are living as a couple need to negotiate play with their partner. Some therefore experience a change in the way that they play games, and therefore the significance of games in their lives.

For some the task of balancing relationship and games is easy and games become something they can do together and a shared experience both enjoy. A partner who plays also 'legitimises' play and buying and playing games together becomes part of a couple's routine time together, even if one of them also plays their 'own games' as a solitary activity. Players without a willing partner may try to get their partner to play. They aim for a situation where their interest is a shared one, but at times with only limited success. When a game player starts living with a partner digital play therefore produces something of a social drama - a breach that must be resolved either by converting the non-player, or by some negotiated compromise. And for some their partners end up restricting the time they have for play and ongoing negotiation and self-discipline is evident.

4.2.4. Playing and family life

A potential further disruption to the negotiated routines of digital play is the arrival of children that may also coincide with greater work responsibilities, as adult videogame players get older. So for parents digital play is further subject to changes in playing style and management. Previously I explained that for John, a growing child was actually the 'excuse' to start playing games, even if John's busy work left little time for the complexities of many games, but for adults who already have an established play routine, the arrival of children may be disruptive. For example Carl is a 40-year old father of three. His youngest daughter is only two, and Carl explains that when she was a baby, his digital game playing was more or less suspended:

> *My daughter is two years old, and it's so difficult to play with a one year old crying on your shoulder and most of the games I'm playing now are ones that I can pick up and put down.... Depending on what's happening in my life, depends on what games I play and sometimes the duration that the games go on for. I've just put Call of Duty back on because I'm starting to get a bit more time in the evenings for myself.*

With a family, games have to fit around other priorities. Carl explains that he feels he needs to justify not just the time spent playing games, but also the money. However he also explains a 'need' to play sometimes that justifies both. In particular he notes how games fit between work-time and home-time. This includes specific occasions when work is stressful and he needs to 'get rid of aggression', but also play that is more routine.

> *I'm brain dead, there is no creativity there, just the hum-drum of life, you come home from work, you have some tea, you get the washing down and stick it in the machine ready to put out in the morning, you iron yourself a shirt and think thank goodness it's half past nine, time to watch the goggle box. There is nothing in there that makes me feel that I want to create, or that I want to*

really do something that no one else has done you know, and to go to a computer game then, that releases something in me. I can play the what if, I can engage my more creative function that is part of me, that is me and I can actually do something interesting.

Carl also finds time to play with family members. He has a teenage son from a previous marriage who visits him every other weekend along with his older sister. When Carl's son visits digital games are something they play together and Carl explains that the whole family will occasionally enjoy playing digital games together. He explains the situation like this:

So it's my wife that actually dictates how I play games, Anne and Stuart, they live with their Mum, so I see them every other weekend, so occasionally every other weekend I'll just have Stu, and we will go and play games for half a day. If Anne is there as well, she's not interested in games, she's 14 so she is growing out of playing games now as a girl, so we will go and do something as a family, we won't play games that weekend, that would be a non-starter. But the social games we would play in the front room, like the table tennis game. That will come out at the drop of a hat. You haven't got to set it up, just plug it into the aerial socket, stick it in and it's a no-brainer, but it's quite social. And we play that and we've probably played that since Christmas several times, and that's not a huge amount, but that's been a whole evening and that's been from when my youngest, who's almost two, she goes to bed at about seven, we've had tea while we've been playing the game, so it's like pizza and drinks and then until half past ten, eleven o'clock and we've suddenly said, 'yeah, we really should go to bed now' and we will go to bed and we've just played the game all evening. But it is social because we will have talked about what we've been doing; we've had a laugh.

However like other players in a relationship Carl explains a need to monitor his own play to avoid arguments:

If it draws me too deeply then I'll never drop it and the wife will come and crack me across the back of the head and say you haven't done the washing up and it's half ten and I'm going to bed, get on with it.... It's a married man syndrome and you know I can't afford that because the next thing that happens is next time I say I'm going to have a play on the computer I get cracked on the back of the head straight away and I don't get a chance to do it so I have to keep the work/life balance.

Carl continues to play videogames, fitting play around family commitments and even integrating play into the interactions with his family, although he indicates a qualitative change in the nature of play now that he has a family, with more emphasis on games that can be played for short periods of time. Malcolm, a 38-year-old data manager also notes this change. Malcolm is married with two children, and has been playing games since childhood. One result is that he feels that games are a 'habit' and simply something he has 'always

done'. But he explains that he no longer has the energy required to play the complex games that he once did. He tells me that his children, work and domestic duties take up much of his spare time and that the result is that he only plays games for short periods of time and chooses games accordingly.

> *My patience for gaming has altered. I had the patience, the energy and the time to dedicate to a programme on the Spectrum; I could dedicate days and days, or weeks of my life to mapping out every single problem on the Hobbit.... But I had more time for it then, more energy. And as the years have gone by I find that I can't spend as much time, or put as much energy into it. Unless a game grabs me now in the first ten minutes, I don't tend to have much tolerance anymore. I tend to put it back, you know for a rainy day. I can't be bothered now wading through vast instructions, or a great deal of mythology mumbo jumbo that they've made up to make an average programme seem good.... I mean, I've grown old and children have come along and various other responsibilities have come along in parallel to the evolution of my gaming time.*

As a result of work and family he ends up, like Carl, unable to engage with complex games. He also notes that his behaviour is not 'normal'; that he should be doing other things at his age, especially maintaining the home.

> *Look at the state of the garden. I will admit that I do a lot of stuff at the expense of what I should be doing. I do do stuff that you have to do, like mow the lawn and stuff like that, but a lot of people spend their time down at B&Q, and if I'm forced to I will got down there and I'll see lots of blokes my age trundling around with their stuff in their trolleys, with their various things in, and to them that's their hobby or their interest, whereas I like to go to Maplin or to Gamestation, or something of that nature. Yes, so like I say I don't have so much time for gaming, but.... I mean look around and there are things that need decorating. Society suggests that I should be doing that. I don't know if this is true for other adults, but society suggests that they should be leading a different sort of life, they shouldn't be clinging on to this gaming thing. We are in unchartered territory because people our age are of the first generation to come across this situation, to have this problem. We were around at the birth of gaming.... But I do sometimes feel that I should be doing other stuff.*

Yet Malcolm explains further that he hopes to dedicate more of his time to games in the future.

> *As a parent a certain percentage of your - if you think of yourself like a processor - a certain percentage of your cycles, whether it's conscious or not are taken up with knowing what your child's doing, what they are doing and looking after them..., and without realising, that becomes quite tiring and very, very time consuming and you know, I expect that when the children leave home, when I'm older, I will probably have more energy and more time and perhaps more concentration. Because there is only a certain amount of cognitive function to go round so to speak. But when they are older I hope to play more games. I think I will stay up later.*

When videogame playing adults have children the result may be that there are further negotiations and self-disciplines required. For some, the disruption and excitement of a family results in the temporary fading of the desire to play digital games. Players with families find more pressure on their time for other 'more important' things than games. Some experience that for a period they barely have time, or energy to play (yet they do find some time). This influences the games they choose and the complexity of some of the games they played earlier in their lives - games that may have taken many tens of hours to complete - are rejected in favour of games that allow for a 'quick fix'. As careers progress, work may also restrict time for play, or may influence the types of games played. Complex and challenging jobs leave little time for the complexities of many games and may raise the overall stress levels of players, encouraging them to seek out play that is a 'release' or escape from the pressures of life. Alternatively the realisation that work is largely dull and routine may encourage players to seek in games a creative outlet. Malcolm also hints at his desired future where as an older adult who has played games all his life, and whose children have grown up, he might return to the time-consuming and complex game-play of his childhood.

So the practices of digital play do not stand separate from the life-world of players. It would be a misunderstanding of Huizinga's (1938) magic circle of play to see it as independent and uninformed by family, work and financial influences. And therefore in understanding digital play these form an important context. Digital play varies both qualitatively and quantitatively throughout life. It responds to the felt inadequacies of current circumstances, to fantasies and desires, and to the pressures from and hopes for relationships with family members. Digital game-playing practices develop from this and are subject to change as player's lives enter new phases. But each phase may also be linked to previous behaviours so that the games played and play occasions preferred in early life are the basis for future negotiation and modification. Perhaps what is special about digital games that separate them from other distractions and pastimes is their flexibility and success at being turned towards the large variety of 'problems' that individuals seek remedy for within the time available for their use. The desire is to play outside of the obligation of work and also of family at times, and videogames surface as commodities that provide opportunity for the 'right' type of play experience.

Chapter 5: The practices of adult videogame players

In the previous chapter I illustrated that current and past domestic arrangements produce a complex set of practices that together constitute being an adult videogame player. In this section I want to examine these practices in more detail and therefore 'map out' the various activities that surround and inform the experience of play. I will consider how players choose and buy games, their financial investments in games and game-related hardware, and the disposal, or alternatively the accumulation of games and game hardware. I will then add detail to the various times and locations where play takes place as habit, reward, compensation, relaxation and binge and how players articulate the different times and spaces in which they play, including play-time in relation to work, family and friends. I will also consider the ebb and flow of play as it varies throughout the day, week and seasons, and how play is managed and occasionally mismanaged such that other activities are disrupted.

5.1. Buying and owning games

In this section I want to consider how adult videogame players sustain their interest in games through the research, acquisition, and disposal of games and game-related technology. I will consider practices related to learning about new games, shopping for games, the specific pleasures of new games and consoles, disposing of games and decisions about keeping 'special' games, and game collections. These practices demonstrate the complexity of digital games as a hobby that involves pleasurable time and effort beyond play itself, or if you like the consumption 'meta-game' of being a game consumer. Games may be anticipated for several months, or even years before they are purchased, but adult players – even those with high disposable incomes – are also surprisingly sensitive to price, demonstrating a seemingly paradoxical view of games as important, frivolous purchases. As commodities, games and related hardware are also desired for their novelty, yet at the same time for some they are a source of nostalgia that results in the collection of old games and consoles.

5.1.1. Researching game purchases

The complexity of the digital games market requires careful research, including spending time reading about games and related hardware online and to a lesser degree (for these adults) in magazines. For some, this is in itself a pleasurable part of their hobby and they may use sites like *Amazon* to monitor games and to hold a 'wish list' of the games they desire. Douglas, a 31-year-old administrator living with parents was perhaps the most avid game collector I spoke to. He spends time reading about games and other media online giving particular emphasis to what other players say. Douglas tells me that he doesn't actually play

many of the games or consoles that he has researched for several years. Much of his time is spent checking the latest games, but also checking for 'good' prices for older games.

Once I got my PC I started reading a site called Gamespot which has reviews and keeps an archive of all the games that they have ever reviewed, which a lot of other games sites don't. It's got a huge archive of material. And every year both Edge and Gamespot, I think the editors do like a list of like the best games of the year, or awards for like the best graphics in a game, blah de blah, and off the back of that and reading about all the games reviews in both Edge and on Gamespot, there are certain games that I felt were like classic games.

For Douglas years of intense research into games have resulted in him becoming jaded as innovations have not kept up with his thirst for knowledge. He explains that currently he is waiting for the latest generation of consoles to produce new and innovative games. Until then he is nostalgic about 'classic' games of the past. He tells me that he spends time monitoring prices and availability of these 'classic' games on *Amazon* and that although he is currently too busy at work to play games, this allows him to maintain his interest. He shows me some of his collection and explains how he bought them, focusing on finding what he considers to be classic games at the best price (which often means considerable research over a long period of time). He then shows me the result of his online research, a personal database on *Amazon* of films, books, and games that he has researched and now monitors the price of.

I mean if you look at my basket I've got loads of - you know you can save items for later - I've got 400 pages of stuff that I like the look of, that I haven't bought.... It tells you when you open the page when stuff is going up and down, so if stuff is really cheap then I might buy it at that point.

Max, a PhD student who lives in a room in a shared house, also described this 'game' of researching videogames. He uses the web extensively to research games and technological developments in general. He shows me his routine and explains it to me.

Well this is a news site that is set as my home page, and then I tend to go Gamespot. Then I go to Slick, which is a file sharing news website, look there, and then I go to a couple of torrent game related websites to see what new files are out, anything interesting. Then I usually end up on Cool News checking up if there's any movie news, Quicktime trailers, a forum where me and a couple of friends hang out and that's basically my day. And then I repeat myself, in that same pattern, going to the same websites over and over again, until I get bored.

Max downloads games from peer-to-peer sites and has a collection of such games, many of which he has yet to play. But he also uses the web to speculate about future purchases; not games themselves (because he has access to downloads), but rather a gaming PC. He

describes regular visits to Dell's website to monitor the price of his 'ultimate gaming PC'. Again, there is a consumption game taking place here. This is how he explains this behaviour:

> *I keep window-shopping, you know, going to the Dell website and configuring my PC, seeing if I could afford it at one point. And no, I can't. I go on the website and select the Dell XPS, which is the gaming system and it looks kind of cool and then configure it with dual core Pentium 4 processor and 4MB of Ram and 2 SATA 500 GB hard drives. So, yeah, that's what I'm doing.... OK, I start off with my dream system and then I kind of narrow it down. I tick off the boxes, but you know it would be too much, but what is the bare minimum that I want, or that I could live with for the next 2 years and it's usually around two and a half thousand pounds worth of stuff.*

Max tells me that this research is part of the pleasure of playing games and just as he anticipates a new PC, Carl explains the pleasure of anticipating a new game. Carl describes planning to buy games up to a year in advance using a combination of recommendation, browsing in shops and researching online.

> *The press, I rarely read it, you know, sometimes someone will say, 'oh have you seen that article on so and so', and I'll read it and think that is the kind of genre I like, and I enjoy playing, I'll wait and see what happens. If I see a game that I haven't read about or heard about, say I'm just browsing through Game, or Virgin, or something like that I'll have a look at it, I'll have a read of it and I'll think OK, I'll keep an eye on that for about 12 months, see how the sales go. I'll look at some of the cheat sites, and if lots of people are putting up lots of different cheats up there, or certainly if they are putting mods up there that tends to mean that it is a very flexible game and that, that's something I'm interested in, so that will start to draw me in and then perhaps a year or two years down the line when it has gone from the chart you know down to budget, I'll buy it as budget.*

This seems like an extraordinarily long purchase deliberation for a relatively cheap product. But Carl explains that he actually enjoyed this. He would start to anticipate a new game even before its release and would then monitor its price, waiting for it to fall. During our conversations he was able to state several games that he plans to buy over several years. The extended anticipation of a game would also be an opportunity to check that he was still interested and provide a reason for visiting game websites and stores. For him, this became part of the pleasure of his video game hobby, allowing numerous visits to game stores without buying.

These behaviours seem common and consistent with Campbell's (1987) narrative of consumer desire. Games provide a context for online activity, providing a reason to search and a topic to read about. This suggests that for some digital game players, playing games involves much more than simply turning on a console. Games are often an involved purchase

that requires considerable research and effort. Only very low prices or multi-buy offers (popular with used games in the major games retailers) induce anything like an impulse buy (see below). For some, an interest in digital games involves almost continuous surveillance of the games market.

5.1.2. Shopping for games

Many of the adults that I spoke to claimed to enjoy shopping for games. For some, games shops are seen as a 'male space' in the high street, alongside 'gadget shops'. Just as games provide an excuse to use the web, they also provide something to do whilst out shopping. Alex explains the casual way that he might find himself browsing a game shop each time he is in town as a 'habit' or 'routine'. Malcolm goes further to suggest game shops as a specific destination. He claims to visit several stores on each shopping trip, monitoring both new games to find out what has just come out, and the current price of used games. He tells me about the attraction of shopping in a high street store.

> *You know, Saturday morning it's full of young kids - but you know they are just as entitled to buy games as anyone else I suppose [laughs].... I'll be honest with you, I can't afford to buy games, you know, brand new games week in week out, but I do tend to go into the second hand bit and I browse through there and of course Gamestation have a good retro section as well... The majority of stuff that we buy [Malcolm and his son] is the retro stuff or the second hand. We buy quite a lot of second hand. And I tend to go for these 3 for 3 pound kind of bundles or if I'm going to buy NES games you know there are three for 99p each or something. You end up with a bundle of games for very little money. Although I do buy from somewhere like Play or Amazon, if I'm buying a new game I do tend to go into somewhere like Gamestation. I don't know why, it's just habit, I don't know, I don't want to wait for it to arrive, I just want to go and get it.*

Malcolm explains that he seems to spend as much time buying games as actually playing them.

> *I'm not playing as much as my buying habits would suggest [laughs]. I have a rainy day mentality, where I think, you know, I'll get that and I'll play it, it tends to be more the older stuff to be honest. I've got quite a few Saturn games that I've never really played, but they were classic games.... Rainy days is a metaphor, it would be a sunny day, I might just think 'I fancy a game of Mariocart, or Premier Manager, was always one of my favs.*

Malcolm occasionally goes to game shops with his son, and Duane, a 34-year-old DJ also tells me about taking his son to buy new games. Here shopping is a social activity for father and son, something they can do together.

In the morning my son Will, who is 9, had decided that he wanted to get a new game and the game he wanted was Zoo Tycoon and he wanted it on his DS, but after I explained to him that PC games are a lot cheaper, we went into town to have a look. Now we went into Game and in there they had a pack for 14 pounds which had all the zoo tycoon games put together. Now he saw that and he thought 'oh I like that, I really want that', and he came home and he counted his shillings and he had £4 pounds. And his Grandma had said that 'for every penny you earn I will match'. So I got him to clean the car for a fiver. That meant that after spending 2 hours cleaning the car, he had 14 pounds to go to the shop. But when we went back to Game we said 'where is it', and the man said 'oh, we've sold it'. So I was I little bit peeved and I was thinking 'oh no, how can this help with morals and working and ethics and I should have bought it there and then and I'm going to get it in the neck'.... So we went down to Gamestation and they had some deal going and it was buy one get one free.... And actually we came home with 4 games in the end for £14.99.

Here buying games is a special event and Duane uses it to attempt to teach his son values. Later Duane explains that these trips to game shops are not infrequent and although he mainly buys games for his son, occasionally he will also come home with a game. Dylan, a 20-year old student also describes a social aspect to game shops. Having recently started at University he has new friends and has been trying to get them more interested in games. He tells me about a shopping trip with his housemates where he intended to share his knowledge about games with them.

We were hanging around in town and didn't know what to do so, so like pop in Game and basically I wanted to pop in so that I could say 'look,' and just rubbish the whole chain, 'look at the carpet, it's so clean, this is a game shop, it shouldn't have clean carpets, this is ridiculous. And where are the pre-owned things? They've got rid of that, the cheap stuff. It's all new releases at full price. This is bollocks, this is rubbish'. That was my intension. To go in there and show them that it was too expensive. But we ended up spending about three hours in there just wondering around the shelves looking at things. I didn't buy anything, 'cause I didn't have money, but they bought some games themselves. My friend made some stupid decisions and bought like buy one, get so many free, so he got a couple of football games that he just didn't need.

Game shops seem to be places that young male adults can loiter. But Dylan also reveals his expectation for a game shop as a specialist store for knowledgeable enthusiasts. He rejects a 'glossy' retail layout. He also demonstrates a knowledge of the way games shops 'work', later describing the used section and the various bundles that are often on offer, as well as the fact that older versions of games are usually on offer and new versions are likely to be at full price and in the chart section. However, unlike Malcolm and others who have been playing games since childhood, John, a relatively inexperienced gamer tells me that he finds game shops confusing and usually avoids them. John relies on specialist none-game media and traditional advertising to learn about games and then often buys online.

If I'm in Bournemouth town centre I might nip in there to see if there is anything in there worth buying. But I tend to - I just have a look on the racks. There might have been a game that I've heard about, that I thought 'I won't buy now, but if it comes out second hand I might pick it up'. But I'm not so into games that I know what all the games are and it would need to be a film tie-in or a sports tie-in for me to know anything about it, whether it was worth buying. I think to make me aware of the games I think they would, well certainly in magazines like Autosport, every month or six weeks or before Christmas they had something called Armchair Enthusiast, which talks about new books that are out, something connected to the sport, or new games that are out, or new model kits.... And that's where I might find out information about one of the games. From Russia with Love, I first noticed that on a billboard that was up at Waterloo station and that made me think 'I wonder what that is', so I went on Amazon to have a look for it. But I will always look on a website like Amazon before I bought it.

Dylan and others see game shops as a 'male space' and there is possibly a consequence for women of the male-domination of game retail spaces. Elaine's experiences illustrate this. Elaine is an 18 year-old student. She describes herself as an experienced game player who has been playing games since she was very young. She plays and buys a lot of games and like others, she tends to visit game shops to browse the second hand section each time she goes into town, and tends to wait for a game to drop in price, carefully monitoring stock before she buys it. However Elaine tells me that she does not always feel entirely comfortable entering videogame shops.

I think a lot of people are put off, because it is just commonly thought that games are for guys. I went into Gamestation once with a friend of mine who was a guy. I went up to buy a game and the guy there was staring at me the whole time and then I went to leave and my friend was like 'he's scared of you 'cause you're a girl'.

She tells me that she resents the 'maleness' of game shops, and commented that most shops tended to have driving games and first person shooters, or football games on demonstration, none of which were games that interested her (and she therefore assumed they would not interest other women either). She also explains that a female friend who has played some games feels uncomfortable entering game shops. Like the inexperienced John, Elaine's friend only accesses games via other familiar media and interests. But Elaine also identified a group of girls from her peer group, or possibly younger, who visit game shops because they had discovered that they were actually a good place to meet boys. These girls would hang around game shops 'pretending to buy'. Elaine did not want to be associated with this type of behaviour.

The other annoying thing that you find is girls that go in there and have blatantly never played a game before, but they're in there because they want guys to think that they play games. I've seen that a lot. Well they usually come in and they usually, their face is mostly makeup. They usually have highlights. They're mainly tramps. And they don't pick anything up, they don't look at anything, they just kind of walk though and stop and stare at the shelves from a distance, as if it's like dirty. And then after a while they leave. Or they might like go up behind one of the guys that is playing one of the demos and just watch them for a while, but they don't touch anything at all. But I was talking to some of the girls on Myspace and they said that they find it annoying that most of the time guys think girls are going to be worse at playing, because half of the girls that play only play because they want to be around guys and so guys think girls are awful.

Susan, a 20 year-old student, also notes that games are something boys know and understand better than girls. She claimed to enjoy playing a range of games and yet also confessed to be guided by her younger brother when it came to choosing games. She defers expertise in the purchase of games to her 'more expert' sibling, avoiding game shops altogether.

I've never bought a videogame ever.... I never go into game shops. If I randomly like was like in a shop and I saw a game that I quite want and I saw it was for a Mac, I might buy it, but, it's like I don't, 'cause I like the games that I've got. Like World of Warcraft, they're bringing out a new one soon and you can go up to like level 130 I think; my brother will buy that, so I'll have it as well.

Other than the web, the adult players that I spoke to regularly visit games shops, not just to buy, but to undertake surveillance of the latest game hardware and software and especially the current prices. For some these shops are another way to pass the time and they will routinely visit them when on a shopping trip, or during a lunch hour. For parents, game shops are like toyshops; a place to visit with a child and at times a specific destination for a trip into town and therefore like playing games, they are a way for parents and children to spend time together.

Some players will watch prices for a game fall for several months before committing to purchase, routinely noting the status of games in the used section of shops. Others will visit several shops to compare stock and prices. And players develop a sophisticated system of monitoring stock and prices to gauge the popularity of games. For example, the absence of a game in used stock immediately after release may be seen as a sign that a game is popular with those who bought it new. And despite reports that games are acquired only after extensive research, visits to game shops and surveillance of the used sections also provides players with a possibility of some usual find or even a bargain. But some older players and female players seem 'lost' in game shops. Overall game shops are a male space on the high street. Men, especially young men feel comfortable in them; at home and competent. They may hang out in stores, and knowing this some young women may use game stores as a way

to gain access to boys. But other women may feel uncomfortable in such surroundings. Sarah does not visit them, and does not want to be seen in them, relying instead on her brother to buy games. Emma does visit, but notes a strange reaction from store staff.

I was struck by the number of participants who claimed to only seldom buy new games. Some of this is accounted for by economic constraints, for example, Colin, an 18 year old who works at a leisure complex and lives at home explains that he simply cannot afford to buy new games, even though he would like to. This is how he describes a recent visit to a game shop:

> *I'm walking down the high street looking for a job and I look in all the shop windows, you know. And I thought I'm going to go into Gamestation to see what I can't afford, look at the games and plan what I might buy next, what I'm going to get next, you know, save the pennies together. And I go up to the counter because occasionally they have free demo discs on the counter you know, which is quite interesting.... I was looking at buying God of War again. I wanted to pick it up again, to do it again because I played it once, completed it, and then got rid of it, because I had to get rid of it to get some cash. I needed the cash. But I wanted to carry on because you can do it again on like harder difficulty levels and it was so much fun, it was one of the best games that I've played ever and I just thought that I wanted to do it again.... I've always traded them in once I finished the game, 'cause when I've finished the game and done everything I can, I won't pick it up again, not usually. So once I've finished a game I'll get rid of it because there is no point in it being there when I can get the value for it. You know, it could be worth 6 or 7 quid against a 12 quid game. And that's what I do. I'll buy the game, I'll play it, and then I'll trade it for something else.*

However even high earners that I spoke to explained that they never bought new games. For example Carl, a 40 year-old IT technician and experienced gamer explained that he could not 'justify paying £40' for a new game, even though he could afford it. He explained that this was because he knew that prices quickly fell and therefore that games could generally be purchased more cheaply in 6 months from release. Carl felt that there was no need to pay full price for a game, explaining that as his PC was never the most recent specification, he actually found that new games often demanded a higher spec than he had, and that as he often played games for more than a year (and often returned to them over several years), he felt no need to 'chase the latest game fashions'. He also expressed some guilt at the money he spent on games (money that he suggested might be 'better' spent on other things for the house). By buying second hand and budget games Carl was better able to justify his purchase to his wife, but he also accounts for this behaviour by explaining that he was brought up to be careful with money.

> *I can get more bangs for my buck by buying them cheaper. And what do I lose? I don't lose anything. Because I've got games that I'll be playing for years that I think are great. If I actually*

never bought another game, because I couldn't, if I leave for a desert island tomorrow, I took my kit with me, I'd be quite happy. I wouldn't notice. The thing that makes you want to buy more games from my point of view is consumerism. I am not a great consumer. I'm actually a bad consumer, because I'm willing to wait.... Occasionally something will come out and I'll think - Call of Duty is one of those - I did play a demo before I bought it and the demo level was really good. I did wait a bit until it came off the charts and that dropped slightly in price, and I think that's two things. The first and most important thing is that my wife does look at my bank statements and there is a possibility I might have to justify why I've spent 40 quid on a game. But the other thing is my background. My family, when I was a child we were all very normal working class people and two things have come from that: I hate debt, You won't believe the pain I went through to take my first mortgage out, it's ridiculous because it's manageable as long as you are sensible, it's not a big problem, but I had a massive block because it was debt.... And the second thing is that coming from that background you only buy something if you have saved up for it.

This need to justify the cost of games was also revealed by Robert. Like Carl, Robert seemed to have sufficient disposable income to easily afford an online subscription to *World of Warcraft*. But he also expressed concerns about the price and felt the need to justify this expenditure. He does this by not buying game magazines, for example.

I do not feel guilty. I do wish it wasn't eight pounds a month, but you buy a computer magazines and that six ninety-nine. And basically I've stopped buying them. And I don't feel that, it is, actually if you think about it per month it's not too bad, but over the year you think 'crikey, it's a hell of a lot'.

Carl and others seldom get involved with discussions with peers about the latest games that might prompt a need to buy games on release. This contrasts with Grant, a 28 year-old technician for a high street PC retailer. He works in an environment where much of the conversation revolves around the latest technology and the latest games. One result is that he describes considerable peer pressure to buy and play the latest games, or else he may be left out of the conversations at work. But he too thinks games are expensive and justifies prolific buying by claiming that he saves money with his staff discount.

I've just paid 40 quid for those two games, I played Saints Row once, which was the night I got in with it, I haven't touched it since, and Dead Rising, I've played twice. They're OK games, it's 80 quid of my money gone, although I could sell them on eBay 'cause the turn around on 360 games is dead quick. But they will be something that I'll probably just pop into once every few weeks and give it a bash.... It could be that I'm bored and I'm looking through and think 'I haven't played that in a while.... Or it could be kicked off by someone as work saying do you want a game of such and such tonight.

Peer group pressure may influence consumer decisions; peers encourage Grant to buy, but a lack of this encouragement, and knowledge of the quick drops in game prices results in Carl from spending little money on new games, for example. This might also suggests a 'structural' problem in the market. Many of the participants here engage with much of their video game consumption via the pre-owned and budget market. They are strongly aware of the ways in which games fall in price and the savings to be made by waiting and buying second hand.

Despite the fact that many working adult game players could easily afford full price games – and acknowledge this - many regard games as too expensive and take steps to minimise the money spent on games. This results in prolonged purchase deliberations that in some cases were claimed at over a year, whilst waiting for prices to fall. Players also raise concerns that they don't always finish games and for some this seems to be part of their reluctance to pay full price (if only a quarter of a game is ever completed, then players might only pay a quarter of the original price). Players also see games as something you can only play once and therefore not worth 'large' investments. Here they compare games to films or books, often arguing that these other media forms are 'better value'. The fact that games can be seen to fall in price so quickly may confirm suspicions that they are not worth the initial launch price (and players again make comparisons with other media consumption such as DVDs that also quickly fall in price). Some players also minimised their overall 'games holdings' trading in consoles and games once they were played to recoup some of the cost that may then be re-invested in used games. These practices are 'forced' by low incomes for only a few of adults. Even when minimising costs participants claim a need to justify the money they spend, for example by cutting out other activities, or playing for long enough to 'get monies worth'.

But although many players trade in, many also claimed to have a favourite game or games that they wouldn't sell because players know they will return to them from time to time. Some games also seem to have emotional values attached to them. Playing them is experienced as sufficiently significant that the game is kept as a 'souvenir' of the time spent in the game. I will discuss this further below.

5.1.3. Desire for the latest technology

I have already mentioned that games are often part of a broader interest in technology and explained that players eagerly anticipate new game-related technologies. This interest was apparent when visiting the homes of players. For example Malcolm lives with his wife and 2 teenage children in a small cottage that has a generally clean, but untidy appearance (you may recall that he rejects DIY as a hobby). The small, main living room is dominated by a large

screen TV, an Xbox 360, a Sky+ box, and a DVD recorder. At the opposite end of the room there is desk with a PC and large monitor. He also has a Nintendo DS. 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, but is only occasionally used to play music. It is also networked, yet Malcolm explains that he is yet to try online multiplayer play. A good part of my unrecorded discussion with Malcolm (as well as some of the recording) focussed on the technologies themselves. Malcolm is interested in what technology is capable of and anticipates new developments in hardware.

> *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; they're yet to stretch it. And I'm looking forward to the Wii because of the hardware, not so much the games, the remote the stick thing that you wave around, that's the bit that grabs my attention.*

An interest in new hardware and software technology was common amongst the videogame-playing adults that I spoke to. Luke, a 29-year-old web developer also explains this desire for the latest thing. Although he recalls Gamecube games being the best he has played, he tells me that he won't 'go back' to them, despite being bored with his Xbox collection. Instead he anticipates new consoles:

> *I was going to get a PS3, but they've pushed the date back now, until March or something, because everyone else I know who is talking about it is planning to get a PS3, even though it's like 500 quid 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. And now I feel like I can't really be bothered to buy a new game because I've seen all, I've seen the first person shooter, the racer, you know, the sort of four standard games and I've seem them all on the Xbox, so I don't think there is anything that will blow me away at the moment. Until I get a PS3 or something.*

Several adults explained the thrill of getting a new console and playing it for the first time. For example Max remembers clearly the excitement of getting a Gamecube. He bought it during his lunch hour and then played it with colleges for most of the afternoon. Like Luke,

Max explains that he wants new play experiences and so seeks out innovative games and consoles. He gives further examples of this:

> *One game I want for the Game Cube is Chibi Robo which is a little robot that a family buys and the robot has to clean cups and obviously keep the house tidy. Yeah, it's a good game to educate kids how to keep stuff clean. But, you know, the game also like a secret mission, you find an old robot who's running out of energy so you're also trying to save the old robot by supplying him with energy. Yeah, I found it an innovative game idea so that's what I want because I have so many, you know, first person shooters and if you cut it down they're all the same really. So I'm quite into new innovative ways of playing games. So that's why I'm looking forward to the new Nintendo console. That's why I initially bought the Nintendo DS for my girlfriend.*

Buying a new game, taking it home and playing it for the first time, is exciting even for adults: if it is accompanied by a new console, even better. And if the game or console has been long anticipated, better still. Games and console hardware are something to look forward to and participants get pleasure from new purchases as the realisation of a long-term desire and a desire that may be renewed as new technologies come to the market. The quest for 'something new' also drives experienced players to more obscure, or 'original' titles. Like other commodities then, games give players something to look forward to, and on acquisition a sense of accomplishment in at last getting hold of that desired object. And as we shall see, this desire and anticipation may be carried through a game as it is played.

5.1.4. Game collections

Although many adult game players hold only a limited number of games, several explained a desire for collections. Richard is a 24-year-old postman who recently left the army, and describes himself as a 'serious game-player'. He lives with his girlfriend in a small rented flat. I visit him there and during the interview he shows me his game collection that he has accumulated over many years (although some he has re-bought) and keeps despite telling me that he has very little money. He explains:

> *They're just stacked like that just because it's convenient. Like this [the cabinet that holds the collection] was cheap second hand, I was like skint as anything when I first moved in with my girlfriend and we had no money for anything like furniture wise, so I had to just make do with what I could scrape up, and that's just the most efficient way to fit them on there really. It's just stacked behind there as well, like if I lift some out of the way you can see... I've never counted them, but it's quite a lot. There is that again behind all of these.... I've got probably a couple of hundred, there's two more boxes stored behind the futon as well, a couple of boxes of old like Megadrive and Dreamcast and stuff like that.... I've got a Megadrive, but it's not my original one, because with*

that one I had like about 24 games and loads of CDs and that, but when I went into the army my brother like robbed them all.

Richard explains that he feels he has better knowledge and skill than most gamers. For him one result is the 'need' for this special collection: physical evidence of his experience and skill. Like Max, as a knowledgeable player, he seeks specialist games.

If I know a game is coming out and I'm going to want it then I'll probably pre-order it. Sometimes I pre-order in the shops and sometimes online, but sometimes they give away free stuff if you pre-order a game, like I got a free T-Shirt when I ordered Killer 7 and stuff like that and that's kind of nice. But other than that I go for, like there's a second hand and indy shop down on Williams road and he sells a lot of retro stuff as well and generally speaking if I go to a shop I'll go in there because they carry oddities and like the older stuff because I buy older stuff that's not current anymore just because it's, you know, because it's added something to the evolution of games and I want to play it and see it just to see what it, you know to see what it's all about.... If it's something out of the ordinary, even if it doesn't get good reviews.

Despite not having much money, Richard has kept a collection of games, especially those that he considers to be 'classics' and that therefore define him as a 'serious player'. He was not the only collector that I encountered. Douglas, an administrator who lives at home with his parents, had an even more extensive collection, including many games that are still in their original seals. Douglas tells me that he often buys games that are original or very highly rated, but that he does not have time to play them all. He spends time researching games however and has considerable knowledge of the games industry (including specific game designers and the games that they have made). Unlike Richard's games, Douglas's collection is immaculately presented and ordered so that whilst we talk, Douglas can scan shelves in order to find specific games. Some of the games in Douglas's collection are for consoles that he does not even own.

I've also bought quite a lot of games for the Xbox and also for the Nintendo Gamecube; games that I knew were cheap at the time, that were becoming scarcer and scarcer, that by the time I got around to buying the console I knew would be impossible to get hold of or would be too expensive to get hold of, that's why I bought them at the time.... I read a lot about games and I'm quite, I think I'm a little bit of hard-core gamer, I mean I'm not good at - I would say my gaming is average - but I'm very interested in the whole kind of culture of games and games that are good or different from other games or games that stand out from other games.

He also has a considerable collection of CDs, and DVDs. Again, for him collecting and 'finding out about' the media is his primary interest and games are part of a broader interest in the media and media technologies. It isn't just software that can form the basis of a

collection. Malcolm explained that he has an extensive collection of old consoles (and software) and that he has bought and sold hardware via *eBay* and from local car boot sales. Malcolm explains that he regularly goes to boot sales in search of old gaming hardware and that he monitors the vintage console section of *eBay*. He further explains that he sometimes enjoys just getting old consoles to work, 'to see what they are like', yet he is quickly bored by most of the games that he plays (old and new) and seldom finishes them. For Malcolm then, games as a hobby is about collecting. Like Douglas, he also has a large collection of other media including CDs and DVDs and he feels he is passing this interest onto his son.

> *I'm very lucky, my Son, now whether I've indoctrinated him or something, he's 16 now and he's not a mad computer enthusiast, but he collects old consoles. That's what he does. He spends all his money and time buying old consoles and games and things and we search boot fares for things, like the old Philips G7000 Video Pac. Now that I've got a decent income, a lot of the consoles that I sold, I'm now getting back again.... We still scour around and look for stuff. I sort of re-live my childhood playing Spectrum games on my PC, but it's a sombre experience so I like to get the proper hardware and I like to clean them up as well, I can't bare to see these machines just lying, you know, abandoned.... When I get bored I pass them on to him, 'cause he will look after them. I mean the Spectrums are all mine and will remain mine, but the other bits and pieces that we pick up occasionally, he basically takes over, like the Atari VCS and things, things that I've had a bit of fun with, but I'm not terribly fussed because even I can't hark back that far with nostalgia.... 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 than, yeah, I keep those nice, but the other consoles we play around with.... I have had bigger collections in the past and I've sold them because I've had periods of reflection about how much money I've spent on them.... It's got to be literally over the years I must have spent thousands on them.*

The opposite of restricted games holdings is to build a collection and some players accumulate collections of several hundred games and consoles. Although for some this is simply by default (they don't get round to selling old games), for others collecting becomes almost more important than playing games. The complexity of the market provides a suitable context for developing a specialist 'set' of games and accompanying knowledge. Collecting is experienced as a project of achieving something 'complete' and 'special' that might mark the 'serious' player out from other more casual users of videogames. Other collectors focus on 'vintage' hardware. Many players keep or re-acquire old hardware, but for some this produces a large collection of old machines with which they are able to tinker and reminisce and which provide a project of knowledge acquisition allowing them to become 'experts'. Collectors also note the investment potential of old consoles and for some part of the pleasure is to

monitor the worth of their collections on sites such as *eBay*. Collecting also allows players further meaningful recreation such as visiting car boot sales and charity shops for old and unusual finds. Regular changes in consoles over the years have allowed this activity considerable scope. Collectors are able to cite the history of consoles, related hardware and 'classic' games that may be desired by collectors. And as mentioned, for some the commitment given to collections is more manageable than the commitment that may be required to play the latest games.

5.2. Finding time and space for play

Having acquired games and game hardware, players need time and space to play. They need to fit hardware into the home, or find space for using portable devices. They also need to find times when they can play. I have already indicated that adult play is subject to broad fluctuations that result from changes in life circumstances, now I want to consider how play may also vary throughout the year, week and day. These practices represent the detailed management of, and sometimes failure to manage play. They represent the variety and complexity of digital play. I start by considering the range of different places that adults find or are forced to play in. I then highlight how play may be seasonal, and how play fits into the routine of daily and weekly life. I then consider 'special', social play occasions where play makes some group event or activity. Finally I consider disruptions from routine, either in the form of binges, or breaks from play.

5.2.1. Places to play

The spaces where games are played is something that I was able to directly observe from visiting people in their home, as well as something that came up in various conversations. At the time of the interviews I took notes about the playing environment and here I draw on these as well as interviews with players. Adult players like Grant or Luke who live alone have no problems finding space for games and in interviews with them the issue doesn't arise. Grant, for example, has filled his flat with his technology and a large screen TV, consoles and PC dominate the living area. But players who share their living space have to negotiate space for play. They may adopt one of several approaches. Robert's solution is his own office, separated from the main household living area. Carl also has his own office. And similarly, Duane has a music studio, complete with two PCs. He describes retreating to this private space whilst his wife watches TV.

> *Obviously I play at night time, so, see normally I can get in here, probably about half past nine, when I've done all my bits. Obviously Kathy, will be upstairs with the babies, well to be honest with*

you she likes to watch all the soaps and big brother and all that rubbish and they don't appeal to me at all, end of story, in fact I detest most of them.

However some players don't have this option. For them the space for playing games is also the main living area. Richard, a 28-year-old marketing executive who lives with his girlfriend explains his problem:

I get home from work, and she's a teacher so she gets home a little bit later than me and if I get back before she does I'll put on my game – I've been playing it all week, I've been playing the Lyons tour of New Zealand, and it's 40 minutes, 20 minutes each side, plus whatever extra, when it gets to 20 minutes, the half, the ball has to go dead in Rugby before they blow the whistle... So I try to keep the ball alive so that I can score a try, so I can actually play an extra 10 minutes, so an hour a day when I get back from work.... And tomorrow morning I'll probably play before Jenny gets up, or something like that.... 'cause we've only got one TV, so you know, I let her watch friends or something like that, but then she has to watch me play this rugby game.... She doesn't like it.... I have to watch her watching friends and that kind of thing, so she gets to watch me. But she will sit there and do a sudoku or be on the phone or do something else.

Matthew, a 26-year-old soldier whose partner doesn't play gives a similar story of negotiating time to play with his partner. He tells me he prefers playing on the large TV in the lounge, but often ends up playing on his PC upstairs because his partner wants to watch TV. Many of the players I visited had large screen televisions fed by a range of set-top boxes, media players and recording devices. Many players also described having more than one console and it was not uncommon to see several different consoles connected to the same TV. Despite this dedicated space, some also use games in the bedroom. For example Alex describes the consoles distributed throughout the house.

OK, all the things we've got in the house then. We've got obviously a PC, we've got a laptop; the PC's about three years old, the laptop is about 9 moths old so laptop is certainly fairly current, the PC is not quite as up to date as I would like it to be, it's difficult to justify spending more money on it. We've got two Xbox's, a Gamecube, a Playstation 2, two Playstations, one chipped, one regular, I've got an original Gameboy, the Micro Gameboy that then came out, two Gameboy Advanced and a Gameboy DS and we've got an N-Gage. Most are really just for anybody's use so they are primarily the kids' and mine. I have one Xbox up in my bedroom which I consider just mine because it has the saves for the game that I play most of.

Janice and Elaine also both explain that the bedroom, late at night is a suitable place for play. Elaine, who has only limited access to the main TV, explains it like this:

> *Sometimes I just get ready for bed, turn off the lights and because I've got a laptop and I put it on my bed, I just play and then go to sleep straight afterwards. In fact I've fallen asleep with the laptop on my lap before.*

Alternatively some players find a solution through portable gaming consoles. So for example Mandy describes using a DS in front of the TV and even watching and playing at the same time. Alex also uses a DS in a similar way, and Malcolm describes using a PSP whilst watching TV. These adults also describe using portable consoles to find other spaces to play. In particular both Alex and Malcolm describe playing in the car whilst waiting for family members, and Malcolm further describes the flexibility the DS gives in terms of space.

> *I much prefer the DS... I play at work, I must admit [laughs]. I take that or the PDA into work and I tend to have a go at lunchtime, and this is really sad of me now, I tend to work earlier and have a short lunchtime than my wife, she works in the same place as I do, and I tend to finish between 4 and half past and in which case I'll often go and sit in the car with the radio on, playing and it gives me three quarters of an hour of a quick gaming fix.*

Games are played in a variety of places but where this is the main living area this may cause conflict with other. For some there is simply no other space or television on which to play games, but others identify a number of solutions. Firstly a portable games machine has the advantage of allowing the player to remain with family or partner in front of the TV. Secondly, PC game players in particular may have a separate office as the main site of game play. This separates the player from family and allows full attention to be given to the game, but also results in occasional friction with family members about the time spent separated. Finally some participants used portable consoles to play game whilst away from the home. This brief overview of spaces for play also illustrates an inseparability between space and time for play. Shared audiovisual resources, an unwillingness to spend time apart, or a need to be separate from the family in order to focus on play results in time for play also being restricted.

5.2.2. Seasonal play

Several of the adult players that I spoke described a tendency to play more in the winter, and less, or not at all in the summer when outside activities take preference. For example when I visited Janice at her home at the end of July she was working in the garden. During the interview she brought up the fact that she wasn't currently playing a game because it was summer a total of five times. For example:

> *I'm a keen gardener and so therefore I won't sit upstairs on a sunny day spending three hours on the game. But then one of the main reasons why it's upstairs in the bedroom is because last thing at night I can go and play it for an hour, probably the majority of nights in the winter I'll play it at night, but less in the summer, maybe an hour 2 or 3 days a week, and maybe at the weekend on a Sunday morning I'll play it for a couple of hours, but then going back to like the winter, I could probably play it more, especially if I've got a game that I'm seriously interested in.*

Alex, who lives close to the beach also explains that in the summer, the beach and a book are more attractive than games:

> *I didn't play any games yesterday, I didn't play any games on Sunday, or Saturday because the weather was nice and the beach is two minutes away and I'd still sooner sit on the beach on a sunny day with a book than sit in a house on a sunny day with a computer game, if that makes sense. Now if its poring down with rain and you know, I've not got anything to do, then yeah, I'll play a computer game.*

And Richard further elaborates this preference for going out over staying in to play games. He explains it like this:

> *I don't want to waste my life away by spending a whole night playing on a game which I could just play any time when I'm bored. There might be something interesting on TV to watch, or I might do some cooking or something like that, or go and see friends or go down the quay, or have a drink. I like to do actual things when I can do them. So in the summertime we will go off kayaking after work, I've got my own kayak and we go and put them in and, but in the winter you can't do that. It's great in the summer and I'd much rather be doing that than playing on the Xbox, but when it's whether like this in the evening I'll probably play the Xbox.... You have to take it in context don't you. When you've got nothing else to do, then it's good to play, then there's nothing else to do.*

In addition to being subject to the day-to-day requirements of work and family duties game play seems to have a seasonal bias for many players. In the winter there is less to do to draw players away from games and boredom at having 'nothing to do' may be higher and therefore the desire to fill time with games may be greater. In the summer however it is not just a greater range of available activities that keep people from games, but also some felt desire to 'make the most of the summer'; to get out and to do something.

5.2.3. Daily and weekly play

As well as seasonal play 'routines' players have weekly or daily playing habits. In highlighting the various places that are used for adult digital play I have already introduced some of the routines that adults develop in order to fit play around other activities. I now want to develop these further. On occasions play is experienced as resulting from a specific need to

'fill time', but also to feel that they have 'got something' from this otherwise 'dead' time. These periods may often be short (waiting for someone), or longer such as holiday time – especially long student holidays – where players are separated from friends and the routine of study or work and have little to occupy them. Theo explains how he routinely plays games to fill time in the evening:

> *I like games, you know, when I'm doing nothing and I'm bored. I really like doing stuff on the computer, but because I spend like 10 hours at work on the computer, then I could just sit here and play a game. It's very relaxing. I just do it for about an hour or two hours and that's it. It's not that I come home, I'm not the guy that wants to play, or has to play, but because I got here earlier than my wife and I'm here alone and you know, if I'm alone I'm just playing games until she gets here. If I'm really stuck in the game I keep playing, but if I'm not, she waits until I'm done or she goes and does something and then I go 'ok I'll finish this level'.*

Susan, a twenty 20-old student explains how the time to be filled may be a longer holiday period.

> *Or, it could be, it's mostly just, if I was like sitting about with nothing really to do, there's nothing on TV, or, you know I've got a couple of hours before I meet a friend, so I just play a game for a couple of hours. It was like mostly in the summer holidays or things like that, yeah, like last summer, on my days off from work, I just wake up, go straight on it and spend the whole day on World of Warcraft, literally, because you get sucked into it. I just forget to eat as well. Which is quite good, and then my brother will come home and kick me off it. Yeah, it's just something to do and it's quite interesting.*

Later Susan explains that she doesn't play in the evenings because she prefers to go out with friends, but during the day she has little else to do. 'Filling time' when there is nothing to do is not the only form of regular play however. Janice, for example notes the way games may also mark time between work and home. So this isn't just relieving boredom, but a planned period of time that seems to mark a transition from one type of activity to another.

> *I find when I come home from work sometimes I just sit and chill out for an hour and I might put the game on and that, that's probably a good thing.... The playing when I come home from work will probably be a game that only I play, not me and my partner, just because that's my time and I can play what I want. I'll play the games that she feels' are silly or whatever, you know 'just going round a track, what do you want to play that for?'. You know, that's my chill out time. The stresses of you know the day at work and you just want to switch off, whether it's watching TV or going upstairs and playing on your Xbox, or putting your feet up in the garden or weeding the runner beans. It's whatever you find, you chill out.*

However, in contrast to using games to fill or mark time some players, notably those with work *and* family commitments, complained that often they do not have time to play games. For these players games need to be carefully fitted into other activities and the result was that they claimed a desire for a specific type of play that was simple to pick up and 'get something out of immediately'. This 'immediate gratification' style of play also seems to be preferred in situations where specific emotionally-charged events prompt play. For example, Carl described 'pent up' frustration from work resulting in almost immediate play when he gets home.

> *There have been jobs that I've done where I have found it incredibly stressful and feeling quite aggressive because of the stress so I think I want to punch his lights out and I'm not an aggressive person, that is not part of my makeup and I will go and sit down and I will say to my wife, look don't talk to me for a while, I'm going to go and do something and that will be when I'd play quite an aggressive game like Quake especially. All that is in there is violence. There is nothing else in there. There is no real problem solving in the game and you have to just bang away at it, dump all the aggression in the game and then turn it off.*

The players I spoke to suggested that only certain games were suitable for this type of release of tension. Typically these would be violent first person shooters (such as *Halo*, or *Unreal Tournament*), or perhaps arcade racing games such as *Burnout*, *Need for Speed*, or *Grand Theft Auto*. Participants frequently described the need 'for destruction' or 'to just kill something mindlessly' and the emphasis in this type of play was instant action and high levels of concentration such that the 'worries' of the day could be forgotten.

A further contrast to 'filling time' is a form of play that accompanies other, usually computer-based task. Some players would integrate games into a work task, so for example Carl describes working on a report and playing a game at the same time.

> *If I was working I would find myself firing it up [Sim City], doing a bit of building, dropping the window down again and going back to my essay and working for a bit, then popping it back up again and thinking, oh no, look what they've done, doing a bit more building, perhaps do a bit too much building, dropping the window down again, then going back to my.... One of the nice things about Sim City is the ability to keep it windowed so that you can drop it down to the task bar, go back to do something else and then pop it back up again and see what's happening and the fact that it just keeps churning on.... Sim City can be quite compact, you know, you can have a beginning and an end to it and feel quite satisfied with whatever point you finally close it down.*

Players highlighted a regular day-to-day play-routine and experience this as 'habitual', often based around known 'dead time' during the day. Some participants will play on return home from work, using play to mark a transition between work and family time, for example. For

others play starts towards the end of the day, after other duties have been fulfilled and comes to mark the end of the working day (both paid and domestic) with a 'reward'. And for others still digital play takes on the role of 'bedtime book', used as way of marking the end of the day and distancing the play from the frustrations of that day by filling the mind with the game, therefore displacing 'troubling thoughts'. However some players also note how 'fragile' these routines are. Play may extend beyond the normal routine, or may be dropped altogether for example. And play may also be prompted by specific events, for example a felt 'need' to play that results from a particularly stressful day, or the need to distract oneself with play whilst working on some complex task.

5.2.4. Play and social occasions

An additional form of 'special play' was social play that was often planned, but usually not routine, daily play. Here play is a marker of a special social occasion. For example when Carl's 12-year-old son (from his first marriage) comes to stay, video games are something that they can do together that they both enjoy. Carl tells me that his son looks forward to playing video games with his father. Carl also uses videogames as a form of family entertainment. Again, specific games are used, mainly simple multi-player games. Carl tells me that he bought a cheap tennis game with a bat that is swung in front of a sensor and that his family have spent many hours playing this game as a group. He also pointed out that the point of this game is that 'anyone' can play and that it is fun to watch others 'swinging wildly at an imaginary ball'. It is the 'being together' and 'doing something together' that is important. In this respect video games are perhaps substitutes for other family card or board games. Alex also explains this to me several times. He tells me that he plays games with his children as a 'special' family event. Occasionally it is board games, but more likely it is videogames. Alex also recalls another form of social play that marks the end of an evening out with friends.

> *I was younger and more, you know, before I was married, but I still sort of had friends [laughs]. Now I'm a man who has kids and haven't. But it was more of a social thing then. You know, we'd come back from the pub and it would be 'oh, yeah, you know, we'll play this world cup 2 whatever' you are half cut so it doesn't matter... you know it fills in that void while you are gradually winding down.*

And Dylan recalls a similar story of social play with friends. He is at University now, but tells me that when he returns home he still gets together with friends and they play games.

> *We don't play as much now because obviously we are split up at University and different places, but when we get back together and as I mentioned I'm looking forward immensely to the Wii, and*

Smash Brothers, and my friend says ' buy it, buy it' every time we talk and I know he'll whip my arse every time.

Less frequent still is the use of digital games as part of seasonal get together. John, a 44 year-old management consultant explains that digital games are likely to be played at Christmas, for example when there are friends round and more time for games. And games may also form a key activity for a holiday. Unlike Susan, who uses games to pass the time on her student summer break away from friends, Max explained that when his girlfriend comes to stay, (she lives in Germany and only visits once every few months) they spend most of their time playing games together. Max further considers himself 'lucky' that he has a girlfriend who enjoys playing videogames and explains that although he plays some competitive games with his girlfriend (and he tells me that she is much better than him at puzzle games), they prefer to play co-operatively.

We played 2 or 3 hours a day, including the DS. Really I would say almost constantly. You know she would be sitting on the bed and I would be sitting here and we would be using the chat function on the DS which is quite fun.... She was on the left and we both had the messenger on 'Hey, what are you doing?' Flirtatious! We have like a few games that are particularly entertaining in two-player mode.

And Robert and his Wife, Ann, also describe a short 'gaming holiday' that they used to take before the children arrived. Ann explains:

We used to have pyjama days didn't we? Where we would plan, 'right, next weekend is a pyjama day'. And we would spend the whole day playing games and we would just stock up on food and we would play games the whole time. It was great. We should do that again. We did it a few times. Just play games the whole day.

During this time they would effectively shut themselves off from the outside world. The effect then would be to deliberately remove themselves from everyday routines in order to focus on playing games.

Players describe a type of play that is organised and planned for social occasions, using social play to mark a special occasion, time together, or a seasonal celebration, including play as part of a 'warm up' to a night out, or a wind down as a group of friends return from a night out. On the whole though, social play is less routine, and less common for these players that the other periods of play that they have described.

5.2.5. Binge play

Despite awareness of frictions caused by playing games to the detriment of time spent with family and partners, most of the adults that I spoke to described occasions when they would 'binge-play'. As Robert and Ann explained above, sometimes these occasions were planned, and as Susan also told me, other times extended play took place when there was nothing else to do. Duane also described play 'binges' when his wife is away with the children. But at other times, especially after buying a new game, or a new console, play would come to dominate players' lives. Robert provided an account that illustrates this. He told me that he would routinely plays games for an hour or two most evenings after the children were in bed (about 8pm). But at the time of my interviews with him he was playing *World of Warcraft* and both he and his wife identified that this was a game that was taking up an increasing amount of his time. Ann explains:

> *I tell him off, especially if he's going to work the next day. It's not very often, I would say once every three months, something like that. It tends to be with a new game. Or, a new level or something that is really hard and he's just got to beat it.*

This was a theme identified by several participants and seemed to accompany their 'confessions' of occasionally, or sometimes frequently playing for long periods. For adults living with families or partners there is often a 'domestic' cost to extended individual play. Mandy, a 25 year-old web developer articulated this friction most dramatically. Over the period of my interviews with her (which were a month apart) she told me she had been playing *Animal Crossing* on the DS for almost all the free time that she had. During the second interview she explained that this was becoming an increasing cause for concern for her boyfriend.

> *I had two weeks off, it was quite soon after I first spoke to you, and then I had 2 weeks off. First week I was active, I did everything, I went to Guildford for a friend's wedding. Second week, played Animal Crossing. For the week! Honestly. I think Michael did some DIY, but for me it was literally like you wake up, 'I just better check, see what's in the shop today', and we got broadband installed... Got broadband, doing the whole wifi thing, playing with people that like live in America.*

Mandy confesses at several points that her playing has been a 'problem' for her and that she is not happy with the situation. For example, she explains a friend visiting:

> *My friend came down all the way from Kent. I hadn't seen her probably in like 3 or 4 years. She's my friend from secondary school so I've known her for like 15 years and I really, really despised the fact that she made me go to a bloody nature reserve. She made me do stuff, she made me do*

> *other things and all I wanted to do was play on my game. All I wanted to do! And I resent everyone from preventing me. But I'm going to tone down the language now [laughs]. I hate everybody. I hate you all! [laughs].*

Similar themes emerged with many of the adults who were in a relationship. So extended play for many produces a feeling of imbalance with family life and is often a source of complaint from other member of the family. One result is that players may deliberately avoid games that they think might result in a binge that might cause them problems. Carl explains this about playing the Sims:

> *Well it is this time thing you know. Initially I had a lot of interest in it. I think there were two things that put me off it. The first was, to really see anything develop you have got to play for a long time, and that time element, I don't have a lot of time, you know, I need something that I can play and then drop. If it draws me too deeply then I'll never drop it and the wife will come and crack me across the back of the head and say you haven't done the washing up and it's half ten and I'm going to bed, get on with it.*

Players often explained that although they knew this behaviour to be problematic, when on a game binge, nothing else matters. For example Elaine and Susan both describe missing food, Carl describes losing track of time and Max even explains that he doesn't even notice that he needs the toilet. So players 'confess' to periods of time when play seems to take over their lives; when the routinely managed practices of fitting play into the rest of life breaks down. Typically this resulted from new games that players describe getting 'sucked into' resulting in prolonged play, often to the exclusion of even routine activities such as eating or sleeping. At times 'binges' last just a day or two with minimal disruption of other tasks. They may also result from extended play during 'dead-time', so that what starts off filling time, ends up dominating it with whole holidays spent playing a game.

5.2.6. Breaks from play

I have already mentioned how changes in life-circumstance might result in gaps in play, and seasonal variations in play, but there are also smaller breaks in play where players seem unable to 'get into' a game. Luke, a 29 year-old web developer, for example explained that when he bought a new game, or a new console with new games, he would tend to play for long periods, but at other times he would go for weeks without playing a game. He explains that currently he is 'bored with games':

> *Well maybe I've hit 30 and that's the end of it! Well I don't know. Well I do know, it's because I'm bored of the Xbox. I think I know what it can do now, and I've seen it, so I'm kind of loosing*

interest in it. And it will take a new machine to get me back into it probably. Exactly the same happened with the PS1, and Gamecube was the same.

Stephen, a 35 year-old project manager also explained this type of behaviour:

I sort of have phases, you know, I go into a newsagents and maybe see something, a new game, or something on the front of a magazine, or I'd hear from a - 'cause I like American Football, American Football isn't something that a lot of my friends enjoy, so most of my friends who I talk to about American Football are online friends, I'm a member of certain American Football communities, of which a lot of the people on there are also involved in gaming and they talk to me about it and you know they will mention certain games and that would sort of rejuvenate my interest in it and I might think 'hmm, track it down and buy it', and that's where I am now, so to speak. I like to dabble in it now and then, and if a particular game I have sparks an interest then I'll play more regularly.

Ann, explains that despite Robert's extended play with World of Warcraft, she is also going through something of a 'game drought' (her term) and that this is playing on her mind. She is actively looking for a new game to play, but in the mean time she explains that a book has been a substitute for games. This theme came out in several conversations. For example, Colin, a 19-year-old leisure worker describes getting so into a book that he doesn't play games.

I did go through a point where I stopped playing computer games for about a week, no actually probably a couple of weeks, whilst I was reading a book that I got so into. You know, so this book had just taken over – it was the Davinchi Code, I just got so into that. This was when I was living in my flat with my girlfriend and she was playing the games and I think her mother was round and they were both playing like Bust-a-Move or something, they got really into that and I was just sat there reading my book, and her mum was like 'oh, he's really into that book isn't he', and I'm like 'yeah, I'm bloody hooked on the damn thing'.... So occasionally I can get pulled away from games. I do stop playing them.

The spatial and temporal aspects of adult videogame play are complex. First players need to find space to play. For younger adults (as with children), this might mean a bedroom, but for older adults who share small accommodation with a partner, all space may be shared and space for games therefore needs to be negotiated. For those with larger, family homes, there is often an office or other space where a player may take themselves away from the family, but some note a reluctance to spend too much time away from commitments. Once space is negotiated there is still the matter of time. Many players seem to have regular play routines, often when a partner, or family are absent, or otherwise occupied. This might be in the evening, when children are in bed and household duties are complete, or in 'gaps'

between getting home from work and a partner returning. For some though, there is a lack of time and this results in them limiting play to 'simple' games and also finding smaller spaces and places to play (the car, or a few grabbed minutes here and there). Portable consoles offer potential solutions to such problems.

It is also clear from these conversations that regular routines are subject to other influences. Most obvious is the seasonal variation that results in limited play for many in the summer and longer periods of play in the winter. From this comes an explanation that games are something that you do to fill time that cannot be used for more 'interesting' or 'productive activities'. In the summer many players think they should be outside.

Further variation comes in the form of other breaks in routine, or 'special' play occasions. Special play is often social in nature. Players find occasions to play as family or as a group of friends. Players often claim a preference for this type of play and frequently give it special status, but for many it does not happen very often. Variation is also observed either because a particular game has become so compelling that play time is extended, or because players can't find a game that interests them, or simply because they have temporarily found something more interesting to do with their time. For example Luke looked forward to new consoles and would 'binge' on one when he bought it, eventually becoming 'fed up' with it. His interest in games would also be rekindled by the release of a new game, often a new version of a game that he has already played. Novelty is therefore key. In contrast to binges and routine play, and the seasonal ebbs and flows of play players also report times when they do not play at all, where digital game play simply drops from their regular activities and where consoles and games go unattended. These breaks may result from other activities, such as a heavy workload, or a new baby 'forcing out' time for play.

5.3. Disruptions to domestic life

I have already suggested that adults frequently need to manage play by finding suitable time and space for it, but that occasionally - even though they take steps against it - they find themselves playing more than they intended. In this section I want to consider in more detail those occasions where the management of play is unsuccessful. I will consider player's reflections on how play may result in missed time with family, in the failure to do other tasks, and often as a result of either of these, the ways in which digital game play becomes a cause of arguments in the home.

5.3.1. Missing time with family and friends

Single adults obviously have less restrictions on their time, however they may still find that play results in them missing time with friends. For example Grant explains what happened when he spent a considerable amount of time playing an online game.

> *I was very hard-core into a game called EVE online, stupidly big-time I was into that.... But I spent far too much time in it, far too much time. A day off would be typically, would be say get out of bed at ten, stroll in, have a look if some of my buy orders had been filled, see if some of the stuff I had up for sale was sold, check my training - because it had real time training, so to learn to fly a ship - actually in the game - if it took 3 days, 2 hours and 56 minutes for you to do that training, then it would actually be 3 days time until that training was finished. And the sad thing is that you would sit there and you would go 'right, what's the time, right that's going to finish at Friday 11 o'clockish. I'm going to be at work then, well what I'll do is log in that morning and change it to another skill so then I've only got 4 hours left of that, but I know I've got a three day skill and then when I get home I can log back in again and I'll change it back because when I get home I'll have the four hours'.... So I'd get up at ten, start doing that, the server always goes down at twelve or one for an hour, so that would be your time to get washed and eat, shave, whatever and then you are back there waiting with a ten minute countdown.... So as I say, then play from ten in the morning, until the server goes down. And then from one 'til eleven that night. And if that was my day off, that would be it. If I came in from work I would probably sit in the evening and play for five or six hours and that would be every night, every week, every month for 2 years.... The good thing with the game is that there was constant patching, they were making money off you so they could pay people to make constant new content.... It was £10 a month, but that's for, probably 40 hours a week, along with your 40 hour week work, along with sleeping and eating, along with going out on the piss. It was quite a busy, it sucked up all your free time that you didn't spend at the pub, or asleep.... I mean the only good thing about it was that it was in a stage of my life where I needed to save a lot of money, and I was only going out, when I really wanted to go out, rather than just going out 2 or 3 nights a week and getting pissed.*

When he reflects on this Grant has mixed feelings about his experience. On the one hand, he saved money and avoided going out 'just for the sake of it', but on the other hand, he was concerned about the time spent playing the game, and not doing other 'more social' things. Like Grant, Richard tells me that playing games saved him money because it stopped him going out and seems happier that this is a deliberate and useful way to use one activity to displace another.

> *I'd get to the point where in London I'd be out most nights, you know, going out every night and it was costing loads of money and at weekends, you know a weekend like this, and I could just kill a bit of time on that. And I thought, well I can afford it and everyone was going on about these things,*

I might as well get one and just see what it's like. You know, what was it, 250 quid with a couple of games and if you don't like it, well it's 200 quid I've spent, I could spend that in a couple of weekends, you know, going out drinking.... So I got the Xbox and I bought Fight Night, the boxing simulator.

Others seem clear that missed time with family is a problem. Matthew, for example, explains the need to protect time with his fiancé. Carl made reference to such a problem several times. At one point he explains in detail time spent playing *Morrowind.*

It was quite early on in my second marriage and I think that was when I realised that the reason I was wearing the screen on the top of my head was that I had been playing it too long. And at that time I would be up until two or three in the morning playing the game, you know, coming home from work and going 'I'm going to have an hour and I would probably pop my head out to have tea and I'd be sitting there thinking about Morrowind and actually it was quite a dangerous game, but I really did engage with that game, I got far too involved which was why it came off the machine.... Time ceased to exist. Completely. And when I said I was up until two or three in the morning, that's a Monday morning, or a Monday evening and I'd gone through to Tuesday morning and I had to go to work next morning and the Tuesday night I would be there, but it was all, that game had far too much horizon.... I think it was that getting really locked into the world that made it quite dangerous for me to play.

Duane explains something similar when a new baby arrived; a feeling that he was playing too much and not spending time with his family, and Stephen explains his wife's concerns about the time he spent playing a *Resident Evil* game that she bought him as a birthday present and that he 'got hooked on'. It's not just players with family that experience this compulsion and its effects. Susan, a student recalls an occasion when she ignored her friend so that she could continue playing *World of Warcraft.* She then notes how the game has resulted in her neglecting her study.

I wasn't overrun, it was just little things like, my friend, one time my friend was coming round and she rang on the doorbell, but I was in the middle of fighting and I was like, I didn't know what to do, so I just ignored it and carried on playing, and then like I got to a safe place, as soon as I could, ran downstairs and she was just about to leave, and I was like 'I'm so sorry, I'm in the middle of playing this game', and then I made her sit and watch me play it for another half hour until I'd finished what I was doing and I was thinking, 'this is not really fair on my friend here', and she didn't get it either, but yeah, no, and I have work to do and when I've got work to do I'd wake up at 6 in the morning so I'd get a full days work done, but what I'd do is wake up at 6 in the morning and be like 'right, I'll play on World of Warcraft for 2 hours, and then I'll start my work', and then it would be midday and I'd be like 'great, Ok' and then it would be like 'I'll have my lunch, then I'll play on World of Warcraft for just another half an hour, and then I'll do my work'.

and then my brother would come home from school and I wouldn't have done anything all day, apart from play.

So many players find that their time spent with others – friends and family – can be reduced because of play. Although occasionally players feel that restricting 'going out' is a good thing, for others there is a concern that games are affecting their relationships and they worry about this, often to the point where they self monitor they own play, including avoiding games that might lead to extended and disruptive play.

5.3.2. Failure to do other tasks

Even if it is not family time that is 'lost' to games, players complain of other activities that don't get done. For young adults, education might suffer and several of those I spoke to had memories of this. Like Susan, Elaine 'confesses' that she had frequently neglected her studies, favouring games to the 'dull' tasks of homework or revision and allowing herself to be drawn into games instead of study. Dylan recalled a similar experience from his youth. Dylan told me that he played games round his friend's house most days and for his peer group this was their main form of shared social time. In common with others he exhibits mixed feelings about the time spent on play as a child, on the one hand recognising that he played more than he 'should', but on the other hand declaring that he enjoyed this time. Mandy also has a story of neglected study in favour of playing digital games. Mandy explains that she has long desired to be an interior decorator and has started a correspondence course in interior design, but that the course has been neglected since she started playing *Animal Crossing*.

I actually do have other things that I should be doing. I started an open learning course in interior design. Have I done any of it? [laughs] Noooooo.... I actually have to do coursework and complete my projects and stuff like that and I haven't touched a thing of it, you know. It's all just sat there neatly in a pile and everything. I haven't touched any of it. I haven't done anything for it. What have I been doing? I've been playing on my DS.... Well I've kind of stopped going out as much [laughs]. It, well it saves me money, yeah! I've stopped going out as much. And I need to do. I've paid however much money - like a lot of money to do this course, like this open learning course in interior design - and I just haven't done it. I dunno, I should be doing that but no. [laughs].

It may also be routine tasks that get neglected. When we meet, Matthew tells me that he has ironing to do, but was actually playing a game before I arrived. Malcolm explained at length his dislike of DIY. Even though he acknowledges that there are a number of jobs around the house that need immediate attention, he notes that he is likely to play games instead. Alex likewise avoids DIY in favour of games. He explains:

Well the favourite one I've got at the moment that I keep going back to is the original Halo. I mean I wouldn't have actually picked that game but it came as a bundle when I bought my Xbox, because it was on a special offer, you know it was there, and yeah, you know what I find is that is a brilliant sort of, a brilliant sort of 'forget about it'. I mean I'm supposed to be decorating the bathroom at the moment and if I get a guilt trip that I should be there painting the coving I'll go and put Halo on for an hour, play that, then it's time to go and get the kids tea ready, and oh, I haven't done anything on the bathroom, but, yeah I'll feel guilty about it later but while I was playing the game I wasn't agonizing over the fact that I should have been in there decorating. So that, you know that is something in the last couple of months that is probably a prime example of total immersion or escapism.

If student can neglect their studies, it is also possible that players neglect paid work so that they can play. Alex, who is now a househusband, recalls a time when he was working, but took time off in order to play a game.

I once took a week off work to complete a game called Vandal Hearts. I took a week's sick. And, and I was in a job were I had, where I actually had the luxury of, I had an amount of work to do rather than a set amount of hours to do it in, so under the guise of saying effectively that I was working from home finishing some work which took me I don't know whatever it was a day or two days, so the last five days when I was so say completing all this stuff I just played this game non-stop. And I nearly got divorced over it. You know my wife thought it was, morally that this was a terrible thing to do. Yeah, I did it from start to finish in five days.

For those with limited money the issue of the cost of games and related hardware also produced accounts of other things being 'sacrificed'. For example Alex explains that the amount spent on games had been instead of buying a newer car, and Douglas, explains the financial 'scarifies' made to create his game collection. As a result of an attempt to acquire the 'ultimate' games collection, Douglas has got himself into considerable dept. He explains that he needs to get his life 'sorted out' and although he doesn't blame games for the 'mess' he is in, he feels that playing games may prevent him from making the changes that he needs to. A recent break from playing games has resulted in some re-evaluation of their role for Douglas.

Sometimes when you play them they can take over your life and there are certain things that I've recognised that I need to change in my life so that if I go back to paying games then I'd be avoiding doing those things.... I mean I don't know if I want to go into it, but obviously being 31, a lot of my friends from school are getting married and one of my friends recently had a baby, and a lot of them are doing much better paid jobs than me and I'm sit stuck here, living with my parents because I'm on crap wages, doing crappy admin job. I don't really have much of a social network beyond colleagues at work and when I have time to reflect on that I think 'shit, I've got to do

something about it'. And stuff like playing games and watching films and spending money on games and films is not doing anything about that.

Play can result in the neglect of other activities. Sometimes it is the simple routines of sleeping and eating that are missed, and both Susan and Elaine noted that this was a potential benefit; a sort of dieting aid. Other times it is routine household tasks (ironing, or washing-up) that are left to a partner. Studies may also be neglected and even socialising with others may be avoided in order to play games. Again, not going out may be seen as advantageous because it results in money being saved, but recognising a potential for conflict, players adopt specific strategies such as the temporary removal of games from a computer when important work needs to be done, or avoiding buying games that players suspect might result in excessive play. In these ways play is actively managed, but there is also an explicit recognition that more 'useful ' work has been neglected and at times this may result in some effort being taken to hide the neglect of other tasks from family members and therefore create periods of 'secret' game play.

5.3.3. Arguments over games

Many of the adult players that I spoke to recalled having arguments over their game play. Partners often comment on hours spent on routine play and especially when a player has a binge. Carl frequently mentioned this tension and recalls his feelings after a row with his wife over games.

I remember having, one or two rows over it, quite noisy rows and it being quite early on in my marriage I was thinking, no, that's not right, there are other priorities that are equally as fun, but that early on in the marriage, it, the games became something to monitor [laughs].

He explains that as a result of recognising the negative aspects of games, he now consciously avoids games that will lead to excessive play and therefore arguments. Mandy expressed the strongest concerns that her playing is actually damaging her relationship with her boyfriend. This is one example she gave of an argument on a day they we due to go to a friend's wedding:

So I'm sat there and I'm trying to connect, I'm trying to dry my hair and straighten my hair at the same time and Michael is like 'come on, put that away now because we've got to go', and I'm like 'yeah, give me one minute', you know, and he's like 'no seriously Mandy, put it away because we've got to go, we've got to do this, you've got to do this, you're not even dressed', you know. 'Right, ok, I'll be there in a minute, I'm just picking up an item for god's sake, leave it'. And then, I'm in the middle of saying 'I'm coming over to get my Christmas tree' or whatever it was, I think it was a Christmas tree, so I'm like 'Ok, that's cool, my gates are open, I've got to go in ten minutes

anyway, so it will be fine'. But I couldn't connect..., and it says 'for some strange reason you can't go out right now', So right, get back on the website, but the website's not working, what's going on and you know. He's like in here doing all the washing and you know doing things that I should be doing, well not that I should be doing, but you know, lately he's been doing everything because lately I've been spending too much time doing that, or doing my work. And work is fair enough, but for him to come in and find me playing Animal Crossing when I'm supposed to be doing my work and he's doing the washing, the dinner, the ironing, the dustbins and everything. And so yes I'm sat there and 'right, I can't connect, what's happening' because I really need to get this item, I can't wait any longer, I need to get this item... and I was tapping away, really getting annoyed and really slamming my keyboard 'cause obviously if you hit the keys harder it's bound to make it work, you know. Popped my head round here and noticed that the phone line was out and I went ballistic. I honestly just 'I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'VE JUST DONE THAT, RAH, RAH, RAH, I'VE BEEN SPENDING TEN MINUTES, I COULD HAVE BEEN THERE AND GOT IT', and he's like 'Mandy, we need to go now', and I'm like 'YEH, ALRIGHT, RAH, RAH, RAH'. So I went to connect again and he'd obviously taken it out again, as soon as my back was turned he'd taken it out again, 'I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU, NAH, NAH'. And this was actually the day that we were supposed to be going up to the wedding as well. I thought we would have enough time to fit in me going to Accessorise to pick up a bag, or something like that, fit in travelling up to Surrey and everything, and it just didn't work out like that. My priority on that day was picking up my Christmas tree. And I overreacted somewhat. I didn't speak to him and I suggested that Michael didn't come to the wedding because he obviously doesn't understand that I have, you know, that I find it a stress relief. It's my fun and he's taking away my fun because he didn't understand.

Despite knowledge that game play can results in the disruption of 'normal' family routines and steps to avoid this, conflict does seem to occur. Players are able to recall times when they have had an argument about their game playing habits, even those with partners that also play. For some these arguments go though periods of regularity that ultimately result in changes in behaviour. Others experience a lower level tension, or nagging about what partners see as undesirable behaviour. Overall, many players complain that they have partners that find it hard to understand why they would want to spend their time playing games. Conflict often results from missed time with family. For some this is a regular occurrence. They recognise that their routine play physically and mentally separates them from the family and that this creates an ongoing friction that occasionally results in a row. For others this is a temporary breach in normal family relations. At the extreme, Mandy worries that the regular disagreements may actually be harming her relationship.

Through these practices we may note the diversity of play experiences that seem to argue against any useful reduction of videogames to a single discourse. In a sense this is as play itself and also as consumption. We see in these diverse practices the potential for many different play forms and for both a defence of videogames as social play, but also a warning

on the potential for videogames to disrupt the routines of everyday life in ways that disturb players. In the next section I want to consider how players make sense of this diversity in more detail.

Chapter 6: Adults' experiences of videogames

Specific experiences both account for, and result from the practices that I have already described, but the connections are sufficiently complex to disallow a simple mapping of play-occasion onto experience. However experiences of play are in an iterative relationship to the practices that develop over time and therefore also to the broader individual histories of play. I will assess what it is that players claim to be doing whilst playing and what they feel they get from this. I will consider experiences of achievement that 'compensate' for the inadequacies of life such as stressful work, a lack of material goods, a lack of time, or general feelings of boredom that result from a sense of underachievement in life, which games may partially and temporarily reduce or negate. This includes games assisting creativity amongst individuals who again feel that a lack of creative opportunity is afforded by work, their domestic arrangement, their prowess as a consumer, or their own physical and mental skills. I will also examine the ways in which players report games as a strategy to stimulate their imagination either by exploring and maintaining daydreams, or visiting broader and more ambitious fantasy, or by simply 'going somewhere else' for a while. I will also show that these attempts to escape mundane, material reality, or to compensate for a life without satisfactory achievement may be undermined by experiences of play and by reflections on play itself that occasionally result in frustration, humiliation, guilt and even a sense that the careful balance between the rest of their life-world and their gamely escapes may break down into experiences of compulsion and addiction.

6.1. Play and achievement

As adults recall their experiences of playing digital games in detail frequent reference is made to a feeling of achievement. I want to examine this in more detail. I will start by exploring aspects of game-play that adults describe as a form of 'catharsis', usually following a 'bad day at work' or some other negative experience. The result is that players look to games to 'counteract' or forget negative experiences; a form of 'balancing'. Players also attempt to control boredom through play. Having 'nothing to do' is often experienced as a negative situation and games are felt by some to fill this 'pointless' time with experiences that provide a sense of achievement. At other times players feel an overall lack of creativity in their lives and this may result in the use of games as a way to produce a creative output. Finally, players also explain in some detail the satisfaction they get from beating a computer, but indicate the limitations of this form of achievement that results in a desire to find other human opponents.

6.1.1. Counteracting bad experiences

In mapping out the temporal and spatial aspects of play I have already described play that takes place following some negative experience as a way to 'distance' the player from negative feelings. Here I expand on this. Most of the players that I spoke to described a type of play that is 'cathartic', often 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 provides an account of this.

> *I think playing the games has some form of therapeutic - it may even be, I mean a classic case is that I'm often heard swearing at myself, or at the cat or whatever when I'm on the Playstation, I've got the Playstation in our spare bedroom and quite often 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. You know, it gives you a feeling of exhilaration I guess. I don't know whether it's blowing a zombie's head off or whether it's scoring a goal or a touchdown for your team, but it does give you that thrill. There's no doubt about it. That thrill has been there since day one when I was probably in my first arcade.*

Max tells me something similar as we play *Star Wars Rebel Strike* together.

> *Well as I said I play this for the quick fix. So if I've had a bad day, I don't want to have a worse day by losing at a game that someone programmed. So I just go for something that I think is going to be very easy to beat you know. Play maybe five or ten minutes and then everything's OK after that.... As you can see there is like an auto aim. Look, I'm not even putting much effort into it, I'm just running around and shooting. Ah, this is like a big gun I think I can use that. See, do you see what I mean. I mean it doesn't take much; this will calm me down for a while.*

For others the problems that games are seen as a solution to are more enduring. Stuart, a 57 year old academic, provides a detailed account of the way in which digital games – in this case *Morrowind* - may compensate for ongoing problems he experienced 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, either an increase in skill, or the respect of the other players in the game.

Then in a later interview Stuart returns to tell 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.... Because games are designed, well I know it's a bit of a cultural cliché but, but a lot of it has to do with justice and goodness.... 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.

Mandy also recognises a lack of control in her material life and the way that this can be compensated for in a game. She tells me about her neighbour and contrasts this to her 'escape' into *Animal Crossing*.

Well, in Animal Crossing, you know like I said, you can interact with your neighbours. It's all kind of really cheerful and it's all very pretty and it's like the utopia lifestyle and you're like, 'yeah, this is the life'. You know I'm having problems with my neighbours upstairs. This mad woman is apparently trying to sue me for cooking because she is like concerned that the smells from my kitchen is going up into her kitchen and you know, at three in the fucking morning. I mean who in their right mind cooks at three in the morning? And we've had like letters from her solicitors going 'bu, bu bu'..., but this woman's mental and I just sit there and I think, 'oh yeah, I can make my neighbours in my game leave, like by hitting her over the head'. Now obviously I might get into trouble, but everyone is so happy and cheerful, ok they can be kind of irritating and stuff and when they are going on about furniture all the time, you know, what kind of furniture they want. But you know at the end of the day it's all, it's all like the perfect lifestyle and why can't the real world be like this?

Many players find that when life gets them down, games help them to cope, or to forget for a while. In particular players report that games are routinely used to help them to relax, or unwind after a days work. But more than this they report times when life is more than just 'routinely stressful', 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. For some an absorbing game simply takes you mind off events. It stops negative thoughts repeating in the mind because the mind must fully occupy itself with the game. The need here is therefore for instant, involving games. And the result is that the individual is sufficiently distanced from

the problems of the day that they may return to normal family life refreshed. Cathartic play may also contain more subtle reflections on the problems of the day. Difficult customers, or bullying bosses, or even problem partners may be symbolically dealt with through the destruction of a first person shooter, for example. Alternatively the feeling of a lack of choice, or a lack of control, or a lack of achievement may be reduced by playing a game that does provide these things.

6.1.2. Overcoming frustration and boredom

If some experiences are something to be 'forgotten' through digital play, players also find times in their life when they have nothing to do or think about. In these circumstances they may turn to games as a 'meaningful' activity. Again, I have already described games as filling time, but players explain more about this 'mental management' task. For example Alex, a househusband describes being bored at home, but also needing to take his mind off various dull D.I.Y jobs that may need doing. He does this by getting involved with games:

> *There's the games that you just pick up every now and again 'cause it's raining and you're trying to distract yourself from the fact that your gutter is overflowing so you put on a game that requires, you know, 100% attention because it stops you worrying about the drip, drip, drip coming through the attic. You know that you can't do anything about it at that particular moment, so you know, there's that.... you know, frantic Star Wars Battlefront, shoot 'em up where while you're playing you really don't have time to think of anything else, do you? So in that way they are a form of escapism, you know, if you are having a bad weekend, or you are trying to put something off, there is nothing better than playing a game for an hour because it just pushes it completely from you, from your mind. They are like Mills and Boon for men really. [laughs].*

The need to add 'excitement' to life is also a reason Duane gives for getting back into games as an adult.

> *I was kind of looking for a bit of excitement elsewhere, not mad excitement, but just something for myself. I like time on my own doing things I enjoy. Maybe that's a bit selfish, but if I find the time, this is what I like to do. It stimulates my mind in others ways.*

Although for many players with family the issue may be often finding time to play, for some players, boredom is often experienced. Life for them was occasionally or frequently experienced as 'dull routine'. With no clear aims to occupy their time individuals seek them out games that fill this role because they take up lots of time with little awareness of it passing. Carl also identifies times when he plays a game whilst doing another ambiguous, or boring tasks where achievement is hard to experience. A game may allow a feeling of

achievement that compensates. He returns to this topic several times in the interview, finally reflecting:

> *At times if I'm writing something that is fairly heavy, something which is a bit academic or that just needs a bit of concentration, if I don't take a break and go and do something completely different then I just get bogged down, it just stops, it stops happening. The creative process just leaves you and you might as well just close it all down. Whereas I have found that if you take a break, I find that if you go off and make a cup of coffee you still haven't had a break so I'll pop a game on or call a window back up when I've got a game running in the background and then it's just totally different, but it's still quite creative though. Your mind is working on something different but creative, the creative process is still there.*

Mike, a 20-year-old student explains something similar when doing assignments, but with longer periods of play 'reward' to 'balance' working on an assignment.

> *I'm a very fidgety person, naturally as it is and basically I can't keep my attention on stuff that I don't find incredibly interesting at the time.... If I find something boring, there is no chance of me being interested in it.... So with assignments, by the time I come to write them I have been doing them for like a whole year and, well like 5 months, 6 months something like that so I deserve a break. That's how I justified it.., I had done so much work I could take a day out and play a bit of WoW. And you get an enjoyment factor whilst you're playing it. It's not - actually once you stop, you don't have an enjoyment factor, It's like you stop and think, 'right, I've just wasted 4 hours of my life' - but whilst you're playing it's great. If everything is going well and you haven't died and you've earned shit loads of cash. If you've made a powerful friend, or got a group together, you feel good.*

Ironically however, players note that games themselves may become boring. For example Luke's general discontent with games and desire for a new console and Ann's gaming 'drought' that has resulted from not being able to find a suitable game to play. Just as Carl and Mike describe using games as a way to make work tasks bearable, players also describe getting bored with long complex games and needing some distraction from them. Elaine, for example, finds this in Halo and 'messes around' as distraction from the main mission of the game. She describes playing Halo in co-op mode with a friend. The game itself becomes boring and so Elaine and her friend take a break from the complexity of the main task.

> *One of the fun things isn't actually playing the actual game, but it's shooting each other and then running away. Well we had just finished defeating one of these boss levels and he decided to start jumping off this wall randomly, he just does things like that from time to time, and I was just like, I tried to shoot him and we ran round each other and I think I ended up falling in the water and dying and we had to do the whole thing again.*

Players identify that life occasionally presents them with tasks that they simply don't want to do. Not just the washing up, or the ironing, but DIY projects, or revision for exams, or a complex and unrewarding report for work. At these times games may be used to make these tasks more bearable. It may be that games are a reward for the partial completion of a task. In the case of writing a report, or revising for an exam where progress is hard to judge, games seem to allow a feeling of 'creative distraction' when they are played alongside the 'main' task'. But unlike breaks for food or to watch television (identified as alternatives), games have the advantage of 'keeping the brain working' and physically keeping the individual at the computer. There are specific types of games that are good for this task and they are games where interventions by the player may be sporadic without disrupting the game and without 'sucking in the player'. So big, complex, boring tasks can be supplemented by brief periods of play with obvious rewards, perhaps with the game running in the background. As games themselves have developed into big, complex and sometimes boring tasks we find that players use a similar strategy of balancing the large complex task with something more controllable and 'instant'. They take mini-breaks from the main aim of the game as well. For example Luke explains that the free-roaming aspect of GTA serves as a break from the complexity of missions, or as a wind-down after a bout of play that has ended in frustration or underachievement.

6.1.3. Being creative

In discussing the issue of play to relieve boredom, several players articulated a type of play that seemed to be a specific type of compensation for a more general ennui, or a specific desire to compensate for some negative or demoralising experience. For example, Carl explains at length his desire to create things in a game, not just as part of a way to manage complex work tasks, but as a pleasurable activity in itself. Carl explains that he enjoys building things in a game. He also notes that his job seldom provides him with such opportunity.

> *I am actually creating something. In the world we live in often there is very little opportunity to create. The only other time I get it, I'm, - my wife is actually quite a good artist, she paints very well in watercolour 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. When we go on holiday, we go to a part of Wales which is quite rugged and visceral in the way it looks, and I love painting it, but when you look at the paintings I have done you can just about recognise it. I've done paintings where I have drawn a bird - I've tried to draw a bird in the middle of the detailed scenery - but it doesn't come out. 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 wanted to use that word, it's Lego again, you know with Lego you put it together, but 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. You can just change some of the parameters which is what I get from Command and Conquer because I can edit the ini files, so I can change all the parameters. I want to build something and I want to build those walls. I want to put turrets on the end of those walls and I want to build something that is going to last for a while and that is what keeps me being drawn back to the game at the end of the day.... I am actually taking nothing and creating something that if I play with it will actually last and if I was vain enough I could show other people that came round or I could take screen shots in games and I have done that occasionally and sent it to my mate Phil, who we talked about right at the beginning, we used to play Elite together and we still play similar games and he lives in London and I live down here and occasionally I send him a screen shot and I say 'I did this' and, you know he'll send me one back and show me how awful what I have done is. But it is the fact that there is that creative thing there.

Robert also explains a pleasure in making things in games and contrasts this with his work. He works as a computer programmer and during our discussion, the issue of work and play both being based on computers came up. The difference appears to be control over the creative process, or 'ownership' of the project, and the absence of risk; work carries with it a responsibility that play does not. Max also expresses this desire to be creative but without 'pressure'. He shows me a game he is playing - *Rollercoaster Tycoon* - and explains what he gets from it. He tells me that he only plays in 'sandbox' mode, ignoring the competitive part of the game because he isn't interested in running the park, only in building it.

I don't like the scenario challenges, you know where you have to manage the park. I just want to build a theme park that I would like to go to basically.... Entry is free to my park. All the rides are free, yeah. So I built them roller coasters and rides and just hope they have a good time.... Building it with not having to worry how much stuff costs, I think that's why I play it. That's the enjoyment factor right there... And also being sort of the Almighty figure ruling your own world and that's why I want them to be happy in my world, you know.

And Grant, like Carl, explains the pleasure he gets from modding and therefore creating new games. During the interview he spends considerable time explaining the details of the mods he has done as part of an online community.

In the last two weeks I've been purely playing Star Trek Armada 2, which is a 6 year old game now, pretty dated on the graphics front now to be perfectly honest, 6 years is a long time, but purely 'cause there's a huge modding community out there making new ships for the game and 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. To be honest Stargate games, there are none, and never have been. So it's actually sit down and play something you like sort of thing, and have it just like you want it. But it is actually probably more doing the task rather than playing the game.

Individuals may feel their lives to be occasionally or frequently devoid of opportunities for creativity. Again, this is about routine imposing itself and a lack of an ability to grasp anything meaningful that results from work. Games provide one creative outlet as an alternative to writing, painting, dancing, singing, or similar aesthetic pursuits. Many lack the skills for other creative work, or the time or inclination to develop them, but games flatter our abilities. Using games, players are able to make something satisfying and therefore feel that they have expressed themselves. This might be in terms of building some grand project such as in a god game like *Sim City*, or by contributing to a modding community and therefore also getting the recognition of others for their creative output. Or it might just be creative tinkering with the code to see what emerges. Something that marks this type of play from more competitive approaches to achievement is that players report avoiding scoring in the game. They may use cheats for example, so that they eliminate competition, or they may use various 'sandbox' modes where the competitive aspects of the game are suspended.

6.1.4. Beating the computer and task completion

Several players noted that a sense of accomplishment is something that differentiates videogames from other media consumption, or even actually from other aspects of their daily lives. Richard attempts to explain the difference for him between playing a game and watching TV with reference to rugby videogames and live matches. Initially he states a preference for live matches on TV, but then explains the satisfaction he gets from 'beating the Xbox'. Later in the interview he expands on this.

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. If I could go kayaking as a time filler, I would, but it's not feasible.... I haven't got time to do that, but I've got half an hour, I can turn the Xbox on have a quick nine holes on tiger words, 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.

Alex - an experienced gamer - attempts a more considered explanation of 'achievement games', contrasting them with the 'distraction games' that might simply take his mind off something.

> *Well you take things like Galactic Civilisations, or Prepare for War, you know they're basically a board game on a computer so basically you're back to the old turn taking, so the fact is that you have the time to plan your move and then you can watch what your opponent is doing and there is so much depth you know.... I mean they're are 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.... I want to see the process that has occurred and be able to learn and devise tactics for next time against it. So that's where the joy of sort of turn-based strategy comes for me.*

But Alex also reflects that there is a programmer 'behind the game' that he is really playing against.

> *I'm a max-out player. I like everything to be - I like him to have the best sword the best armour. I like to do every single little quest. I like to find every little bit of treasure. I like to kill every monster I like to just, you know to just everything that's there. I like to find all the hidden bonuses and that sort of thing.... It's just completeness isn't it. It's just the challenge because the programmers have put it there and you know that's what I've paid for.*

Alex confirms that the point in games is that through this process of understanding how to progress, a player gains a sense of both control and over and recognition of their achievements, and that this is a 'deal' between the consumer and the programmers. Later in the interview he makes a similar point after describing apparently completing *Baulder's Gate*, only to find that there is always another target for experience points that can increase a character's level.

> *The guy designing the game actually has flattered me because he has absolutely read what motivates me. He knows what a person playing this game wants and he's acknowledged it by doing that. What they want is more points and what they want is the highest level, you know and he's acknowledged the frustration of getting that, you know.... But it's that acknowledgement and I suppose we all like to feel we're part of a group of like-minded individuals don't we. You know we assume that people are entertained by the things that we like and have similar drives and ambitions and I think that's actually quite a subtle but, you know an entertaining way of tipping, of tipping a*

hat to the fact.... Yeah, me and the programmer. It's like some, you know, whatever distance separates us we're, we know each other.

The idea of achievement through accumulation of things was also identified by Mandy in describing several games, but particularly in *Animal Crossing* where she collects themes. Her goal is a complete theme having a full set of virtual furniture is experienced as an achievement. Like Grant's desire to be acknowledged by other modders and Alex's imagined recognition of the programmers, Mandy also experiences recognition of achievement when other online players appreciate what she has done. Mandy shows me her virtual home in *Animal Crossing* and takes me through the various themes before explaining:

Yes, so I have all my themes, like my back garden theme and my western theme a beach theme and a camping theme, because I hadn't seen a camping theme before and she [another online player] came over and said 'oh your house is really cool', and I went back to hers and she had a space theme because she said 'I really wanted a themed room, like one of yours'.

However several players note that the complexity of some games seems to undermine a sense of achievement forcing them to use cheat codes, or walkthroughs. To some degree we see this in Max's use of Railroad tycoon in 'sandbox' mode for example. The need to carefully manage a budget undermines his desire to achieve completion of the theme park. Others note that the sense of achievement from finishing the game may be rather short lived. Luke, for example explains that although you feel some achievement at finishing a level, he forgets games easily.

I guest you are pleased that you have achieved it. I guess I feel like I've achieved something, that's the point. I feel like I've figured it out, that you've beaten the game on that level.... And you have the desire to see the next bit. Now part of it is just to see how have they done it, there's always a technical element in it for me.... But I do kind of pass over them quite quickly. I couldn't say I remember the time I beat so and so or such and such.

Towards the end of some complex games, achievement may be replaced by relief. For example, Dick, who describes himself as a skilled and experienced game player, explains what it feels like to finish a game and to negotiate this line between achievement and frustration.

I wouldn't play a game just for the ending really. It's just kind of you've reached the end of the road and then that's it, the games over. Well apart from Ninja Garden which I was glad when I finished it because it was so hard. I was glad when I finished that, just so I could say I finished it, because I know so many people haven't.... It was an achievement, because it was so hard, but it

was so hard it was frustrating and it wasn't even fun any more, after a point, it just kind of got to that point, it was still kind of enjoyable, but in the end I was just glad to have done it.

Alex also explains that his sense of achievement has diminished as a result of playing so many games for so many hours.

Well part of it, obviously there's the sense of achievement but I have to say that's diminished a lot lately since you know, than it used to. Mostly it's a case of right, that's that done, so I've had my 15 quid out of it, now what else can I do to the game to you know to maximise the value for money [laughs].

Other players note that with some games – especially sports games – a sense of achievement is undermined because players learn 'easy' ways to beat the computer and once a win is certain, the sense of achievement diminishes. Richard explains his desire for a challenge, but also the ways in which that challenge is undermined by predictability.

I played [Rugby World Championship] 2005 and I probably spent, you know, 1000 plus hours on 2005 and I won everything you could win.... I played every scenario, I've played the worst teams against the British lions, or Australia and I've beaten them. Now I've got 2006 which I hated when I first got it because it's so hard, because 2005, I learnt tricks that you could win, you know, 5 times out of 10 I could score a try by doing a certain move, which was rubbish really and I used to kind of, under pressure to win I would, well not cheat, because it's part of the game, it's an established rugby move that you can see any team doing, it's just that the programmers obviously weren't from a rugby background.... Because it's a move that you could try once in a game and when they're on to you, you won't be able to do it. So you're exploiting the AI. But then I'd get into a situation when I'd make myself not do that move, because I don't want to beat the computer like that. But it got to the point where I would go through 40 or 50 matches, 20 minutes halfs..., and I'd go for match and match without loosing.

And then later in the interview he returns to the 'benefit' of the new version.

It's nice to win every match, you know, but then there's no satisfaction in it. Because I've won it so many times without having to save it any more, so it's quite nice now to get beaten, it's refreshing to actually have a challenge and go for a 4 match streak where I have been beaten.... The games are slightly different, so the AI has learnt a bit, but now I've learnt to learn the AI, so I can now try different tactics and mix it up a bit and now I'm much better than I was and it's satisfying that I've had to learn to do it.

Players express the experience of achievement in different ways. For some it comes from the recognition of being able to do something that you couldn't before. Playing games as a visible acquisition of skill. This means that games must first produce failure, or the possibility of

failure such that players are able to experience completion of tasks as 'non-trivial'. Hence players talk about the 'learning curve' in games. As part of the experience of achievement, they expect to lose a bit at first. Achievement is also experienced in terms of control. Some players contrast the clear rules of a game – rules that reward ability and penalise mistakes in a consistent way – with other lived experiences that are full of contingency such that links between ability, effort and success are often difficult to grasp. Games allow this experience of 'fairness' in various ways. Collecting things in games may be another way that achievement may be experienced. As a game progresses the player can see that they have accumulated more of something, be it tokens, or in-game commodities such as more powerful weapons, armour, or abilities, or even cars and simulations of other consumer goods. A score, or level progression may be a more simple ways. Players also note a desire for recognition of their achievement from an imagined programmer, or an online community, for example. So in a life made up of routines, and with what seems to be 'random' success and failure and only vague markers of achievement, games have a sort of predictability that allows for easy monitoring of achievement. Having finally completed a complex game is something a player can store as a significant event in life. Something they can always say they have done. But some note that in reaching for this completion there are problems. In the end, games may themselves become a burden; something that *needs* to be finished rather than something that is a source of ongoing reward. Failure here is also a risk. It can result in frustration and humiliation. Alternatively, once the computer is well and truly beaten, that sense of achievement may be lost as the real world returns to focus and the perspective that 'it is only a game' returns. And with sports games that may be played many times, players may learn 'exploits' which ensure that they always comfortably win. In these circumstances too, initial achievement soon fades to be replaced by a predictability that results in a loss of the sense of achievement (but that may also be regained by acquiring the latest game).

6.1.5. Beating another human

There seem to be two broad types of play with other people. In a later section I deal with play as socialising, but here I describe play against a human opponent as a solution to the problem that Richard illustrated above; the predictability that comes with playing against AI for long periods. Duane provides an account of this. He describes himself as expert at *Counterstike* online and indeed shows me a game where he easily wins. He tells me why he likes this.

> *Computers will never do things that real people will do, because they are so unpredictable, and also, you've got to allow for the fact that sometimes you mess things up. Whereas a computer can't do that, it just can't. If I press left when I meant to press right, it will be something mental rather than an actual command. So even though they go on about artificial intelligence and all this sort of*

thing, it will never get close to humans because humans have too many faults to actually be predictable.

Duane also notes that he never talks to the people he plays against online, he just wants to beat them. He also rejects single player off-line games because for him there is no point in just beating a computer. Duane demonstrates his approach. He logs onto a game and starts playing. There is no introduction to the other players. He plays two games and wins, then shows me his position on the high score table. He then logs off without acknowledgement of the other players. Stephen also explains the value of playing against another human, but recognises a difference between social and instrumental human opponents.

I bought an American football game which was the first game I played online, 'cause at that time it was free.... I played it online and it was a great experience. Going back to what I said earlier about games having like a linear feeling, especially in sports games when you know what the computer is going to do. When you're playing against another human you get that random element thrown in.... So playing against another human was a great challenge and I think going back to having the Commodore you used to have the most fun when playing against friends and this was like having an unlimited amount of friends when you are on the Internet.... But then I didn't know any of these people. I never really got to know any of them.

Some players are reflective about the programmer when they play. They recognise that when playing against the computer, they are actually playing against an unseen and mostly unknown programmer who has taken the trouble to understand and predict play behaviour. Players note experiences where 'the programmer' has tricked or flattered them for example and therefore accurately predicted their actions in the game. But players may also get to know the programmer as they play and in doing so come to 'undo' the unpredictability of the game and therefore its enjoyment. Understanding the fragile nature of achievement against the computer means that some players seek human opponents to beat. This is not the same as social play. Here players are clear that they neither know, nor really want to know the people that they play with, they simply value that fact that humans are unpredictable and 'make mistakes', or 'get lucky'. But unlike the randomness felt in life outside of play, the game applies the rules consistently. So playing against other humans is a way to improve on the AI built into a game, to add complexity and introduce contingency.

Players gain a satisfaction from feeling that through playing digital games they have achieved something. Sometimes a feeling of being defeated drives them to this. So a day at work where they feel no achievement may be compensated for by playing a game. And players also find that rather than 'waste' time during their lives where they can see no productive action, they can play a game and therefore use these small bits of time to achieve something. Achievement is also experienced in a larger way as a sense of progress; of having

finished a level (on the way to some greater goal), or having accumulated more of something. And there is also a sense of achievement in having made something. Games allow players to create things and some comment that they lack the opportunity or skill to create otherwise. And here we also see that at times the games seem to work against the players desire for certain types of satisfaction. Players must therefore find ways round this, often using exploits or cheats or walkthroughs. Unfortunately however, players may recognise that the accomplishments of games are short lived. There is little lasting sense of achievement, especially for experienced players (although some take a long-term pride in having completed a particularly difficult game). Repetitive play often results in an erosion of the sense of achievement through play. With sports games in particular players come to find ways of 'always' winning and therefore reducing their feeling of achievement. Some find that a solution is to re-introduce the contingency of another human opponent, or alternatively to buy a new version of the game (or new game entirely) in order to re-experience challenge and therefore achievement.

6.2. Play and the imagination

Many of the players that I spoke to referred to aspects of their play as 'escapism' and through the quest to experience achievement I have already suggested that players find aspects of their everyday lives that are unsatisfactory to them. In this section I want to explore the experience of using games to 'escape' from material reality in more detail. These experiences tend to encompass much of the longer periods of play that players talk about (rather than the 'quick fix' catharsis of the previous section), but also include attempts at nostalgic play as a way to capture something of the pleasure of early experiences with digital games and childhood in general. Escapism also takes the form of the maintenance and enactment of daydreams; aspects of people's lives that they would like to be true, or that they once desired, but now cannot hope to achieve in the material world. I also consider fantasies that individuals have that are beyond what they might experience in the material world, but which may have been stimulated by books or films, and finally I describe a fourth form of escapism where players look to digital games to experience novelty, often in the form of visiting new places as a virtual tourist. Here the aim is simply to be removed from material reality, to be somewhere else and see something new. And in the final part of this section I consider how players think about the time they spend in game 'worlds'.

6.2.1. Nostalgia (being as you were)

I have already described the attraction of old games consoles as the basis for collections, but most players I spoke to – especially those who had been playing since childhood – had also

re-played old games. For example Matthew describes playing *Championship Manager* as a child, and then acquiring and playing the same game as an adult.

> *And to this day I'm still a massive football manager fan.... And I actually got it for my laptop. I got Championship Manager 94, 95, you know. And it's not so much - it's not a great management game, well it was then, but you know compared to what you've got now - but it's just more the retro thing about going back and doing it. I sit and play, it's good fun, It kind of takes you back to be honest, to whenever you were that age, kind of thing.*

Later Matthew tells me more about playing retro games.

> *Nothing was better than Championship Manager you know. And that was me, my cousin and my mate, used to sit up for days on end.... And that's why it's on my computer. I guess it's trying to go back to that, but it doesn't feel the same. It's good and it's fun and it's enjoyable, but you know, it's more of a novelty. Whereas before it was.... Because you're not 17 any more. And because the games have progressed I would say. I mean, you're going back, I'm going back, say to Doom, after playing Halo, which is not necessarily the same game but is a game later on and they've evolved so much you know. But when you go back to it, when I go back to it the novelty's good and it's enjoyable and stuff, but as a game it's not as good as now. At the time that was the best game on the market and it was the best game in the genre that you had and for me there was nothing that could compare at the time, but now there's an absolute host of games that are better, you know, but what they don't have is my cousin and my mate sat there, you know, at whatever age and drinking coke and eating sweets, and eating crisps, playing it, you know.... For me, I had an enjoyable childhood, you know, and even in my teenage years it was enjoyable you see, and I enjoyed it and I enjoyed doing that stuff, you know and ten years, twelve years on and it's responsibility.*

Matthew explains dissatisfaction with the re-experience of playing old games. He is drawn to play them; to recapture an experience that he remembers as pleasurable, but this doesn't live up to the memory. Robert and Ann share similar experiences with me, recalling the process of loading a spectrum game and also recalling reminiscing about this with friends and colleagues who shared a similar past. They fondly recall a number of games before telling me about their current use of emulators to play the same games more recently. Yet they also confess that these retro games seldom get played for long. Others find current games that are similar to those they have fond memories of. So Luke recalls *Elite* as a child and seeks out a similar game as an adult.

> *I was playing a game called X2 and it's basically the same as Elite, but it is taken to extreme, well I don't remember Elite being as big as this. You've got the same sort of thing, you start off with a bad, crappy ship and you can either start trading or you can be a pirate or whatever, but in this you can get to the point where not only can you trade but you can buy other ships.... I bought it for the*

> *PC because I wanted something like Elite 'cause I remembered it. I played Elite on an Atari St and I kind of liked it. I didn't play it a huge amount it, but it is one of those things where you can lose hours on.... I was looking for the latest incarnation of Elite and kind of assumed that it's such a popular game that they would keep churning it out every time a new machine comes out.... It's one of those things that I bought it because I kind of missed playing something like Elite and I do go back to it every now and again for a couple of days, play it for a bit and then decide that it's actually quite boring.*

And Mandy explains that part of the attraction of *Nintendogs* was that it was the *Tamagochi* she never had as a child, but always wanted.

> *I felt deprived as a child because the whole reason I bought a DS lite was because I wanted Nintendogs, and my reason for that was - OK I am 25, I have got a 'life', she says in inverted commas, and everything - but I never had a Tamagotchi so I, you know I never got to raise a little Tamagotchi and pet it and tell it when it was good and all that kind of stuff. I never experienced one dying before and everyone else had one and I just thought, you know, 'sod it I'm not allowed a proper dog' because I live in a first floor flat, so I'm not really allowed one so I'll get a Nintendog instead.*

The advantage here is the combination of the fondly remembered and the novelty of the latest technologies. Despite players feeling plenty of excitement about the latest games and consoles, players also seem drawn to re-experience the games they played in the past. Players have fond memories of games that may have taken up a significant amount of their younger years. They seek these out, often using emulators, but sometimes re-buying old consoles and games. But the reported experience of re-playing games is often disappointment. The warm feeling of nostalgia that accompanies familiar graphics and controls soon fades as the games are played. The 'problem' with nostalgic play is that players soon realise that 'things have moved on'. Those that they played with are absent and their own life has continued along a path they cannot now change. They also recognise that part of the attraction of the games originally was their newness. At the time players had never seen or experienced anything like it, but in subsequent years technology has developed and the things that made the game special, are now routine and even obsolete. One solution is sequels, or re-makes of games because these promise a tantalising combination of the new and the 'lost'.

6.2.2. Actualising daydreams (being a better you)

Mandy's experience links nostalgia to daydreams of what might have been and this theme emerged in several conversations. Players look to games for experiences that are based on daydreams about things they might have done, but somehow never did. This doesn't seem to

be restricted to older players either. For example Colin describes his enduring interest in playing basketball professionally; something he knows is now very unlikely to happen.

The deal with buying a basketball game is like anything, it's doing something I can't do. NBA, is the fact that I bought this game NBA Live is the one I bought. You could create your own players and create your own team, so I ended up making a team of me and all my friends for this basketball game, gave them all amazing stats and absolutely whipping everyone's arse. It was so much fun because it's 'oh look, there's me, in the NBA, in a proper uniform, slam dunks, 3 pointers, you know everything. You know, it's fun, it's entertaining, it's believing you can do something, kind of thing. My ability? I do doubt my ability when I play. My ability is not that great. When I was at school and my ability was great because no one else could really play. I was one of the best players in the school, but as soon as I got out of the school, you meet other people and it's like 'oh my god, these people are amazing', I can't compete with them. I still try, but I can't compete with some of these people, you know.

Janice also explains her enduring interest in racing cars and motorbikes. Again she plays games, for example *Grand Turismo*, based on these activities as a substitute for driving in the material world, even though she seems clear that the games are in many ways an inferior experience.

I enjoy driving and I've done single-seater racing car driving and I enjoy motorcycling. I enjoy going at speed. But you can't do that out on the highways and byways. But you can - it's escapism isn't it - like all of the games and stuff? It doesn't compare to the real thing really, because it's not you know, it's not the real thing is it, but it's as near as damn it and it's probably more than you are ever going to, you are never going to be able to get into a top class car and drive round the streets of Paris or London or whatever, but it's just escapism isn't it?

Later in the interview Janice makes a further statement about the attraction of games

You can't do on the roads, or in my job what I can do in the game. I can't get into a top class sports car and go hurtling down the road in a race and winning the pot of four grand. I can't do that at work. I take a box of black things over to someone so they can fill them and then bring them back again. At work I behave myself because I don't want to loose my licence and I don't want to loose my job.

Matthew also explains how he plays a game based on his work, and the advantages of doing so. Matthew is a soldier who has recently returned from a tour in the Middle East, but is planning to leave the forces. Yet he tells me that he enjoys playing games based on armed conflict.

You never get to go what you do in the game. Apart from the select few that have been to war and actually done it, you never get to shoot back and this, that and the other, and be involved in real sort of dangerous situations. And I always sort of tell people when they ask, 'would you want to go to war, or would you want to, you know' and soldiers say 'yes'. And why would you want to do that? You say 'well you know would you want to train as a bricklayer and never build a wall', you know, it's what you've been trained for all this time. And you want to see what you are made of when it comes down to it.

Matthew also tells me about actually playing these games and how they are both similar, but also different from his experience of military training and actual conflict. Matthew explains his 'soldier games', starting with Desert Storm.

With the Ghost Recon..., it's fantastic and it is like real life and you get to do things like real life, you know and it's...., because as a soldier you can, you have to patrol and things like that and so in the game I think, 'well I wouldn't go that way, I'd go round here, and I'll stick next to this and I'll have a look round the wall', you know and then I'll do something, I'll send a team over here, and then I can cover fire whilst they assault the position. So you get to do all that.... It's so real, it really is. I mean they get it close to what it's like. You get the feeling that you are actually there you see and you feel like 'I don't want to put my head out here'.... It's things like the fact that you can go and do it without dying and coming back here in a box.... I'm way down the food chain in the army so I go and get told what to do, you know 'go around here and then assault this', whereas, you know, you control it, so I guess there is an element of stepping up a level and seeing what you're like.

A common explanation of the value of games to players is their ability to let you do things that you can't in real life. But Stephen qualifies this, explaining that with sports games, for example, what he actually wants is for it to be like it is on TV. And this seems consistent with the choices for play that others have made too. Stephen explains that a sports game is not good if you can't re-create the sort of performance that you see on TV.

You want to play a game like you are watching it on television, with the American football one, it works so brilliantly, you know you are playing a game and it's almost like watching it on TV and you're.... It's like, it's a realistic simulation of the game, the scores are the same and the players and what they do on the game and you know it's not like a football game where you pick the ball up and the guy can sprint and he can run all the way down to the goal and bang it in. You know, that's not real.

Other daydreams are based more obviously on ideas that players maintain some hope of making happen in the material world. For example Luke tells me about his interest in

customising cars and how he uses a game to explore his interest in customising. He claims to have learnt about customising through playing the game.

> *Need for speed, I would say, has taught me a lot about cars. It's taught me what bits do what to some extent, what you can do to it, to a car to change it's performance, that kind of thing..... If they have got it anyway near right, then you will learn. You are not going to learn the handling obviously because there is no feel, but you do learn stuff about travelling on the road, it's like the DVLA test, albeit very primitive. The fact that you feel, through you senses rather than reading about it, or see it on TV, you learn it quicker.... It's one of the reasons I buy them. It's what I'm interested in. It's a way to learn about things I'm interested in, so it's different to buying books on the subject [laughs] or actually doing them. I've got a Honda CRX, but I haven't done anything to - I was going to change the air filter on it, maybe the exhaust, and take it from there - but I would do it in Need for Speed, but I probably wouldn't go out and waste my money in reality [laughs]..... That was the reason I bought it, was because I wanted a racing game.... And just this whole modifying thing. I have bought Max Power for the same reason, to learn about how much these things cost, because that's what you don't get from the game. It's crossed my mind to go out and modify the car, but I'm too sensible now, I've had a lot of debts in my time and I hate them so I won't put anything huge on my credit card even though I'd like to.... Because it's easier and cheaper in the game than trying to do it properly [laughs].... To some extent if you want to be at the top of the NBA, or whatever you can do it in a game, in your lifetime, probably in a weekend. Whereas 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.*

Luke was not the only one to relate their game experiences to the limitations of their material consuming powers. For example, Ann explains the pleasure of buying things in *World of Warcraft*. She explains that for her, this is the best bit of the game and contrasts buying things with fighting and dying. Ann uses a fantasy game, but the pleasure seems to be based on a desire to shop; something that she tells me she enjoys doing in the material world.

> *We spent so long in a town where you start, a place called Stormwind, and it's huge and we were looking for a place that sold helmets and it must have taken us nearly half the night to find a shop in this town that sold helmets. Then I couldn't afford it anyway [laughs].... I like dressing up my character. The fun of the game for me is buying stuff. I like buying. I didn't have much money, but I did a few quests and had some fairly good armour and a nice sword, and some good boots.... Some of it we picked up but the swords we bought. It was the top sword in the village.... I like looking and you want to buy the best, I want my character to have the best armour and cloths and sword. It's like in real life, the more it costs the better [laughs].*

In a later interview she returns to this idea and compares in-game shopping with real shopping.

It's really frustrating going shopping and having no money. You discover new stuff, get the money and then shop.... But the game doesn't really compare. If you have enough money and you buy the best bow and arrows, you feel great for your character because he has the best he can have.... 'cause I would never go shopping in Tesco for a bow and arrow, but I might go to Next for a new top and that might be the best top that I can have for that week and that would give me the same feeling, when I'm wearing that. It's the same sort of feeling, but it's a different kind of item. But I much prefer buying real stuff. It's like Christmas. In a game you get the same feeling to an extent, but it's not the same.

And Mandy gives yet another example of the game allowing her to explore her interest in interior design.

> *I am very much into interior design anyway. I'm doing an open learning course in interior design, so I'm thinking, you know, I'm just going to apply it to my game as well, so, you know, if my own flat is matching and co-ordinated, I want my house in my Animal Crossing world to be matching and co-ordinated as well.... To be honest at the moment, obviously, I'd say my Animal Crossing game is more important than the course.... Ok, so at the moment I'm having problems with a certain room so at the moment I'm just kind of playing and I might have an idea for something and I might do it in the real world but I just don't have the time to do all that kind of stuff.*

Everyday life seems to produce a wide range of desires to do things that are not possible because of physical, legal, financial or time constraints. Some of these may be fleeting (a sudden urge to drive fast as a result of a frustrating traffic jam, tempered by the risk of fine); some may be more enduring such as the desire to be good at sports. The latter sort of daydreams may accumulate over years, yet never be acted on, leaving individuals with a sense of something that might have been that occasionally haunts their consciousness. With other daydreams there may still be a hope of some achievement (when money is saved up, for example). In various ways games seem to be a way for players to access these daydreams and in doing so keep them alive and/or compensate in some way for their inability to make them happen. This is a speculative role for games that allows specific and managed access to the imagination based on possible, albeit occasionally extraordinary events.

6.2.3. Actualising fantasy (being someone else)

Although the interest of some gamers remains in the order of daydreams – for example Richard explains that he prefers games based on 'thing that could happen' – for others games are pleasurable because they allow fantastic imaginings (here I am making the distinction that Campbell (1987) does and that I explained in Chapter two). Elaine provides an account of playing *The Sims* that suggests the same individual may use the same game for both daydreaming about their future and to engage with a fiction-derived fantasy. She starts by

explaining how she creates the 'perfect' life. You may recall that Elaine lives with her mother in some financial hardship and confesses that in 'real life' she has few friends.

> *In The Sims I make my own life and it's like me but it's perfect. It's just the way you want your whole life to go, you can just make it happen. Ok, this is where I use the cheat codes, because you can give them lots of money [laughs].... A good house - they don't have to have a job, so they can spend all their time at home [laughs], but I don't know what I do with them most of the time. 'Cause the cheats I use mean that I can turn up all of their needs as well, so they don't have to cook meals, they don't have to sleep. And I spend the whole time I guess making friends with all of the ones already in the game.... So it's just you can see what it would be like if your life was perfect.*

Elaine then goes on to tell me about her other neighbourhoods in *The Sims*.

> *Well I've got two. I've got one called the Wizarding World, which has all Harry Potter characters in, as well as myself. And then I've got one called Sphera, out of Final Fantasy V. And I've got all of the characters from that in there.... Some I have downloaded and some I have made myself. I downloaded all sorts of things, so I can make them fly on broomsticks and things, which you couldn't normally do in the game. And I guess it's just unique and it's kind of like creating your own game. Or your own film. And you can have things go just the way you want them with characters from other things. I mean I've written – sorry about the Harry Potter fixation – fan fiction which is like 400 pages long at the moment, but I can just put that into The Sims and just make that happen. It just feels really good when you see it all done.*

Robert makes a connection between a general interest in fantasy that goes back to his childhood playing *Dungeons & Dragons* games, and the attraction of *World of Warcraft*. Robert also explains that the game itself invites you to think about your future character. The game makes you want to work towards the next level. His wife, Ann, compares this to aspects of consumer desire to get the 'next thing'. Susan raises something similar. She tells me about playing *World of Warcraft* with her younger, but more expert brother, suggesting that although the context may be fantastic, the experience has parallels with everyday life.

> *It's funny actually 'cause all the level 60s, they just stand around in the middle of Ironforge and they just like look at each others' armour and they just stand there and it's really weird. My sister played it for a little bit and she never, she got into it. But she's not a gamer and I'll always remember this time when she was running through Elwood forest, which is like a low level. She ran past this girl and she just stopped and she turned to the girl and she spoke to her: 'oh my god, I love your dress, where did you get it from' [laughs] and the girl says 'oh thanks, it's really great isn't it, it was just a lucky drop'. And I just thinking, that's the way my sister sees it. And she was learning the skill of sewing so that she could make herself pretty clothes. She just liked getting the money together and buying clothes.... It's so weird. Like my brother will just stand there in*

> *Ironforge, like kind of opposite the auction house and there is always loads of them there..., and my brother will just go round like inspecting people and say 'Ah, look at that armour Susan, that is like' - I've forgotten what it is, it's not elite, it's purple, the words are purple which means it's like extra special - and like 'yeah, that's the Druid outfit and like one day you can get that', and all this kind of stuff.*

Frequently people gain access to other worlds and experiences through films and books. They come to know of these places and people (or creatures), but only in third person. So they may read about or watch Luke's adventures in *Star Wars*, or of the Hobbits in *Lord of the Rings*. Games seem to give them more direct access to these fantasies. They allow players to become the heroes of other fictions, or to experience these worlds 'firsthand'. So for example Max explains his enduring interest in the Star wars films and how games have allowed him to inhabit this 'universe'. Like Elaine, Max explains that he has his own version of the films 'in his head'. He has built and maintained his own fantasy space from the raw materials of Lucas's films. Max explains many of the *Star Wars* games that he plays, for example:

> *Jedi Outcast is a game that I play. I've been playing it since it came out. I haven't finished it yet because it has some frustrating bits and then I just put the game away for months and don't touch it.... And Rebel Strike is just a game that I play for the quick fix, you know, flying around, shooting, destroying stuff. I don't like the tactical element in it. I think it's just that I can finally sit in an X-Wing or in a TIE-fighter and shoot stuff, because that's always been one of my dreams.*

And perhaps Stuart sums up for him what is the key point of playing the fantasy game *Morrowind*: the experience of 'another life'.

> *It's a form of suspending disbelief and living in a fantasy world for a while.... You exchange your mundane everyday life for the life of a different being, if you want, and in this case a fantastic heroine [laughs].*

These players gain access to other worlds and experiences through films and books. They come to know of these places and people (or creatures), but only in third person. Games seem to give them more direct access to these fantasies. They allow players to become the heroes of other fictions, or to experience these worlds 'firsthand'. This seems to be a slightly different strategy for dealing with the mundane familiarity of everyday life. Rather than change aspects of that life and live out those changes in a game, players opt to negate the material in favour of some other type of existence, but one that is still somehow familiar.

6.2.4. Virtual tourism (being somewhere different)

Many players explained fantasies and daydreams that games helped them to actualise in some way. They aim to experience playing a sport they can't otherwise play, or shopping for things they couldn't otherwise buy, or they talk about living in the fantasy world of a book or film. But others explain escapism in terms of simply wanting to 'be somewhere else' or 'experience something new, beautiful, or exciting'. Dick tries to explain to me the pleasure of exploring new game worlds and finding new things, but then complains that as he has got older he has lost some of his capacity for such fantasy.

> *I remember just like really enjoying the whole experience of the Zelda games and they are kind of similar to the Metroid games because they are about exploring, but it's more traditional because it's more about exploring dungeons and stuff, but those games... they have very rich world and they have very good art work and the music and everything in it is just like really well done. So if you suspend your disbelief enough, it's very convincing, it seems very complete. It's like escaping to another world I suppose. But I was a lot younger when I played those games and..., I don't think I'd let myself be drawn into so much now. I kind of look at everything with more cynical eyes now..., I now look at a game as a piece of design, as a cultural artefact that I can analyse. I can see it in context now. I can see that it's only a game. But I suppose as you get older you kind of, you lose that childhood capacity to fantasise and dream and stuff like that. You know when you are playing a game then you have to get up and go to work tomorrow, or play the electric bill, so it takes the shine off it.*

Other players also articulate this desire to see new and fantastic things from 'other worlds', but through a knowing technical eye. Carl tells be about playing *Breed*.

> *If I am just having a stroll about in the game then I will play something like Breed where I can go anywhere and I'll just avoid the bad guys, I know where they are so I'll just avoid them and I might have a pop with my snipers rifle occasionally, but really while I'm in there I'm just seeing what is over the next hill. It's quite a clever game Breed is..., it's a bit more free form, which allows you then to take a stroll.... I suppose just to digress, the interesting thing when I play a game, I actually think quite technically about it. It's actually analysing, how is this damn thing working, what's happening here? I mean actually Half Life was the first, no actually I think Unreal Tournament came before that where you could build maps, there was a map creator and you had to start understanding the AI to actually build those maps. And that was one of the games where I started thinking, well how does this damn thing work?*

Later Carl returns to explaining the pleasure from simply taking in the beauty of a game.

> *I mean sometimes the effects are just so beautifully done and so detailed in, in the way that they have been produced; how the sprites on the screen are actually detailed and there is a whole area*

of that that actually draws you into playing the game, you know. Yeah, the aesthetics of it is also something that's important. I suppose that's part of the 'what if'. I mean if I wonder about in Breed it is partly the aesthetics, you know, the way that they have designed the building and some of the complexes, it's fascinating, you know, why did they do it like that? It's actually quite a beautiful game, in quite a raw way.... There is almost a beauty to it, you know the drop ship is like the drop ship out of Aliens with quite a square body and there is a practical feel to it that actually appeals to me and I think that's actually quite real you know, somebody has actually thought what would that ship look like if it was going to do this job?

Towards the end of one interview Carl explains a specific time in his life when he had a need to escape into another world, to 'get away!'

I think for me personally it was about leaving the world behind. You can do that.... When I went through the divorce... I would be at work at seven o'clock sometimes, doing legitimate stuff, but that was also one of my strategies for losing myself. But when I was at home then, especially when the children had gone to bed, I would play games, because I could turn the lights off and my whole world then would be what's on that screen and I could get very, very involved and it didn't involve the pain I was going through. I'm very sure there wasn't transference there. I didn't want to play violent games, so it wasn't me transferring my anger at my ex-wife into a game. I just wanted to get away from it. I wanted to be somewhere else. And in a non-physical way, that was a way of doing that.

Players take pleasure in exploring game worlds, finding new places to visit and new things to look at. Rather than acting out a daydream or fantasy, here the pleasure is in the unknown, in the excitement of not knowing what comes next; of having no clear script to act out, but also not being in the routine of their material existence. So rather than actualising the imagination players are asking for their imagination to be stimulated. Again this may be taken as an attempt to somehow deal with the familiarity of every day life. The same furnishings in the same house, the same desk in the same office, or same shop floor, the same routine tasks re-experienced every day feed a desire to escape. And in Carl's case, the routine 'pain' of a failing marriage creates an especially strong desire to 'be somewhere else' and videogames facilitate this. In exploring games players are also reflexive. Whilst taking in the aesthetics of a game, players declare an appreciation of the game designers skill and therefore an acknowledgement of the creative output of an unseen and unknown artist.

6.2.5. Thinking about and with games

At times, players think about games when they are not playing. So in-game tasks can themselves become a focus of routine 'daydreaming' that occupies the mind. For example Stephen describes thinking about a game he intends to play whilst driving home from work.

> *With that Resident Evil, I'd be hit with a puzzle and I'd be driving home from work and I'd be thinking 'hmm, I wonder, I'll try this when I get back, I wonder if this will work?' Or with the American Football game I'll hear that a player has moved from one team to another and I'll think about getting home and switching it and then playing the game with him on the new team.*

And Colin likewise describes times at work when his mind wonders to the game he has been playing.

> *It will be on the back of my mind when I'm working. I'll be working, and be thinking about it. Sometimes you'd be working out tactics in your head whilst you're working kind of thing, 'cause especially my job I get now, because sometimes I get points where I'm just stood there for just five or ten minutes at a time with nothing to do because I have to stand there waiting to serve someone and there's nothing else to do so I just have to keep my eye's open and look around the place and just think about things that are going on. And I just think about ways to do things, like other tactics to do things, working your way around things, you know. If you can't get it right the first time you have to think of another way round it. That kind of thing. I mean it's like I'm stuck on a race at the moment in Burnout 3 where it's a GT thing and you've got four races at a time and you have to get the highest points in the ranking, but I'm doing it with these bloody formula 1 cars and I've tried it a couple of times but the car's so fast it keeps crashing, and you end up in last place.*

Players also explain that the content of games may prompt them to consider other media consumption as they become more interested in something they have played. For example Colin explains 'getting into' TV wrestling after playing a wrestling game and similarly John explains that after playing a rally game he became interested in rallying. He thought about taking it up, and also started watching it on TV. John notes that it's impractical to actually take up rallying, but the game seems to awaken a desire.

> *With the rallying game, I mean that's made me want to take the Rally course at Silverstone.... It's made me realise that it's something I want to do. There are things I've ticked off, I've done a motor racing day at Thruxton, and one of the other things I want to do is a rally day, or just have a go in a rally car and having played the game, it's 'yep, I've just remembered that that is something I want to do'.... The problem with a competitive sport like that is that it's so expensive and I would say I've got better things to spend my money on.... But certainly the game has reinforced the fact that I would like to do it and it's finding the time with children all your spare time goes into spending time with children. But I will do it.... I started watching rallying after playing the game and appreciated the cars better when I started watching it.*

Game-play may therefore prompt further explorations of the player's desires and these may also be 'dark'. For example Luke tells me how he explores his 'dark' side in *Grand Theft*

Auto. He enjoys the fantasy of breaking taboos and lists a series of violent actions in the game that he has enjoyed, but then tells me how he feels afterwards:

> *[laughs] I feel ashamed really, just because of the whole - if it was real life then I wouldn't do it, you just wouldn't - but the fact that a game enables it, I just think is slightly worrying. It's worrying to me that I have a tendency to gun down in the street anyone that walks into me [laughs] in that game.... Why, why do I do that, why would anyone want to do that? [laughs] It felt liberating, I can do this and even if the police chase me I'll probably get away. Even if I get banged up it only takes two seconds and I'm out again. So it's the freedom to act in the worst possible way you could without reproach I think. There's no real equivalent of that. There's no environment where you could just do that and get away with it.*

Game experiences themselves become a source of speculations about what might happen in the game, or how a particular objective might be achieved. And once in the imagination, these speculations may result in other desires, such as a new interest in a particular sport. At times these desires may even be experienced as dangerous, for example when the imagination speculates about breaking a taboo and in these instances play experiences may come to trouble the player.

So players demonstrate a relationship between their imagination and play. Games allow them a sort of temporal and spatial extension of the self. They can transport them back in time, to when they were a child through the use of emulators and new versions of fondly remembered games. They can also allow players to access their desires for the future, and even give access to desired but 'lost' futures through playing activities that they might have but never actually did. Games also allow a form of spatial extension by transporting players to other worlds. These other spaces may be explored or may be used as a stage for more developed fantasies, and many of the worlds visited may allow players to access spaces that have previously only existed in books or films. These activities are experienced as escape from the routine or mundane lives which players frequently or occasionally experience as a problem or limitation. And they may not return from these expeditions empty handed. Players occasionally use games as a source of a daydream, something to think about to pass the time, or to look forward to. They may attempt to act on their in-game experiences in the real world, using them as inspiration for new hobbies or interests, or they may simply use games as a way to reflect on themselves, to consider their own actions and identity.

6.3. Play and socialising

I have already indicated that players occasionally or frequently seek to play videogames with other people. In this section I want to explore these experiences in more detail. For many of the players that I spoke to social play was recalled as some of their best experiences with

digital games and they seek to continue to play socially. This often means playing with partners, wives or children and I have again already highlighted that some players attempt to get family members to play. Others play with friends, and in the absence of face-to-face play, other players seek to play online. Finally I note that games may also be used as a topic of conversation away from the game and as such allow individuals a shared topic of conversation as an aid to socialising.

6.3.1. Playing with family

Of the adult digital game players that I spoke to, Robert and Ann were the only couple who seemed to have an equal interest in games. Just before my first visit to talk with them, they had been playing *World of Warcraft* together, with Ann using a free trial subscription. They explained the pleasure they got from this - Ann on her laptop and Robert on his PC. For the free trial period evenings would be organised around playing the game, at times late into the evening, having put the children to bed and organised things for the following day. When the trial period ended, Ann stopped playing but she explains that she still has an interest via Robert's character. She has bought a guidebook and together they are learning the game. Ann also explains a reluctance to play with strangers online. Ann and Robert tell me about other games they have played together, returning to this topic several times, but often only briefly referring to specific occasions when they played a particular game: 'we played this', 'when we got the game', etc. They inform me that they have played games together for as long as they have known each other and that the arrangement is taken for granted. Games are shared time together. Later they also confess that they eat chocolate whilst playing and that this is a 'secret' from the children, so for Robert and Ann games are also 'adult time' away from children and separate from their responsibilities as parents.

Even when one partner plays more, this shared playing experience may be explained as an important part of play. For example Janice notes that her partner watches and sometimes joins in, but is clear that she is the gamer and her partner is not, and Max also notes that he was instrumental in getting his girlfriend to play games but also that he likes having this shared interest. Max sums up playing with his girlfriend who recently visited him for 2 weeks from her home in Germany.

> *[we play videogames] every day, yeah, because that's something that we like to do. That's always something we do when we're together. I think it's just what we do, watch movies and play games. And go out.*

I have noted that parents may enjoy playing with their children and that this may also be 'special time'. Carl provides a detailed account of this, describing playing just with his son.

At one point he tells me about playing *Farcry*. The game seems to be a way for him to 'care' for his son and to maintain a 'closeness', (Carl's son lives with his ex-wife and visits at weekends). Like others who give accounts of play with loved-ones the game itself is very much secondary to the desire for interactions with the other player(s).

> *I mean with Farcry we bought a second copy so that we could network it and we would play co-operatively in that game and that was fantastic, that was quite an interesting way of doing it you know especially when you are willing to cooperate with each other and there is two of you moving through a landscape and I think Farcry was one of the only games that engendered it. I started to feel quite protective about that other person that was playing on the game with me, you know actually.... Just a thought that comes up, it's over a year ago now, but I really did - and actually in watching his back, or him watching my back - become really quite an important part of the game, you know we talked about not splitting the machines upstairs and downstairs because we lost that facial element. That is what we would lose when we were playing co-operatively. I had Ian sitting next to me, about an arms length away and I can say 'are you watching my back', 'what's going on' and he is where I can see him and I can just look across and see his face and see what is on his screen but I don't do that, you know I want him to tell me, I actually felt you know quite protective, if he starts getting shot away, you know my screen persona wants to switch around and run back.*

Some digital games are also used as a family event. For example Carl also explains the fun of a tennis game that he plays with is family as a way to spend an evening together and contrasts this with less social games.

> *The thing with these is that they only become fun when it is social. I mean if you were to play that table tennis game on its own - playing them on your own would just be pointless - and then you start playing with other people and you get the social interaction and it really brings something, I mean even something rudimentary like the table tennis game and it actually becomes enjoyable, you know, you get a real buzz from it and you get interaction with the family and this is much more interaction than what you get with say the James Bond game which is what we had on the Xbox when we had the placement student. We did all try to play it and you can play it two player, but everyone else just don't get involved and they just start talking amongst themselves and its just two people playing on an Xbox and perhaps three people chatting and they are chatting about something totally different. And this game, perhaps because it is bizarre and because the person playing it looks absolutely ridiculous, you know at Christmas I was playing it with my cycle helmet on because it was you would like wave the bat so hard in front of the sensor.... [everyone else is] laughing, in hysterics sometime. They talk about how good they are; it just becomes social. The game is incredibly absorbing.... Coaching tips coming from the sofa, all kinds of comments you know, people taking the micky out of each other, its just a very easy social environment and its really just a nice thing to do.*

Digital games may be played amongst family members. Where both of a couple play, games are something that they can do together, giving them a shared experience that some note is different from watching TV together because games require interaction. Even when one partner doesn't play they are sometimes happy to watch and this is also an interactive experience where they may offer advice or warnings to the player and therefore help them to play the game. Parents also find that games offer an opportunity to spend time with children doing something they both enjoy. Games provide a clear context for interaction - a shared goal - and are experienced as 'special time' between parents (especially fathers) and their children. Much of this type of social play is co-operative rather than competitive; again the objective is to do something together rather than to win. It may share some of the characteristics previously described - escape, achievement, creativity – but it adds the pleasure of entering these worlds with someone else. Players whose partner play consider themselves lucky and like having this in common, not just because it reduces their need to justify their behaviour, but because they have someone at hand to talk to about games.

6.3.2. Playing with friends

Playing with friends is also experienced as way to bring a player closer to others, but it is perhaps different from the closeness seen when couples play or a parent plays with a child. For example, several players note the pleasure in 'trash talk' or something similar (Carl also hints at this when describing family play). Here part of the fun of a game is being able to laugh at each other's mistakes, or gloat at victory. Max explains playing with a friend recently:

> *It was an old university friend of mine, and he's quite good at games. So he likes to trash talk.... It's when someone else tells you how bad you're doing during the game, yeah. So we were playing Mariocart and he swore to me that he'd never played Mariocart in his life before. Obviously that's a lie. Maybe it was, but I'm sure he's played Mariocart before because he was too good for not having played it. He knew which cars to select and which combination with the characters and that made me suspicious. And he knew all the shortcuts, so obviously he's played the game before. And we were playing and, you know, it was like 'Ooh good choice of car Max. Sorry to pick those characters.' Blah de blah all the time and that made me... it didn't make me angry but I knew he was up to something and then we raced and obviously he was very good at it and it started out as fun and ended up in a verbal fight. 'Oh you're always beating me', blah de blah, blah blah. Obviously we also had a few drinks which takes out the logic sometimes. And we decided to shoot it out in a multi-player shooting game, Time Splinter.... And yeah we kind of played games that we both like and both dislike. So there was a battle.... Yeah, yeah. Well I told him 'Tom, second place is honourable, but if only two are playing it's no good.' That sort of stuff. I took my sweet revenge*

there as well. But it doesn't last long because we know the next round it tends to be the other way round.

Matt also explains in some detail the importance of social play. As he has got older he explains that he no longer plays videogames with his friends as much as he used to, but he fondly recalls previous social play and notes the ways in which games allow for the formation of social bonds.

You know, I would say my best memories of playing a computer are not necessarily of playing a computer on my own, but playing them with my mates, you know. Like obviously Resident Evil. And we used to sit up all night, lights out and scare the shit out of ourselves, you know, playing it, absolutely terrified. But again it was me and my mate taking in turns to play it and things like Super Tennis for the Nintendo was one of them and the football games, you know. I guess it's playing it with your mates really. It's bonding I guess... it's, you are both focussed on the same thing; it's enjoyable. To be able to beat your mate, or you mate beats you and then you've got to beat him back you know.... Most of my mates are either married, or some are single, but they are up on camp, so there is no way I will drive all the way up to camp just to sit and play the computer.

Towards the end of the interview, Matt brings up the subject again:

The big thing for me is how much it probably, you know, brings you closer to your friends, you know. I found that when I really look back at it, that's the one thing that I take away from it. When I think of all the games that I've played, probably with the exception of Final Fantasy VII, which I got engrossed in the story.... All the other games, when I think of the ones that I remember, it's games that I played with my mates, you know. That is what really got me into games. I mean nothing was better than Championship Manager, and that was me, my cousin and my mate, used to sit up for days playing it.

Mike also gives an account of the pleasure of playing *Super Smash Brothers* with friends whilst drunk. And Richard also makes this association between drinking with mates and playing games. He recalls his time in the army.

When I was in the army I took my Nintendo with me and there was Goldeneye on there and that was like a really primitive death match game but that was why everyone bought Goldeneye and I did have four controllers and everyone used to come round to my - I used to live in these like portacabin things, this was in Bosnia - and everybody came round to my portacabin and we used to sit in there drinking and playing like Goldeneye and I used to do that a lot. There was like teambuilding and bonding, like you know a bit of fun.

Some play activities with friends seem similar to play with family; it is friendly and co-operative and is about spending time together and doing something 'interesting' and

'productive' together. It may mark a special event such as Christmas when adult play is bounded by a special free time, or mark a 'wind down' period of more regular social events such as going out drinking or clubbing. This type of social play is important to players and when denied it (for example because they have moved away from friends) they seek to recreate it, recruiting players from amongst their new social network. Social play with friends is also often experienced as friendly, but competitive and a way to develop and differentiate individual styles and skills. It also creates events that are something to talk about. The contingency of social play allows for moments of pride, humour and even mock aggression as a result of events in the game: unlikely errors, fluke victories, heroic efforts, familiar moves (done well or badly). Games high in this potential are picked for this type of play. Here play seems to be more about what happens outside the screen rather than the game itself.

6.3.3. Playing online

Given the stated desire to play with others, it may be easy to imagine the attraction of online play as potentially more than the desire for contingency in competitive play that I have already described, and when these adult players talked about online play they also explained a preference for playing online with existing friends. Robert explains that apart from playing with Ann, he plays online with an old friend who lives several hundred miles away. *World of Warcraft* provides a context for their social interaction. At the time of my first meeting with Robert he had only recently starting playing *WoW* and explained a reluctance to interact with other players and a desire to meet his friend in the online world.

> *I don't bother getting involved in the big groups of people, I suppose deep down I'm a shy person, I don't really know how or why you would go join other people. I've got my agenda and I do my agenda.... But what I'd like to do is I'd like to meet Tim. He lives up in Northampton. We probably see him one or two times a year.... I would like to meet up with Tim.*

At our second meeting, Robert tells me about how his play has changed since he joined Tim's guild:

> *I'm in Tim's guild.... I played with other guild members last night. I'm trying to find this last bit of a relic and this chap came on and said, 'oh Quark where are you, can I help?'. And I didn't know him from Adam, but he's a guild member. And he was 'oh, are you looking for some help?' (I'm trying to skin some velociraptors), 'do you want me to give you a hand?'. Which I thought was quite nice.... When strangers talk to you, I'm not freaked out by it, but a bit wary really. I'm not sort of a gregarious person and, I suppose it's different in this, but they are all part of the guild so it's like a family I think, and they have really helped me out. I keep trying to give Tim stuff, but he won't have it.... But one of the things that they keep going on about is something called Molten*

Core, which is one of these big end of game, big, big adventures, but you've got to be level 60 to do that and every Saturday night they are like 'we're going to do this', like a Molten Core, and I'm really looking forward to being able to go along.

But Robert also explains a bad experience that he has had with more experienced players that he doesn't know and who have criticised his style of play. Others also recall that although they may like to play with existing friends online, many of their experiences of online play have been negative. Luke explains that he enjoys playing digital games with friends and has played with Theo, who I also talked to. He also explains that he has tried Xbox Live online play, but tells me why he did not subscribe after the trial period.

I did dabble with the Xbox live last year and that was because Theo had a Xbox and I'd already got Xbox live on mine, the free trial thing, and I had a go and was really disappointed with it because I was playing with a complete stranger who was probably ten years younger than me and it seemed really pointless to me. So the idea of playing remotely with Theo was that you can kind of tune into it. And we did play Doom and Ghost Recon a few times only and it was interesting because we didn't have the voice connection so we ended up inventing a language to tell each other what we were going to do, who should lead and that sort of thing. But it would quickly disintegrate into a free for all [laughs] we always played co-operatively, never competitively.... He would start the games up and I would just join them. So we kind of played Doom like that and I think we completed it.... But I stopped because of money, the subscription ran out and I didn't want to pay for it.

Like Robert, Luke rejects play with strangers and prefers playing with someone he knows. Alex explains social play at length, but in doing so explains a hierarchy of preferences. He first prefers face-to-face play with his daughter, or other face-to-face opponent then prefers play against the computer, and is dismissive of online play with strangers.

I'd choose Annie first, human opponent next and then the computer opponent. There's a place up in Weymouth I have gone and played a couple of online games, but the problem was I think the people, whether it's just that I've been going in the day and it's the fanatics that are on there, all the unemployed guys like me who are on there at 2 in the afternoon or whatever, I found that, you know, the interaction with the other human players was frustrating, you know you'd get the ones that, don't you, that just circle round the spawn areas and you know beat the crap out of any new players that come in you know, so it's a schoolyard bully mentality.... I suppose to me the immaturity of the people I've seen, of the times I've been on it seems worse than the restrictions of an AI opponent, you know.

And other players also make the point that they just can't relate to people who play online. Richard explains his bad experience.

My experience with online games has not been so good. Years ago I played Quake online at a friends house a fair bit and that was OK, but the thing is, especially with those sorts of games, is that you get people that cheat a lot, on the PC games you do, because it's easy to decompile the code and add cheats. Or there is the whole leet kiddy thing, 'cause obviously they're like an 8 year old kid in their basement getting fed Cheesy Puffs and Sunny Delight by their mum or something and they obviously play all day because as soon as you spawn, that's it, bam, headshot, bam headshot, every single time and it's just no fun because these people, obviously they have spent far too much time playing these games and it's just no fun playing against people like that.

For some, playing online is a substitute for face-to-face play when it is not available. Absent friends may be contacted and interacted with via a game and again the game provides a context for conversation, contact and spending time together. Games provide a reason to be with absent friends. But play with strangers seems to be quite different. Although for some t play with strangers may be preferred to solo play because other humans are less predictable than AI, other players reject this type of play in preference for something more social. They find the experience humiliating or just frustrating because of the difference between their skills and knowledge of the game and that of experienced players. Too often they also seem to experience 'childish' behaviour that for them spoils the game. So the result of some players taking achievement pleasure in beating other humans rather than the computer is that for those humans the experience may be unpleasant. When faced with 'hardcore' players, cheats, or spoilsports, players feel unable to make progress in the game or to feel a sense of achievement.

6.3.4. Games as something to talk about

Videogames may aid social interactions and this role extends beyond play itself. The shared knowledge of a game gives players something to talk about. Colin for example has fond memories of playing videogames with friends and tells me how a particular play experience may result in reminiscences with a friend.

My girlfriend and her sister had gone out for the night and it was me, my flatmate and another friend of mine, all just in the flat for the night. And we ended up sticking on this game which I'd picked up called God of War, which is one of the best games I've played for ages.... Anyway we where up for about ten hours straight playing this game God of War, and I got half way through it and we just did the other half in about 10 hours, me and my mate playing this game, taking it in turns, doing certain bits and we eventually got to the end of the game. It was such a brilliant game and we had fun doing it. I met him a couple of weeks ago, 'cause he moved out about 2 days after I did. He turned up at my work one night and he was kind of drunk.... Anyway, he's waiting for me outside when I finish work and he like 'oh, haven't seen you in ages, we should go talk, let's go and

get a pizza'.... And he's just 'we used to have so much fun together, we used to play basketball, and do you remember that night we stayed up all night playing God of War, that was one of the best nights we had ever, we need to do that again some time', that kind of thing, you know. It was quite a laugh. It was really good.

Colin also explains that talking about games has helped him to get to know people by providing a topic for conversation. His knowledge of games seems to be a form of cultural capital that is important to him and he enjoys sharing the experience of playing with others. He recalls talking to his boss about games for example.

Like when I was working at Tescos one time.... My manager was playing the exact same computer game that I was playing. And we used to have days where I would end up talking about it to him. And 'oh, you're playing this game, I'm playing it too. How far have you got', 'I've got this far'. It was Lego Star Wars. .... So I started talking to my manager and I remember one morning in particular we were all working and I'd been there since like six in the morning and at about eight he comes in and we're all working down these isles putting these things out and he comes in 'morning everyone, how's it going', you know, and he comes up to me and he goes 'oh, I got really stuck on that level on Lego Star Wars last night', and I go 'which one's that', 'oh you know the one on Episode 2, the third one in', or something and I'll 'oh I know exactly what you mean, that one took me ages and did you find that extra room and the secret bits and what characters did you pick up'. That kind of thing, and I remember we spent 20 minutes once on the shop floor, chatting about a game when everyone else was working. It seems really bad, but I actually quite enjoyed it [laughs]. We'd be out the back and he'd be talking to someone and he'd send them out the room and come up to me and go 'oh, I just got to the last level and I'm finding it really difficult', and I'm, 'yeah, fair enough'.... It's good, you know, people talk about games....That's part of enjoying the game, talking to other people about it. It's like going to a movie. If you go before anyone else has seen it, then it's a bit of a waste of time, but when I go to the cinema I want to take somebody with me so that when you come out you can go 'well what did you think of that?'

Elaine also feels that games give her something to talk about. She tells me about how using online forums to talk about games makes her feel confident because she feels she has knowledge to contribute and gets acknowledged by other players. She returns to this right at the end of the interview.

My school report says 'she needs to speak up more in class', and when I came for my interview at Leeds they asked me if I thought my confidence will get in the way.... But I will speak if I have to, but I'd rather not.... I don't know how to say it.... It's like the problem I had before is that I worried too much about what people thought of me, and I don't know what it is about games, maybe it's because obviously when you play them you don't have to worry about everyone else or because I'm used to some people saying things and it's just made me happy with who I am that I

can say something back to them and it kind of improves my confidence. It's like yesterday one of the guys on my course emailed me and we started talking and he found out that I was a girl gamer and he's already asked me to join the Playstation club and things and asked to go out to the Union Club, which I don't really do, but I will do with him because I feel comfortable that we have something to talk about.

Something else that was apparent was the degree to which gamers noted how infrequent opportunities to talk about games were. For some the conversation with me was one of only a few opportunities. For example, Susan explains that she liked talking to me because she can't talk to her friends about games and Mike, another student, also tells me that he doesn't talk to non-gamers about games, especially girls.

If I'm comfortable with someone I will talk about anything, but if I've just met someone, I'm very, not timid, but I like to sit back and get an idea of what they're like, what interests they have so that I can make conversation. Games are part of my life and I enjoy talking about them, if my mates are stuck on a level we will talk about it, so you have something to talk about with fellow gamers, but at the same time you don't really want to talk about it unless you're sure that they play. I think that's just society though.

Games don't just seem to aid interaction between friends and family during play. People who play games like talking about them too. Many of the participants in this research also commented that they enjoyed being interviewed. They told me that they seldom had an opportunity to talk about playing games. But some do regularly talk to friends or work colleagues about games. This includes sharing tips, but also friendly competition over how players have approached specific in game tasks and how much progress they have made. Players may also share their frustrations with certain games or parts of games. Games as culture produce a form of cultural capital amongst some groups, and knowledge of games, and the completion of games in particular gives some individuals status within these groups.

6.4. Negative feelings that result from play

I have so far described experiences of play that are largely positive. Players gain pleasure from play because it allows for a feeling of achievement and accomplishment; because it is a resource through which they may access daydreams and fantasies, and; because it is an activity that may bring players closer to friends and loved ones. But I have also hinted that players frequently express 'problems' with videogames as an adult activity and in this section I want to explore these negative feelings further. I start with feelings of frustration that players tell me are common. These are often related to the complexity of games and related hardware, and to the demands games place on players ability to learn and on their manual

dexterity. Related to this, I then discuss feelings of humiliation that result from being 'defeated' in a game, but also that result from players resorting to cheats and walkthroughs. I then consider an issue that seems to influence many of the behaviours of adult digital game players: feelings that this activity is childish, or frivolous and that as adults they might not be spending their time playing games. Finally, and almost in opposition to the dismissal of games as childish, I consider what these adult players tell me about feeling compelled to play games as if they are addicted.

6.4.1. Frustration, annoyance and humiliation

Occasionally the ability games have to transport players to other places, and/or to provide feelings of achievement are undermined by technology that fails, reminding players that their experience is 'merely' computer generated. Most of the adults that I spoke to were able to recall such times. Robert gives a typical example, explaining a series of hard disc failures.

> *With Half Life 2, I'd got to this really hard mission bit of the game and I was absolutely pulling my hair out doing it and then someone suggested 'well why not do this'.... And I did that and thought 'yes, done it', and the day after I wiped my hard drive. I felt more annoyed because I hadn't finished the game. I'd just got through this really hard bit and I had probably a couple more missions to do before I finished the game and I've got to redo it again and I'm working through it, but I really can't be bothered because I've got these other games. And also the bit with the zombies scared the bejesus out of me and I don't think I can do that again [laughs].*

Another key source of frustration is where games don't 'behave as they should'. Here players become aware of the limitations of the programming. For example Max tells me about the '*little people*' in *Theme Park Tycoon* '*not behaving themselves*'. Carl gives more detail on this, noting that the behaviour that results from the AI not doing the 'right' thing 'disturbs' him.

> *There are occasions when I get really irritated. The Sims, because they are not behaving, they are being naughty, and it's partly the reasons why I stopped playing the Sims is that I, not just me but, my daughter, she is fourteen she would wall people in, if they were not doing what she wanted, she would brick the door up and just leave them until they died and take great glee out of having killed one of the people in the family that she has created and I didn't like that.... Watching a fourteen year old brick a person up in a room because she is being irritating and she won't do what Annie wants and she won't choose the colours that Annie likes and she won't behave the way that Annie wants, so she bricks her up and she's dead.... But when you play Sim City you are still in the god role but you are a lot more removed so if I get bored and I get the bulldozer and bulldoze half the city there is not that part of me that feels that I killed 4 million people, you know, which is probably the amount of people in that part of the city, you know and you do bulldoze parts because you want*

> *to start again, you know. Traffic jams used to irritate the hell out of me. You know I had built them a city, I've given them a logical grid, why do they want to use that fucking road [laughs], why don't they use the beautiful road on the other side that I have given them? There is feeling of irritation, you know, why haven't they done that?*

Alternatively, it could be the controls that irritate. Stephen tells me about problems he has had with controls in games.

> *Call of Duty, I bought that and the controls are really fiddly and it was a game I had trouble getting to grips with and, 'cause you learn a certain way of playing, in terms of what goes forward, and in this that was turned on it's head so trying to - in the middle of a battle - trying to get to grips with it was difficult and so I never really got into it. I played Medal of Honour.... And I quite enjoyed that but this Call of Duty spun the controls around a bit and I had trouble getting into it and I reached the point where you actually, I was in Stalingrad in 1943 or whatever, trying to get round the city in a tank and I ended up getting so frustrated I had like 10 or 20 goes at it and just get killed all the time and you reach a point where you think 'well, am I really going to get that much better where I'm going to be able to complete this?', or 'am I showing signs of improvement?'. And I was no better after the 20th attempt than the first, so I haven't gone back to that. And that sort of put me off those sort of games, I must admit and I've never really gone back to them.*

For some, not finishing a game is a major source of annoyance. Elaine explains the desire to finish, but also the disappointment that may result from resorting to cheats.

> *I couldn't do Jedi Outcast. I couldn't finish it for ages on the PC. I got stuck on one level and that really annoyed me, but I didn't give up until I finished it. If I really can't do it I used cheat codes, but I try not to.... Mainly because I'm afraid they'll say something that is in the future and it would be spoilt. I know Final Fantasy VII I haven't finished and I can't go back to it now because after I played Final Fantasy X.... I looked ahead on the walkthrough because I got stuck and it told me the main person that died and it just spoilt the whole thing for me.*

And a final source of frustration is the player's recognition of limitations in their own ability because they cannot progress in a game. Unlike Stephen, who seems clear that it was the controls of Call of Duty that caused his inability to complete a game, others accept that a lack of skill is the primary cause of frustration. Several players confessed to occasions when this has resulted in them damaging controllers, for example Elaine again explains:

> *Sometimes I get game rage. Except I half control it now. I used to throw the controller, now I just kind of grab it and just try and break it. But I can't.*

Playing games often causes players feelings of frustration. This may mark a difference between the 'ideal' play experience that players seek and the reality of some games and game hardware. Game hardware sometimes fails and results in lost data that may have resulted from many hours of play. This is also an issue for online play where internet connections may fail from time to time. Frustration results from not being able to do anything about this and therefore loosing the very sense of control that made games attractive. There remains a feeling of regret and even grief. The design of some games also frustrates players who simply find that they are unable to get to grips with the controls, or lack the skill to complete missions even though they feel that they should. Players enjoy games because of a sense of achievement they get, but when games deny them this, the experience is sometimes of humiliation. Online, this may be highlighted by more experienced players who may be insulting but without the familiarity that makes 'trash talk' among friends fun, but games may also induce a milder form of humiliation when players resort to cheating as Elaine described. Cheating is sometimes experienced as a sign of weakness, and yet players resort to it when progress in a game is blocked, or when they don't have time for the complexity of some games. Susan explains how resorting to a cheat may undermine her sense of achievement in this way.

I remember there was this one quest and I was walking round forever. They give you directions, like it's northeast of this, just off this path, and so I went there and I was like 'well it's not here'. I was so stuck. So I was walking through and thinking 'well it's obviously not up here, there's nothing up here'. I had to look it up on the Internet and it's annoying because it's so obvious where it was and then, 'cause it's the whole cheating thing, but there are places, like in Simon the Sorcerer I had to cheat a couple of times because you just get so stuck, you'd be in the same place for literally like weeks, trying to work out how you get out.... Yes, you just want to work things out for yourself and sometimes things are quite hard.... Sometimes it's just a little bit more effort to kind of work things out. It's annoying, it's like I've let myself down [laughs]. I don't know, because you work really hard and you get to a certain point without cheating, and then you find that you actually need to ask.... And it's just like, 'god, someone had to go through so much hassle to find this in the first place and put it on the Internet and I've just gone the easy route'. You just feel like you should have tried that little bit harder and done it yourself I suppose.

Theo explains something similar that he has experienced and also tells me about his sister actually crying over a game.

When you are playing and the last level is very tough, I just want to finish it, you know. I just want to kill the guy and I think by that time, when you just want to kill the bastard, you just 'oh, I kill you and that's it', you know. Some games get very tough, you know at the end and that Doom3, that last monster, it was very difficult.... I really like to finish the game when I'm playing a game, you know,

I like to play it properly, you know, not cheating - I cheat a game once I finish it, you know, just more fun, more ammo, but with this game the only way I finish it was cheating. I go to the Internet and find some invincibility code, do it, kill the guy and that's it. I think because I kill it that way I didn't feel, you know, nothing, because I cheat. I cheated because I couldn't kill it. If I get stuck and I really want to see what's next, I do try, I really try, but if I can't, I just cheat the game. It's very frustrating, yeah, very frustrating.... I got this game for my wife, and the same thing happened with my sister. This game called Rayman. And my sister played, she played I think it was the first one. And she got to this level where she had to jump, like three, it was like lava at the bottom and she had to jump these three things. It was very difficult and she got to that point with 20 lives or something like that and she couldn't pass it and she was crying because she couldn't, she couldn't do it. She couldn't pass and she never played the game again ever. Then I bought Rayman 3 I think for my wife and it was the same thing, she got to this part, this monster and she tried like 4 times to beat that guy and she couldn't, and she almost cried. And then she said, 'that's it, I'm not playing the game any more'.

The immediate pleasure of using a cheat or walkthrough to progress seems to give way to a feeling of inadequacy at not being able to solve in-game problems and of therefore not being as good as other players (imagined or known) or the game designers. Theo best described the strength of the emotion felt; something capable of reducing adults to tears and resulting in games being abandoned.

6.4.2. Guilt and childishness

In addition to frustration and annoyance, adult players may describe times when playing games makes them feel guilty. This may be connected to a feeling of 'childishness' that results from spending time playing games. For example Stuart tells me that he thinks games are made for teenage boys and are therefore not *really* designed for adults. His view that games are at times childish is highlighted several times as we talk when Stuart laughs at his own descriptions of his play, for example, he described playing Morrowind:

It's supposed to be 30 square kilometres, the world of Oblivion, [laughs] I can't believe I'm talking about this seriously. It's [laughs]. I'm talking about fighting monsters. In the cold light of day it seems silly.

Mandy also laughs about the shop assistant who sold her a DS and notes her Mother's comments about her wanting to buy one.

He goes 'I've got a game, this Animal Crossing, I've just not put it down at all' and I was like 'yes mate, you're an absolute freak, you know'. I actually, I swear (says the 25 year old with a

Nintendog), but I was like kind of sat there and my mum was listening and she's like 'what are you doing' and I'm 'I'm buying a game', and she 'oh, OK, but your 25 this year'.

And later in the same interview she notes:

I don't want to kind of pigeon-hole him, but he was, you know, your typical kind of - well I guess what I am now! [laughs]. Just like games-freak person! He was like 'yeah, yeah you've got to play Animal Crossing'.

Dick also has doubts about the value of his time playing games. He explains that he is currently studying part-time to be a journalist. As part of this he has set himself a task of reading 'classic' fiction and philosophy texts and compares this to games, noting that a recognition of the 'pointlessness' of most games leads to him being more discerning about the games he does spend time on.

I do like to read and I feel guilty if I spend more time playing games than reading, because I know that reading is supposed to enrich you and stuff, but like playing games is just kind of silly and.... I think as a hobby, because I'm quite seriously into it, I think it's a rewarding hobby, but I think, you know, looking at it from a very honest point of view, it's no better really than sort of sitting watching the TV, or picking your nose or, you know, it's basically just not doing anything. But very few games try to say anything either. A lot, you know, a lot of them it's just all about the game play, but I tend to be more attracted - if there's a bit more substance behind it - then I will be attracted to it.

Robert and Ann also expressed a concern about the 'childishness' of playing games and reflect on the attitudes of non-players who reinforce these feelings. Robert makes this point.

I do feel it is a guilty pleasure and if you say 'actually I spent all night playing games, doing this that and the other', some people will sort of think 'you should get out more', but I don't feel I have to justify myself to them, but in the back of your mind you think 'Well do I need to?'. I probably don't. I'm not going to [laughs].

Colin is clear that the media plays a role in the perception of game players. He seems to acknowledge that a 'stereotype' gamer exists, but that it just doesn't describe him; again there is a tension between what a player thinks others think of gamers and their own view of themselves and their behaviour.

To be honest with you I do worry about it on occasion because there is this stereotypical view of a gamer.... Most people think a 19 year old guy who plays computer games is a guy who sits at home in his parents place all day long, plays computer games, looks at porn on the internet, that kind of thing. But I don't think people should see it like that. You can't say to people 'oh, I play computer

games'. It's not something that would be attractive to people of the opposite sex. Some girls do play computer games, but some girls find it a put off, you know. If you go to a girl 'oh, I really enjoy playing computer games', 'oh, you nerd'. You know, stupid things like that. Well not everyone is like that, well, my cousin is a bit like that, because he does play games a lot, you know. And I think I used to play them a lot when I was unemployed, 'cause there wasn't much else for me to do that didn't cost money.... But the stereotyping of gamers is all wrong, mostly. Not everyone is the same. I don't want everyone to think that I'm just your average gamer. I don't want to be thought of like that.... I think you see some people on like movies and programmes on TV, like a young kid playing a game and they end up being this spotty guy who just sits in his room playing computer games over the internet or something, you know.

Like Colin, Susan also makes the point than playing games should be, but often isn't seen as 'normal'. Several times during our conversation Susan becomes embarrassed when describing the games she plays. She explains:

My friends always take the mick out of me. Like, it's something that I didn't admit to until not that long ago when I found out my other friend at uni plays. And then like I just joke about my other life. It's a stigma. It's like, you say you play a videogame and people think that you're a bit of a geek and that you don't actually - like, 'cause my friends at uni, they only know me at uni, they don't know what I'm like at home. So if I say 'I play World of Warcraft' and stuff, they might immediately jump to the conclusion that at home I have no friends and I don't go out, and I'm just two different people like at uni and at home and like, I don't know, you just don't want people to think. It is the stereotype. Like I don't want people to put me in that stereotype, 'cause I don't think I am. I'm not ashamed that I play, but I wouldn't tell everyone.

Players also noted a worry about 'mindless violence' in games and commented that they wanted to be distanced from the media view of 'gamers as violent'. For example, Dick expresses concerns about violence. He tells me that he has recently become a Buddhist and worries about the conflict between Buddhist teaching and the pleasure he gets from violent action games.

When you talk about it, it sounds really bad because you're saying 'oh yeah man, I really want to rip people's heads of', [laughs]. It sounds really stupid, but like, when you are playing it, it is a challenge because you know it's possible to do these things, so you have to be skilful enough and fast enough to pull these things off.... But it's like sports people say about 'being in the Zone'. You just have to concentrate completely.... There is a very thin threshold where you don't want to go past it because it's not fun anymore because it's just unfair.... Those sort of games keep you pressured and they keep you tapped into like the reactive part of your brain as opposed to the higher functions so that when something goes wrong all these like animal instincts that have been repressed come out and you just go 'argghhhh, sod it!', and throw the controller.... Another reason

why 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, is that 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 so when you do something like that - I'm completely non-aggressive, I would never do something like that - but it's because you kind of bypass the high brain.

Guilt may result from specific experiences of binge play, or missed time with family, or other tasks that have gone undone, but there may also be an underlying feeling of guilt that is attached to spending time on 'childish things'. Players note media coverage of games and comments from friends and relatives that seem to confirm the 'childish' and 'pointless' nature of videogames. Players also express guilt over the violence in games that they recognise is often 'mindless' and therefore also childish. One result of this nagging guilt that players take pleasure from such things is the need to justify playing games. So play is not 'taken for granted', but remains slightly taboo. Another result of this experience is a self-imposed set of rules about when, how much and what players play. And players may also reflect on their own behaviour in such a way that distances themselves from this childish activity, highlighting the 'silliness' in some of what they do. But there is also a suggestion that the industry is partly to blame. Players note that the content of games remains childish. They suggest that producers might aim for games that cannot so easily be dismissed as 'childish' matter.

6.4.3. Feelings of addiction

Despite the dismissal of games as trivial and childish, players may note that they are still drawn to play games and at times it seems that play can become a compulsion. I have already described 'binge play' and for several players this, and even routine play may result in negative feelings that are often described in terms of 'addiction'. For example Janice explains how she feels compelled to play games.

I think sometimes, especially in the winter when you are playing a bit more, like I mentioned about coming home and playing it, it's almost this need for it, it's almost – not all the time for me – but a slight addiction, 'oh I'm going to try that thing when I get home. It's just past tea break, it's half past three, I'm going to be home by five. I can have a go at that, you know Laguna track'. It's almost like, it's part of you, it's, 'I've got to do this and I've got to do that'. There's a slight addiction to it. And as soon as you're home you make a cup of tea, the powers on and its great and that's it, you're lost then aren't you. It's like another world sometimes and you could spend a few hours and you don't even know you've done it.

Janice goes on to explain the feeling of anticipating a new game, suggesting that this is part of the addiction:

> *I enjoy it when new games come out and get excited and think 'it's not long 'til so and so comes out you know', you know. I can totally understand the addiction and they're going on about it on the telly now aren't they, about kids getting addicted. I totally understand it. Totally. It's not so much a physical addiction because it's not a drug like alcohol, it's like a mental thing isn't it. And it's still an addiction. You body, your brain is telling you 'come on, you've got to pick this up and you've got to do this'. You know, you think how long these kids have had these games and that's all they've done, sit in their bedrooms and play these things day in, day out. They've got no job, they've got no life, they've got no friends. Of course they're not all like that, but there are going to be some, the extreme cases that are addicted. It's sad in a way, but they're going to need help, just like that bloke sticking a needle in his arm.*

Others were also aware that games have the potential to 'take over'. For example, Malcolm explains giving up 'important bits of his life' to play *Super Monkey Ball, a*nd Robert also recognises the potential for games to be a 'compulsive activity', explaining that if I wasn't visiting he would probably be playing. Several times Robert uses alcohol as a metaphor for games. For example he explains what happens if he plays late into the night.

> *I realise that if I stay up until 2 in the morning I'm just a grumpy baggin the next day and it's not really fair on anyone [laughs]. Same way as you work out whether you've had a lot to drink, you wake up and you're hung over and you think 'well hold on, how did that happen?'*

Others explain the 'problems' of playing games too much by attributing specific 'compulsive', or 'addictive' qualities to their personality or that of others. So for example, Susan worries about her boyfriend playing *World of Warcraft.*

> *My boyfriend wants to play it, every time he comes round my house back home he's like 'oh, can I play on it for a bit?', and I won't let him because he's the kind of person that won't..., I know if I introduce him to World of Warcraft, he will not be able to stop. He's one of those people, so I won't let him play it because I don't want his life to become over run by it, like mine once was [laughs].*

Douglas also accounts for the time spent playing games by attributing it to an aspect of his personality:

> *You know I described it as being a little bit escapist. I suppose it can be like anything, drugs, or food, sex, there is maybe an addictive side to it that just takes over you, like so you're not having to deal with other things in your life that you're finding hard. It might be socially or getting on with*

your career. There are aspects of both those things that I find a little bit scary and difficult to deal with, so it's much easier to put your mind on something else like eating, or engaging in a game.

Most of the adults I spoke to had an 'addiction story' to tell, but Grant provides a detailed explanation of the hundreds of hours playing Eve online to demonstrate how players may spend most of their available time on a game. For 2 years the game dominated Grant's life. He notes the negative reaction of his friends to the amount of time he played and his reduction in social time with them, and he then explains his realisation that he might be playing too much. He now 'warns' others, based on his experience.

You're just doing the same thing ever week, week in, week out and although there was still new content - I think they've got a huge patch they're going to be doing soon, which is probably going to completely change the game again.... But it just, I got sucked into the MMORPGs and then I realised that I'm just doing the same shit week in, week out. And that's what I try to explain to them [friends at work who play World of Warcraft], but they are still sucked into the environment, so it's like you are sucked into the matrix and I've been able to pull myself out. That would be the best description of it. You got sucked into a non-reality and I was able to escape from it.

However, a curious aspect of the 'addictive' quality of games is that players explain that although at times they feel 'sucked in' at other times there is no compulsion to play. Mike explains it like this:

I stop playing very occasionally actually, like I'll stop playing for sort of 2 weeks and then when I play again I'll get addicted for another 3 to 4 days and then something will come up and I won't be able to play for a day and it's like the addiction has gone. If you don't play it for a day it's like nothing. But you really do get addicted. It's World of Warcrack. That's what it's known as on the forums and everything. It is. There is something addictive about the game.... It's quite sad actually [laughs]. It's like you don't feel as good if you don't play. It's weird. When you are playing time can pass unbelievably quickly. You'll be on there and you think half an hour has gone, but it's actually 3 or 4 hours. So I actually have a little clock next to me, so I've got a timer that will actually cut off my internet connection after a certain amount of time.

Like Mike, Wendy highlights the 'confessions' that take place on online forums.

On the forums you get all this 'oh my god, I'm a 40 year old man and I'm addicted to Animal Crossing. Is there any other people, aside from all the teenagers that are like addicted to it?' And you get hundreds of responses!

Wendy mentions her 'addiction to Animal Crossing a number of times in our discussion, for example:

I'm completely addicted to it! You know, I don't want to be, because I do have other things that I should be doing, but I will compare myself to like other players and in my eyes I'm not as bad as them [laughs]. They're the ones with the problem. I am, you know I've got a slight addiction, but you know I don't smoke, I don't go out drinking that much. You know, it's my kind of, my Achilles heal I would say. Yes.

Towards the end of our last interview Wendy makes a final comment about her apparent 'addiction'.

I don't know, I'm not eccentric and kind of mad and you know, as I might sound. I would like to say that I don't think I'm addicted. I would like to say that, you know, I can sit here, I'm quite comfortable to sit here and say I'm not addicted, when clearly from an outsiders perception I blatantly am.

Sometimes the desire to play games is so strong that players experience it as something like an addiction, or rather this is a way that they account for extended play. Players spontaneously use drug and alcohol metaphors when describing games, recognising that their carefully managed play-behaviours may at any time break down, resulting in the compulsion to play imposing itself on their lives to the exclusion of all other activities. In this sense, games are described as 'dangerous'. However this 'addiction' seems to be sporadic. Players cite specific games and times when play seems to dominate their lives, but this feeling seldom persists for long. Some games, at some times seem to 'suck players in' only letting them go when the game is completed or some other external event interrupts, but at other time players don't play at all, or only play as part of routine planned activity. Wary of this 'danger' some players take measures to avoid games, or avoid playing at times when they might experience this feeling of games taking over. Other players account for this 'addiction' by identifying this as a 'weakness' in their personality; accepting that they are just someone who is prone to this. Periods of 'addiction' are also recalled as 'wasted' or 'lost' time and therefore time when play and life is out of control. It is all the more worrying for players that they recall enjoying these binges at the time and therefore that they have been 'seduced' by games and may easily be so again.

This is perhaps the most extreme negative feeling produced by games, but players also occasionally feel frustrated, or guilty about their play-behaviour suggesting that the task of getting what they want from play is not always straightforward, but rather is something that must be worked at. Even when they get that balance right, they find that friends, or especially the media, might undermine them through reference to the childishness of their hobby. This is not helped by experiences of online play where players seem to regularly witness the very childish and 'obsessive' behaviour that the media report. Players also note that the content of

many games feels 'childish', suggesting that despite the industry's keenness to promote games as a 'normal' adult activity, the content of the games themselves does not always match such rhetoric. Despite this the benefits experienced from videogame play seem sufficient to ensure that many continue to play and the result is an activity that is full of the potential for a wide range of both positive and negative experiences.

Chapter 7 - Managing to Play

Interpretive research studies are now established within the consumer research community (see Arnould and Thompson, 2005). One result is that their arguments against the over-rational and reductive practice of positivist marketing science may seem redundant. Yet here I am re-stating the importance of phenomenology, recognising that the acceptance of interpretive studies requires ongoing research practice, as well as adding to an understanding of consumer practices through an empirical focus on videogames that has currently received almost no attention in consumer studies.

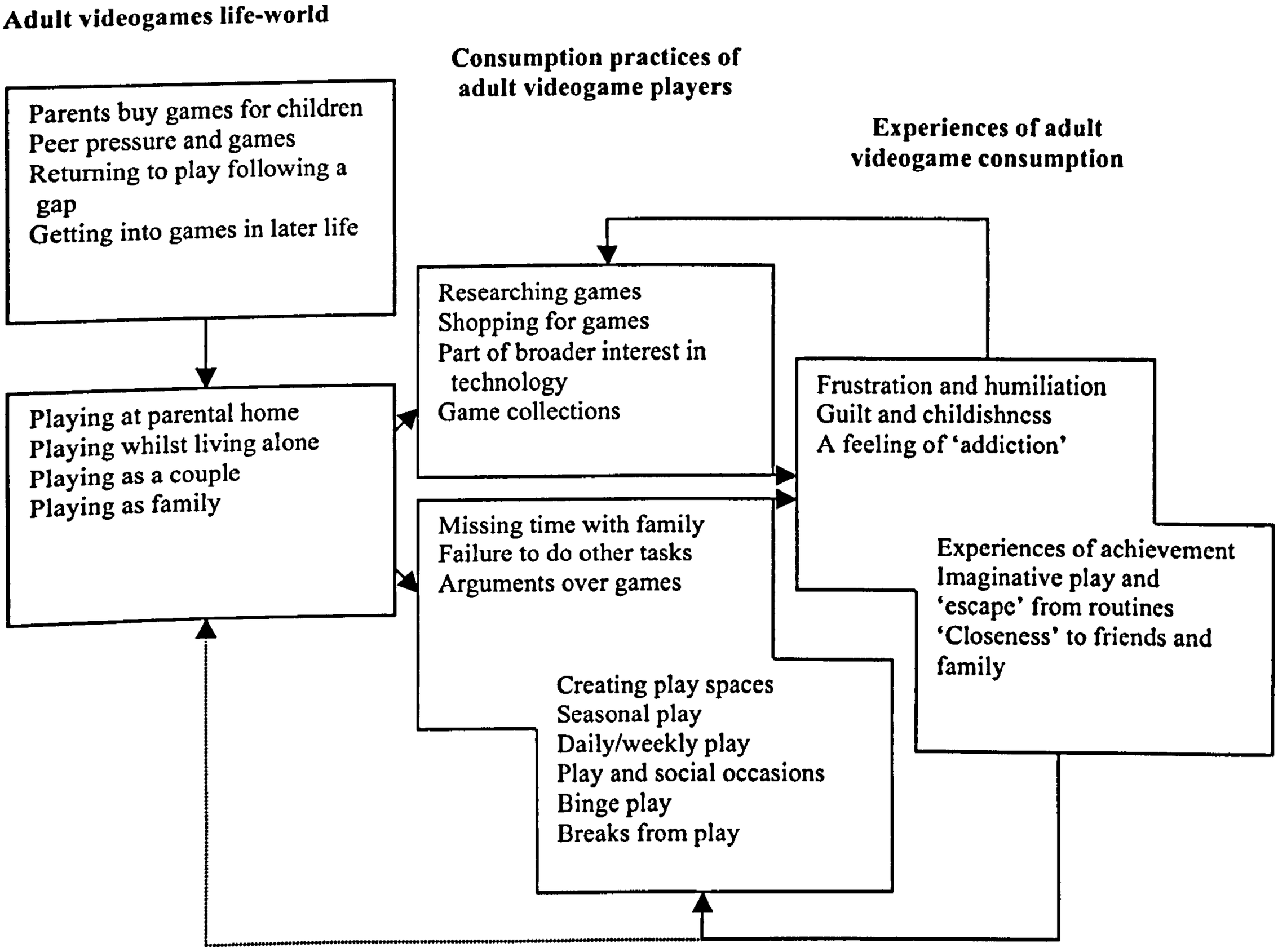
The tradition in videogame research has also initially focused on the modern discourse of progress and more positivist traditions in psychology, in addition to the formalist tradition of film or media studies. We see limited acknowledgement of the everyday and the life-world of videogame players. The necessary rhetoric implied in my methods is therefore for a greater emphasis on the individual videogamer *and* their life. I am also emphasising the playfulness in consumer culture and implying that the complexity of the ongoing competition between *ludus* and *paidia*, routine and escape, is best and possibly only captured through the detailed stories of player-consumers. How else other than through their experience of life, and an examination of the practices they engage with, might we capture their understanding of and occasional resentment for the 'ordinariness' of much experience and the considerable skill and imagination involved in their efforts to overcome such feelings?

In the preceding chapters I have described nuances and complexities in the experiences of a group of adult videogame users. These adults have differing amounts of experience with games based on their personal histories. They also play within various domestic contexts that may change over time. This produces consumption practices that are in an iterative relationship with the experiences that videogame play produces. Such complexity suggests a series of apparent contradictions and certainly no simple picture of why adults play videogames. So in this section I attempt to make sense of the contradictions in terms of the broad theoretical contexts reviewed in the opening chapters. Figure 2 shows a summary of themes apparent in the lived experience of adult videogame consumption.

I start by considering how play and consumption discourses are manifest in the videogame consumption practices that participants described. This leads to an analysis of the key ideas that players evoke when describing such play. These players talk of 'balance' between play and other aspects of life, of 'control', and of a desire for 'progress' and 'achievement' through play, suggesting that they don't always get these from other aspects of their lives. So why are games used as compensation and as markers of progress, and where does a need for balance come from? These players also frequently describe their behaviour as

'escapism', but escape from what and to where? Finally games may also be used to manage social activity. They are something to do with friends and family, and a cultural resource that may be talked about, solving problems of social interaction that some players seem to find especially difficult.

Figure 2: The lived experience of adult videogame consumption



Overall though, players must manage their identity as a gamer. It is clear that players are not always entirely successful in this complex task. They recognise that despite the potential benefits from play, games may also 'take over' life resulting in negative consequences such as guilt, or feelings of compulsion.

7.1. Videogame consumption and rhetorics of play

Sutton-Smith's (1997) broad rhetorics of play (i.e., the ways in which play may be understood) are discernable in players' stories, as are accounts of how the market both aids and at times frustrates 'successful' play. Starting with 'ancient rhetorics', players provide

accounts of a life that is full of contingency, chance, or luck that results in feelings of a lack of control over one's own life-world. Videogames may provide an 'antidote' to such feelings by providing a space that is more predictable and where outcomes are apparently not susceptible to the randomness encountered in everyday life. They may offer a clear and understandable sense of challenge and provide explicit markers of progress in a life-world where progress and achievement are hard to grasp and to quantify. The videogame ensures fair competition between players but also provides knowable chance. This is consistent with Caillois's overall explanation of the relationship between *alea* and *agon*; both are a way to experience 'fairness':

> *Agon and alea imply opposite and somewhat complementary attitudes, but they both obey the same law - the creation for the player of conditions of pure quality denied them in real life. For nothing in life is clear. Since everything is confused from the very beginning, luck and merit too. Play, whether agon or alea, is thus an attempt to substitute perfect situations for the normal confusion of contemporary life. In games, the role of merit or chance is clear and indisputable.... In one way or another one escapes from the real world and creates another* (1958:19).

I'll return to these ideas, and their implications for play as ideological power later. Yet players also note that games may themselves become too predictable and therefore they seek both novelty in new games and ways of reintroducing the contingency of human behaviour into play. This is not the same as 'social' play, where the aim seems to be interactions with others, but rather a way to manage 'chance'.

The ancient group identity rhetoric is less well observed in what is often a frustratingly individualised experience, but the recognition of a desire for social play is apparent. Despite Crook's (1998) warning of a desire amongst sociologists to idealise the 'purity' of the social, we can note a preference for group play, including group online play. And the idea of family play involving parents and children seems counter to the discourse of a fragmented household with family members consuming private media - the opposite of the trends identified by Firat and Dholakia (1998), for example (although perhaps the specialness of family play highlights the more usual isolation).

Modern play rhetorics – progress, self and imagination – seem even more strongly articulated however. There are frequent references to achievement and a desire to complete, do better, or accumulate more. Here we also see a consumer sentiment directly translated into 'virtual consumption' practices: The building of an ideal home, or the 'purchase' of the very best magic equipment. This is consistent with arguments put forward by Sicart (2003) on the ideology implicit in *The Sims*, for example and is an indication of play of the self – a narcissistic project. Despite highlighting a yearning for social play, players enjoy the 'selfishness' of an activity that provides individual space away from work and family

responsibilities. Players also explain experiencing *flow*, a feeling of losing themselves in their play, rather than a project to know others better. Yet as Caru and Cova (2003) state that this may also be evidence of a loss of 'contemplative time'. For example, players note a 'need' to fill time and games are one solution to avoiding the possibility of boredom. So there is a fear of monotony and an apparent 'pleasure angst', a worry about not going anything, about not having fun. Videogames may ensure that there is always easy access to something enjoyable.

However it is perhaps play of the imagination that most dominated stories. This again related to a desire to escape the limitations of 'paramount reality' – the 'nightmare of repetition', as Cohen and Taylor (1992) describe it. Here we see the individual exploring their own selves through the games they have purchased, but this also suggests a deficiency in that sense of self - despite work, family, and social roles - that results from the recognition of routine. Some in-game fantasies are enduring and elaborate actualisations of the imagination that are explained in relation to lost opportunities, lack of ability, or future desires for their lives. For others the escapism is even more elaborate, based on complex worlds co-created with the aid of game developers, but also through established fictional works. So there is also an issue of unattainable imaginings. Individuals can imagine more than is achievable in a lifetime. Not just 'being famous', but what type of famous? Pop star, sports star, actor, businessman, or soldier? All are possible ideals but improbably actualisations. Then there are the fantastic opportunities of wizards and space travellers. Perhaps these are safer options because they present less fear of failure. You might not ever be one in the material world, but nor will anyone else. In this regard videogames are one solution to a romantic tradition in consumption that encourages fantasy, but can deny the satisfaction of actualisation.

Videogames also allow two forms of 'exploration'. Firstly, for some experienced players the task of seeking out rare or unusual games is itself a significant part of the pleasure of games, offering a possibility of finding and experiencing the exotic. For others exploring the technology and its capabilities is part of the play. And the games themselves provide a form of 'virtual tourism' as players explore game-worlds simply for their aesthetic pleasures.

Players also use games nostalgically. They re-visit their youth, or previous pleasurable experiences. Although the latest consoles and games may seduce players, older adults may feel that the 'golden age' of games has passed. They may complain about a lack of novelty in new games as they recall the 'specialness' of early experience and compare this with the 'standardised' genres they now play. Some also complain about a lack of games that suit their playing styles. They may be frustrated by games that they cannot 'get into' because they are too time consuming or too difficult to play. They may also complain that many games lack narrative sophistication, and some complain that games may be too violent. If the games industry wish to defend their products by presenting the consumption of their wares as 'normal' against persistent media coverage of games as 'deviant', these adult players are only

partially in agreement. Yet the 'everydayness' of their use attests against the stronger criticisms of their disruption to society's norms and values.

The frivolousness of games is never far away from the thoughts of players. It is a persistent framing of this activity and it partly determines their financial commitment to games. As does an awareness of a market structure that results in high prices for the 'latest thing', but much lower prices once the novelty has worn off. Many of the players I spoke to had learnt to wait before buying games, often declaring a preference for used games. This is consistent with research reported in *Gamasutra* (2007), who in addition report that despite industry concerns about the used market, its existence actually helps sales of new games because 'income' from trading tends to be spent on newer games, and this is also something the adults I spoke to told me they did. Some players even seem to enjoy the wait, using it as an opportunity to research the market in detail and anticipate a desired purchase. The result is that adults may focus on a few well-considered purchases. This seems to suggest that for adult games are a curious combination of high-involvement and frivolous purchase. A benefit for consumers is that the tensions created by these important, frivolous commodities are a way to occupy time (in research and deliberation) and experience desire, for example in the way Campbell (1987) describes. As a hobby, videogames provide endless opportunities to 'conjure up' desire for the new, to give oneself something to look forward to. For example such was the anticipation of the latest Grand theft Auto games that *Gamasutra* (2008) reported that almost 6 million copies were anticipated to be bought in the first week following its release.

The childishness associated with videogames may also limit the degree of 'public' identity work that games allow. Although there may be some value in knowing about games when talking to other players, in social interactions with non-players the reverse may be true – acquired videogame knowledge in adults may be a cultural liability. At least some of this concern is based on the view of games as the violent preoccupation of teenage boys. In this respect an apparent failure of the industry to successfully establish a public image of games as having a legitimate adult interest, and to some degree their failure to produce adult games other than those that are violent, produces adult gamers as 'victims', let down by the market they support. Although gender has not been a focus here, it seems likely that this is even more the case for female adult players. The female players I spoke to complained about a male-gendered retail and media environment for videogames. This has been identified and covered in more detail elsewhere (for example see Bryce and Rutter, 2007). Adults' experiences of using game shops in some ways helps to reinforce the negative images of games as the preoccupation of teenage boys, as does the experience of using various online games. The stories of fathers taking their children to game shops may also confirm videogames as children's 'toys'. These issues again represent a tension in the market. Videogames and their

retail environments tend to focus their appeal on what are seen as a core target market – teenage boys – but in doing so they may undermine broader industry efforts to widen appeal to women and older players.

However these consumers are also 'cheats'; some download software, avoiding paying for it altogether, others create their own games through modding instead of buying 'pre-finished' games; others still exploit the second-hand market. Most that I spoke to deliberately avoided paying full price for games. However in this group, few took this consumer 'rebellion' as far as activism against games companies. There was certainly more evidence of videogames supporting market ideology than them being an effective form of emancipation and so we may see these activities as examples of the games consumers play with marketers that may rejuvenate the market (see Gayson, 1999) rather than the actions of 'spoilsports'.

Although consumer as communicator, activist or even citizen are ideas that are problematically applied to videogames, elsewhere the description of adult videogame play as a consumer activity seems well justified. These adult gamers enjoy time spent researching games and find in game shops a place to spend time whilst shopping (at least the experienced male players do), or even a suitable destination for a trip – a reason to go shopping. They may take children with them, a further opportunity to spend time with them in addition to time playing the game itself. We may see in this 'ritualistic' behaviour a reason why on the surface consumption seems dominated by choice: the long hours reading reviews, forums and browsing in store.

This all starts to confirm the idea that rather than these being separate and independent conceptualisations of consumption, they are in fact discourses that simply focus on specific aspects of the playfulness of the consumer society. We may see each of these conceptualisations in adult videogame consumption if we start with any as the theoretical basis for a study, but doing so may easily miss something of the lived experience as a whole. We cannot therefore easily reduce adult videogame play to a measure of violent effects, or even education – the dominant progress-ridden discourses of play – or any other single play form. Instead we must focus on the experiences of the players themselves. Doing so also suggests that as a potential 'ideal' commodity, videogames may have some way to go. They appear trapped in a cycle of ever increasing technological sophistication that appeals to consumers desire for the new, but with an adult consumer base that may be occasionally suspicious of the overall benefits of chasing such improvements. This perhaps sets the tone for any analysis of games - a recognition that in the complexity of play, simple explanations are always elusive.

7.2 The discourses adults use to account for videogame play

I now want to comment further on the experiences of players. Here I am attempting to understand what they tell us about this development in consumer culture, how this market activity may have evolved, and why we see these players playing these games in these particular social circumstances. I start by considering the idea of a 'balanced life'; something that is an ongoing project as players' lives change. Related to this is the idea of achievement in that a balanced life also means progress – ensuring that setbacks are balanced with successes. Achievement is perhaps also seen as avoiding feelings of inadequacy or failure that life may present; a form of compensation similar to the idea of 'catharsis' identified in effects research. I briefly suggested that this may involve considerable imaginative effort and these efforts are worth more detailed review. I also want to consider the social aspects of videogame play and the struggles players seem to have to get the group-play they desire. And finally I reflect further on the identity work that games encourage.

7.2.1. Play, achievement and a managed life

According to Turner (1992) the liminal group festivals that society may use to manage the life-plan of individuals has been replaced by liminoid events that are instead instigated by the individual. This is similar to what Bauman (2001) calls 'bottom up' modernism. The individual can no longer look to society to 'make things right' but is required to manage their own life. The market presents itself as a key resource for this task and here we see videogames as one market offering that in various ways allows individuals to achieve an experience of balance. Actually this suggests that the very idea of the need for balance is accepted and understood by individuals such that they may occasionally or often experience an imbalance that drives them to take redressive action. We could also see this as a tendency towards the modern discourses of play as progress and play of the self and a diminishing of a sense of fate 'controlling' everyday life, and of group identity play. Although as Crook (1998) suggests and Desmond (2003) discusses, we might be cautious about articulating this change only as a loss, we might be equally cautious of the claims for videogames as 'strongly' transformatory. For example, the exploration of fantasy as escape from routine, or the use of games as compensation for an unsatisfactory life is quite different from claims that games may be significant in developing strategies for actions in the material world: Schechner's (1988) relationship between social and aesthetic drama, or what Silverstone refers to as a *'flight simulator for the everyday'* (1999:65). Rather than transform everyday routine, games seem to help players to deal with it.

The requirement for management – the things that need to be managed – may vary throughout a player's life and even throughout the year, month or day. The situational nature

of play also reminds us that we must restrict commentary to these players playing these games at these times, rather than attempt to generalise insights to 'all players', or 'all games'. On a daily basis we may, for example, witness players 'defeated' by their work or even by their personal relationships, and they may compensate for this through 'cathartic' play. This serves to block out the negative feelings produced by unsatisfactory meetings with customers or managers, spouses, or even simply a frustrating journey home. Whatever it is that leaves the individual feeling that the day has 'not gone well' can be banished with a period of intense individual play. In this instance games that may be picked up in an instant seem to work best. For example, a few laps at speed on *Gran Turismo* can compensate for an hour in traffic, or a few levels of 'mindless destruction' in *Doom3* or *Halo* can compensate for a bad meeting, argumentative customers or another row at home. Part of the therapeutic nature of games is simply the removal of the player from the reality that is troublesome, aided by the immersive nature of games that require complete attention. Videogames offer both spatial and temporal distance in this way. But there may also be an aesthetic 'release' of the blocked performance that Schechner (1986) describes. The recognition that a player is unable to act in the material world produces the desire for aesthetic realisation. Players effectively 'make good' whatever troubles them.

Another aspect of life that seems to require management is boredom. This may be seasonal and may also vary throughout life. For example, several players observe that when they go to university, start a new job, or have a child, they stop playing games. They describe this as a non-conscious decision, suggesting that it is the drivers to play that diminish rather than a conscious decision to stop. Again, in the summer in particular, players find they may have many other things to keep them occupied and so it is in the winter, when there is little else to do that game playing takes place the most. Here players compensate for having nothing to do - which is experienced as boredom - and they are driven to occupy that time, to fill it with experiences that can allow for some sense of purpose, or achievement. This seems to be a curious manifestation of a work ethic. Rather than 'do nothing', players seek experiences in games that allow a feeling of progress or achievement, creating a feeling that time has not been wasted. And yet games are also occasionally responsible for a feeling of a loss of control. Players identify periods of play that are 'binges' and tell stories of the consequences of such events. The result is that play also needs to be balanced with other activities including other leisure pursuits. I return to this idea below.

'Balance' may suggest a static life without change, but I have already highlighted the sense in which players internalise a need to experience progress. So although they may use videogames to balance many of the inadequacies they feel in life, they also seek experiences of achievement. This feeling of progress is a key driver of consumer culture manifest since the 'more-is-better' ethos of Fordism, and so it is perhaps not surprising that within games we

also see consumer-like mechanisms to signal progress. At times these are the accumulation of virtual consumer goods themselves; 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' is still apparent, but the virtual goods are the magic armour and weapons of games such as *World of Warcraft*, or the fleets of spaceships in *Eve Online.* Even where commodities are absent, progress is confirmed by stronger avatar abilities, or simply an ever-increasing score, such as that described for *Baulder's Gate.* In such play there is an aesthetic 'performance' of achievement that reveals the ways in which consumers understand the criteria by which they may measure their progress: a visible accumulation of more. We also see apparent 'rational consumption' in the purchase behaviour of players who research and calculate the best deals and who in some cases achieve a sense of progress through the accumulation of more games, or through new and better technology. Each console is better than the last and the presence of a new generation of machines eventually results in players losing interest in their current hardware. Alternatively the accumulation of an ideal collection of games or consoles presents a feeling of having accomplished something worthwhile.

Achievement is also experienced through games offering the chance to actualise things that are not possible, or practical in the material world of these players' lives. A specific example of this is the way in which games allow for creativity in lives otherwise without such opportunity - in particular at work - and for players who may lack the skill in art or other creative forms. We see this particularly in 'god games', such as *Civilisation*, or *Command and Conquer*, and also in resource management games such as *Theme Park Tycoon* that require players to build a structure at least partly from their imagination. Evidence that this is not the same task as competitive play – not agonistic – comes from reports that players often either use cheats, or play in sandbox mode to eliminate competitive challenge in order to focus on the experience of creating something. Again, however, videogames occasionally undermine the very experiences that they are used to get at. Games can be either too easy, resulting in a sense in which nothing worthwhile has been achieved, or too difficult, resulting in feelings of frustration and defeat. Even in god games there is the potential for the game simply not to respond in the way the players want it to.

7.2.2. Play, the imagination and 'escape' from routine

If the rational consumer is noted through 'progress play', the aesthetic and imaginative consumer is even more apparent in the stories these adults tell. Players imagine times past, or 'lost' futures; they imagine 'ideal' interactions with others; they imagine other places; and they seek to 'block out' thoughts from their imagination. In doing so they may temporally and

spatially extend their reality. They may experience the future, or past, or another place. They may also 'compress' time, experiencing in a weekend what might otherwise take a lifetime of training to achieve. In doing so they may also become absent from a life-world that is less than ideal. Through use of the imagination games therefore allow a management of time and space, give daydreams and fantasy structure, prevent negative thoughts, or stimulate and intensify new imaginings.

We might see these players' reflections of their escapism as detailed examples of the 'escape attempts' articulated by Cohen and Taylor (1992) and in particular they are examples of aesthetic activities that result from a combination of the 'inner theatre of the mind' and an 'activity enclave'. As Cohen and Taylor put it:

> *Our lives are run through with fantasies: they invade our workplace, our kitchen table, our marriage bed. At any moment it is as though we can throw a switch inside our heads and effect some bizarre adjustment to the concrete world which faces us – make horses fly, strip the women, assassinate the boss – or else conjure up an alternative reality which has apparently little connection with our present situation. Fantasies are always on the tip of our mind, about to enter consciousness. They squeeze themselves into all those moments of our lives when we are not fully engaged by the demands of the concrete world. They provide a continual possibility for the blurring and distortion of the clear predictable lines of paramount reality.* (1992:90).

Only now the switch is on the console or PC and not just in our head. At times life is frustrating, limited, or simply boring and games provide various ways for the player to remove themselves from their everyday lives and be somewhere and/or someone else. Games therefore represent a significant point in consumer culture; more than the move from material accumulation to experiential accumulation videogames are perhaps consumption as the development and actualisation of the imagination. In consuming videogames we are literally buying fantasies. Given the potential for endless elaboration, this seems a solution to economic and material limitations in the market and in consumers themselves, although as I note later, this opening up of imaginative play in videogame consumption might be contrasted with the apparent physical restriction of the consumer who finds themselves spending more time sat alone in front of a screen. This is an enduring concern about the virtual, well captured in fiction, for example by William Gibson in *Neuromancer* (1984), or by Neal Stephenson in *Snow Crash* (1992).

In imaginative videogame play we see different types of games being employed, or games being used in different ways. For some, games allow for the maintenance of a long-held interest in sport, or other possible activity. For example an interest in football, basketball, or American football is maintained by playing a game when the game cannot be watched live or on TV. This seems to keep the sport front of mind, allowing a player to maintain an

interest. More than this, players also describe using games to place themselves 'inside' the action. They use games to play-out what they see live. This tells us something about what is meant when players talk about 'realism' in games. Here we may consider Shield's (2003) ontological tetrology. Players do not seem to want experiences in games to be as they would be for them in the material world - complete with all the restrictions of time and skill - but rather they want to recreate in the digital virtual an 'ideal' version of a sport (for example as played by highly skilled professionals) where they are also such a player. We might consider that for a sports game the actually possible is the criteria which is applied to the game, i.e., the game 'works' when it does what players know *could* be done in a game (even if moves are unlikely). We could also see this activity as similar to what McCracken (1988) describes as 'displaced meaning'. Players hold in their imagination ideal scenarios in which, for example, they are a professional basketball player, or a skilled race driver. Games become a way to access this ideal outside the routines of life, in much the same way as Radway (1984) describes the role of Romance novels, and Stevens and Maclaran (2005) describe women's magazines, for example. This was especially well articulated by Alex's description of videogames as '*Mills and Boon for men*'. When they play, players may experience a temporary and partial actualisation of daydreams without risk of 'breaking' them by subjecting them to the harsh reality of material attempts at actualisation. In this respect we might also acknowledge that videogames are not the only media form that aids imaginative escape from the limitations of paramount reality and that media complaints about games are simply a recognition of their newness in aiding escape from 'normality' or routine. Ironically we can imagine that once videogames are more routine such complaints will diminish – their growth, rather than their censorship may ultimately reduce their deviance.

If for some, escape comes from their interest in sport, for others books and films form the basis of an imaginary world that exists in their mind in some detail and which may then be enacted in a game. For this group of adults three existing media narratives were articulated clearly; *Star Wars* and other science fiction stories; *The Lord of the Rings* and similar fantasies; and *Harry Potter*. These 'public' fantasies seem sufficiently detailed and complete to allow players to sustain them in their imagination. Here 'escape' seems more obvious. Players may spend a considerable amount of time playing these games, diverting their attention from their 'paramount reality', or daily lives. This is like a form of distancing described by Cohen and Taylor (1992). By being able to tell themselves that their paramount reality 'isn't really them', or 'isn't all they are', players may better manage the scripts of daily life. This is consumption as an imaginative act that is not therefore limited by daydreams sustained by material commodities, as suggested by Campbell (1987). Now fantasy becomes that which may be consumed and the limit is not material manufacture, but the work of writers and film makers who may produce for us fantastic adventures that fill our

imaginations, and then the skills of videogame producers who may create these worlds in a form that we may inhabit (although modding communities seem capable of taking on some of that role themselves as well). The player is therefore involved in the sort of mental management of scripts that Cohen and Taylor (1992) articulate. We might refer to this as 'a suspension of disbelief', but in fact it seems closer to an active task of 'creation of belief' in the game world and the roles it provides and therefore also in the need for an 'exceptional' life, filled with 'experiences'.

Cohen and Taylor also see the holiday – that other favourite of the experiential economy – as a potential source of escape from routine and here videogames provide the opportunity for 'virtual tourism', although perhaps tripism – the term Lehtonen and Maenpaa (1997) give to short recreation shopping excursions – is a better description. Players may (must?) take these trips for just an hour or so in the evening. At times the desire is not so much to visit a familiar fantastic script, but to simply lose oneself in the spectacle of a previously unseen landscape. In such circumstances *agon* is dismissed in favour of *alea*, but as Featherstone (1991) suggests of other contemporary consumer practice, it is a controlled decontrolling - a measured and managed sense of exciting fate. We might also question the nature of authenticity in such activity. Urry (1990) and Cohen and Taylor (1992) highlight that tourism for many has become the search for an authentic experience, but in games this may be rejected in favour of a convincing, but novel alien world or an accurate representation of a world they have previously seen in a film, or read about in a novel. This is an extension of what MacCannel (1976) calls 'staged authenticity' and it is perhaps this aspect of the videogame experience that comes close to Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality.

The result is a constructed liminal space where players enjoy an aesthetic experience, and forget the restrictions and familiarity of their paramount reality. In these consumption fantasies the grounding in material reality varies. For some players there seems to be a strong need to relate their imaginative work in games to sports and activities that they see as possible, but for others the desire is to reject such material possibility in favour of more complete escape. The decision between these two approaches may be based on the other interests of the players, but in some respects they all relate to other mediated experience (whether that is watching professional sport, or reading science fiction, or fantasy novels). Those that maintain an interest in sports or driving, favour game fantasies based on these activities; but those whose interests focus on fantasy and science fiction books and films seem already primed for fantastic in-game adventures. Here again we see that although apparently separate from mundane, or paramount reality, game experiences are chosen based on a recognition of other events in a players' life, or perhaps more accurately, their imaginations. This is perhaps most obvious in nostalgic play where the exercise of imagining a time past seems explicit. Players find and re-play old games as a conscious way to access memories of

a pleasurable time in their lives. Here, not just the games themselves but also the hardware become, as Douglas and Isherwood (1979) suggest, vessels to contain meaning such that game commodities hold in them a specific period of a players' life.

7.2.3. Play and the management of relationships

At times videogames may be presented by players as a popular social activity and through them we may therefore see a desire to 'play together', suggesting that group or shared family experience remain in our individualised society. But here we might also note players' positional shifts. As parent, friend or partner, social play is preferred, but when players shift to their individual selves (as employee, creator or competitor, for example), escape from the social may be a priority.

However it is perhaps significant that many of the most fondly recalled experiences of play are play with others, and that this is different from the competitive play with 'human AI' in that it is more collaborative and social. It is therefore about creating a significant shared experience rather than about winning. Even in competitive play within a group 'trash talk' suggests that the opportunity to find a place within a group is more significant than winning. Here then we see play as group identity in Sutton-Smith's (1997) terms. And 'trash talk' seems rather like the ritual language games that Caillois describes amongst Eskimo communities as a way to illustrate the tendency of play to prefer an audience. We see this in the descriptions of young people playing specific games together regularly, and also in the special occasions when a family gather for an evening of games. So unlike the 'selfish' creative and competitive games used for 'achievement', social games are favoured because they allow group participation - including the spectator, problem solver or 'back seat' player. Such games may promote and produce humour that may be shared, and may allow a range of characters or styles such that players may express individuality within the group (*Super Smash Brothers* emerged as a good example of this). It is perhaps also apparent in MMORPGs where there appears to be a strong drive towards guilds - although membership may consist of 'offline' friends and their social networks rather than strangers that have come together within the game. There is also something of the group festival about new games and especially new consoles. A game that is played by members of a group provides something to talk about, but a new game and a new console provide a heightened sense of 'occasion' where a group may gather to appreciate the latest technological spectacle and again as Caillois suggests, such spectacle is diminished if experienced alone.

However, despite the enthusiasm with which players discuss group play this is perhaps the most difficult aspect of play to manage. Players often find that as they get older, established groups disperse requiring the re-establishment of groups of friends that play. We

see this for example as players move to university, or start a first job after education. These changes don't always facilitate the easy establishment of occasions for group play. As players marry and have children they may find that contact with groups of players outside the family diminishes further, perhaps to the point where online play with friends becomes the only way to regain social play. Although family-play, or play with children may compensate in some ways, and perhaps bring new pleasures as parents introduce their children to an activity they themselves have enjoyed since childhood, there are also problems associated with this. Several players report an inability to get partners interested in videogames and an impoverished experience (they must deliberately lose to maintain their partner's interest) when they do. Those players with a partner who also enjoys videogames therefore count themselves lucky, and in such circumstance play becomes something that may bond a couple just as parents see a role for games to help them bond with their children. Playing videogames may become 'special time' together and as such we can see how a consumption practice is passed between individuals and from one generation to another.

This suggests that in day-to-day life individuals may not find it easy to participate in group activities, but may actively look for shared experience in a society where this is not always given. This may be another sign that the societal, shared ritual has diminished and is missed in the focus on individualised consumer pleasures, or it may invite the idea that individual play results from a need to compensate for insufficient opportunities for social playfulness. Players are trying to negotiate relationships around a shared participation in a consumption activity. They seek in the market a mechanism for providing the opportunities to spend time with others, playing or just talking about game commodities. This is consistent with the arguments for neo-tribalism put forward by Maffesoli (1996) for example and suggests videogames as a possible aid to the reconstruction of social groups rather than the more common media discourse of games as a cause of social isolation.

7.2.4. Play and the management of identity

Videogames may allow adult players significant opportunities for the exploration and creation of a sense of self that according to Cohen and Taylor (1992) stems from a recognition of limiting life scripts. Campbell note something similar, explaining that the consumption activities of 'craft consumers' may be 'the most significant part of a person's inner life' (2005:39).

However such work is not without problem. Cohen and Taylor (1992) point out firstly that the understanding of the need for a 'unique self' is itself ideological, especially of a consumer society. This is also Sutton-Smith's complaint about the modern rhetoric of play of the self. But more than this, the project is bound to fail as any escape attempt inevitably

comes to be seen as just another familiar script, or routine; the very thing that prompted a desire to escape in the first place. We see this here in the stories players provide about their occasional boredom *with* games, as well as their occasional insistence that they are not 'typical gamers', for example.

Such iteration between the desire for novelty and its abandonment upon actualisation is at the heart of Campbell's (1987) imagination-based account of consumer sociology and enables a market system sustained on endless novelty and desire. This realisation seems to occasionally strike these adult players. They may come to see games as 'just' another ritual, something that has 'pulled them in', and has therefore become 'just' another routine from which they might escape. They also occasionally experience a sense that there is 'nothing new' left in games and feel a sense of loss here. Where does that leave their identity as a gamer? A gamer with no more games to play has no purpose. Yet as Campbell suggests, consumers have become skilled at managing such thoughts and sooner or later a new game or console *will* capture their imagination, and if not there is always nostalgia and a return to the games of their childhood. Such a process also seems to follow the model of aesthetic drama highlighted by Turner (1992) and Schechner (1988) whereby individuals actively and routinely create a space for the enactment of personal transformation - the identity work of particular games. Games are therefore one resource that allows for the management of a sense of 'self'. The meta-transformation may be of progress through cycles of desire for the new and apparently 'better', but the individual content of those transformations is the daydreams and fantasy articulated in the previous section and presented in full in the chapters that cover players' experiences.

Players face another problem in this identity work though: a recognition of the script of 'typical gamer' that they are keen to avoid, but that may haunt their play. If games carry the potential for meaningful identity work, they also carry the risk of associations with negative images of gamers presented in the media. Game players are presented as 'loners' and 'anti-social', and games themselves carry the risk of addiction or increased tendency to violence. Alternatively they are simply frivolous, trivial and childish. These players may know and experience these aspects of gamer-identity and so are careful about whom they talk to about games and what they say. Perhaps the only advantage here is that there is an extra sense of association when they do meet and talk to fellow adult gamers; a sense of shared 'deviance' that instantly produces a common basis for discussion. This was perhaps most obvious to me in terms of the ease with which players would talk to me about their experience with several indicating that it was not something they got to do very often. This was perhaps a strength of a method where the stories presented by players were taken at 'face value'. However we also see players deal with these problems by distancing themselves from their hobby – by

'laughing off' their play – and by transferring blame to the industry whose fault it is that games have the reputation they do.

7.3. The mismanagement of videogame play

The management of everyday life through the use of videogames is a skilful task that players may not always get right. For example players report 'binges' where the escape from daily routine seems almost too complete and where they may have some difficulty in managing the return to paramount reality. At other times players simply neglect other activities including time spent with family or friends. Here we see that games may even be damaging to the social time with others that players often claim is a priority, but occasionally experience as *the* 'chore' that might be escaped. The result may be arguments, and over time the accumulation of such experiences may make players careful to self-manage their activity in order to avoid conflict. This may include avoiding playing games at certain times, or avoiding playing games that they know may lead to 'over-use' and this is therefore also part of the identity of players. At times they describe themselves as 'addicted', or 'someone who might become addicted', an example of what Caillois refers to as a 'corruption of play'.

We seem to return to the idea of balance. The reflective activity of the player results in a conscious decision not to play 'too much' and to balance play activity with other things. Players resist a 'life of play', which would be an unbalanced life. They do not maximise their time for play but rather fit it into the rest of their life. Perhaps this indicates the fragile nature of such commodities as satisfactory activity enclaves for identity work. Ultimately players themselves seem to accept the triviality of this activity. Unlike the more radical approaches to escape described by Cohen and Taylor (changing job, country, partner, etc), videogames are therefore more about managing the status quo, more compensatory than truly transformational. Players don't so much become different people through play, but deal with who they are: their work arrangements; family and friends; their existing lack of talents or skills, and their thwarted ambitions. This presents videogames as having a conservative role in terms of their ability to transform the individual and therefore suggests that they help to maintain societal structures rather than undermine them as the media so often warn. Perhaps most poignantly this was expressed by Douglas in his confession that collecting and playing games prevents him from tackling the difficult and complex tasks of 'sorting out' an unsatisfactory domestic situation, job and love-life. For him the escape into games does nothing to aid in the larger scale changes he recognises that he wants to make.

7.4. The ideology of videogame consumption

Where does all this leave an analysis of the adult consumption of videogames? Desmond (2003) sees two options in accounting for the history of consumption; one that focuses on what is lost, and the other that emphasises gain. Kline et al (2003) express a similar tension between alienation and liberation in the cultural analysis of games in a consumer society. And in the same way Cohen and Taylor (1993) note their difficulty in judging escape attempts as futile or heroic. As Crook (1998) explains, these are the plot devices sociologists' use in their attempts to account for the experiences of everyday life. We tend to drift to discourses that are nostalgic, or that idealise specific aspects of life (in particular the social), or that lament technology as inevitably alienating, and we therefore look for heroism in the tactical practices of 'ordinary' people. Despite Crook's complaint that such narratives are unwarranted, they are compelling.

Like Cohen and Taylor's initial analysis of various escape attempts, we may feel defeated by the seemingly pointlessness of videogames as a successful way to escape the frustrations and limitations of a life where our understanding of the ideal may differ so greatly from our concrete present or even imagined possible. There is something tragic in the stories of individuals whose jobs and family lives offer so little opportunity for creative praxis, and so much cause for boredom and frustration, or stories of people who lack the social contact with others that they crave, and may only get something like these things through playing an online digital simulation. We may find it ironic that this consolation is found in a commodity - in something Cohen and Taylor refer to as an 'institutionalised fantasy' - such that the consumer society presents a solution to the very problems it seems to create and thus perpetuates itself, creating an over-experienced, yet futile life. This line of argument supports the warning presented by Debord (1967), that a society of the spectacle is maintained as passive. Even the player as Campbell's (2005) 'craft consumer' reproduces the consumption act in all their activities. This seems a long way from the utopian claims made for interactive media such as those suggested by Turkle (1995), and more like her final warnings. Where is the consciousness-raising of these activities? There is little evidence of the reported activities resulting in players challenging aspects of their own lives, let alone more ambitious projects to transform society. Turkle cites Turner's (1992) liminal as a 'large scale' cultural change, but goes on to conclude something much more liminoid. Players may reflect and transform, but as consumers do with many 'small' adventures in novelty and diversion rather than events that change a life-world (less still a society). Videogames as a development in consumer culture therefore seem more like the complex leisure 'pacifiers' described by Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932). They seem to combine aspects of *Soma*, *Centrifugal Bumble-puppy* and the *Feelies*; they may calm those frustrated with life, absorb them into complex and expensive

games, and/or distract with interactive spectacle. They cure the *consumer* ennui Fitchett and Shankar (2006) describe by giving post-Ford experiential consumers new commodities to desire based only on the limits of imagination. If consumer culture inevitably leads to violence (Fitchett's analysis of Ballard's *Super Cannes,* 2002), if it seeks taboo, this can be directed towards the digital virtual for actualization, leaving players to carry on with the rest of their life-script as planned. Like Cohen and Taylor's explanation of 'mindscaping' – the mental distancing of an individual from their life script so that they may continue with it anyway – games may therefore serve a conservative role, allowing a temporary emancipation from the unsatisfactory aspects of life, but doing little to actually change them. In the mean time, the videogame industry continues to return a profit. For example *Gamesindustry.biz* (2008a) report that Sony predict they will sell 9.5million PS3s in the 2007/2008 financial year and separately report that Nintendo predict sales of 18.5 million Wii's in the same period (*Gamesindustry.biz*, 2008b).

This focus on alienated consumers 'trapped' by the strategies of the powerful (in de Certeau's terms) is a form of neo-Marxist analysis consistent with Kline et al's (2003) call for a necessary reflection on the interests served by the videogame market, but these players are not always as alienated as such a conclusion might suggest. For example, they sometimes feel that they 'know' the programmers through the game – they are playing with them, guessing their thinking as they realise that the designers themselves have guessed their behaviour. So even in the physical absence of other players games may involve a human interaction delegated to the code and its success in the market. And we cannot escape players' desire to play together as a preferred play experience. Videogames also more directly contain the potential for the sort of shared human play that Turner (1982) describes as 'communitas' – an ideal and equal social experience. Players are also able to experience creative praxis within games, and the experiences of knowing others, of pleasure, of achievement and of escape from routine are real even if the technology suggests that they are not quite material. So I am uncomfortable to end on a pessimistic analysis that is so far removed form the life-world of the players that I spent time with. When Cohen and Taylor re-evaluated their first edition of *Escape Attempts* they noted that they should have:

> *Shown rather more appreciation of the comic/heroic diversity of people's search for something outside paramount reality, more recognition of folk wisdom, more sensitivity to the idea that the very activity of 'attempting' to escape is an imaginative way to understand more about the limitations of our world.* (1992:28).

Perhaps the same might be true of these players. In negotiating a mapped-out life with largely predictable overall scripts and limited ability to gain access to ideal experiences within them, these players find ways of using videogames to temporarily escape. They use games to 'cope'

with the frustrations of life and their occasional recognition of its futility, they experience achievement or creativity, and they use games to feed, experience and to actualize their imagination. For some this involves extended time in another reality where whatever ideals their life-world presents them with, may be partially experienced and perhaps this is better for them than attempts at larger transformations that are unlikely to succeed. To reduce players to a predictable 'alienated consumer' script with occasional market-derived virtual escapes is a denial of the complex and nuanced life they describe and the pleasures games provide within this.

We have a choice then. We may damn games as just the latest seductive commodity – a potentially ideal one for our time – that imprisons players in an individualised consumer society, yet provides an *illusion* of progress, satisfaction, 'togetherness' and escape from rotine. Or we may focus on the achievement of these things by individuals. This is not the same as celebrating games for their potential as vehicles of learning, as new 'third places' or as mechanisms of individual or social transformation, but rather an emphasis on these *individuals'* successes in managing to play. Within the complex context of their own life-world, these adults find in games a resource through which they can actualize the ideals that society presents to them.

7.5 Limitations and future research

In this last section I want to consider the limitations of this study and note potential for further research. This research may be considered exploratory in that each main theme may benefit from further investigation from a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. The contribution of this research has been to capture and map out adult videogame consumption as a complex set of practices and experiences that may tell us much about adult videogame consumption, and something about adult leisure more generally.

In doing this I have suggested apparent contradictions within existing research, or at least with 'popular' discourse relating to videogames. For example, I suggest that although there are recalled experiences of 'addiction' identified, these seem rather temporary for many of these adults. At times they recognise a strong compulsion to play, yet at other times the same individual seems bored of videogames and seldom plays. It may even be that apparent videogame addiction is rather seasonal (affecting players only during the winter for example). Yet my sample is small and geographically limited and the impacts of any feeling of compulsion to play were not covered in detail. They could be.

I spoke to male and female players, but I did not specifically consider gender differences and although some stories (for example women deferring to male siblings to chose videogames for them) might support arguments that videogames are largely the preoccupation

of males, other stories seems to contradict this. For example, we see boyfriends arguing with their girlfriend over the time *they* spent playing *Animal Crossing*. We also see women playing driving games, and couples happily playing together. This at least suggests that any arguments related to gender and videogame use are going to be complex and nuanced and perhaps suggests that there are fewer differences in attitudes to and use of games than we might suspect. The idea of couples 'bonding' through the use of videogames in particular seems worth more specific attention, as does the idea of parent/child bonding. And here we also see how videogame playing habits may be passed from one generation to the next.

In women's' use of games and stance on retail environments we also see a form of resistance to gender roles perhaps. This might be added to the more general resistance to 'normal' roles that many of these adults recognise are part of the experience of being a 'gamer'. We might consider further the ways in which players must currently resist popular ideas about what they should be doing in their spare time.

My emphasis on the players also meant that I have not considered the wide range of games available in any detail (although I have illustrated many of the practices and experience with specific examples). As the videogame market matures, it is likely that we may see more attention to games that meet the needs, or desires of these aging players. And indeed we may see that already with the success of the *Nintendo Wii*. There is more scope to explore the ways in which different genres of games, specific games and even console design adapts to cater for new playing styles and intellectual demands in older players, for example. These adults certainly seem to suggest that increasing amounts of violence in games would not be welcome. In fact much of the discussion here might suggest a need to consider effects of videogame use in broader ways than the violence and addiction agenda that currently dominates.

There is also an issue of the pricing of games. Many of these adults present themselves as 'savvy consumers', not only able to research games and prices online, but able and willing to wait and monitor the market for cheaper second hand games and/or price reductions. The implications of these behaviours on pricing might be of interest to the industry and to retailers.

So there are questions here for industry and policy makers, but these audiences are likely to require some quantitative measure in addition to the stories I have provided. Having established a range of themes it may now be possible to explore the extent to which these sentiments are distributed across the videogame population.

In addition I perhaps raise questions about the nature of leisure and escapism, but I focus only on adult use of videogames. It is likely that much of the experience of videogames may also be found in other activities (and I have cited studies that seem to suggest these experiences are found in other media consumption). So the issue of the consumer

imagination, its relationship with paramount reality, and the ways in which it may be actualised through market-based or other leisure activities may be worth further exploration. We may take this 'consumer sociology derived from play' and apply it to other experiential commodities, for example.

Finally, I should note that this is only one possible phenomenology of videogames based on players in the south of England. Although I have taken measures to 'open up' my potential understanding of videogames use by playing a range of games and through a review of ideas about play, about consumption, and about videogames themselves, and I have attempted to place an emphasis on the worlds of the participants, ensuring I remain within their experience as much as possible, my readings of events are inevitably filtered through my own experiences at an adult player, a father and an academic. The test here is that players recognise the themes in their own experience, but there may be other ways to tell these stories that will likely provide new perspectives or insights into the consumption of videogames, including in other age groups and in other cultures.

Appendix A: Example of an interview transcript

'Carl' Interview 1 Transcript

Names and places have been changed to ensure anonymity

Date: 05/07/06 Location: Carl's workplace

[Mumbling about the recorder]. So how did you first get involved with games?

Well my experience with games goes back as far as my involvement with computers. It goes back 20 years to playing on a ZX spectrum. Me and a mate of mine used to play elite as a two-player game rather that as a single player game, one of us using the keyboard and operating the controls and the other chipping in with ideas. We just used to get involved. We used to play for hours on that.

So how old were you then?

It was juts after I left school so I would be 17, maybe 16 and it just went from their. We upgraded to an Amstrad, but to be honest we often used to go back to the spectrum because it was quite a social experience. It was actually – it wasn't the playing the game that was that was important it was the playing the game with a mate. And you know the chatting and the laughing, the getting immersed in a game like that, in the whole environment, rather than going from one system to another buying stock and selling stock because the game itself is pretty boring and the graphics were diabolically simplistic, but it was the bees knees at the time. And we just used to play it for hours. So that really was where it started.

And you owned the spectrum did you?

No, it was my mate John who owned the spectrum, erm, it was his, but we bought the game between us because we had heard that it was brilliant and we played it a couple of times on our own borrowing the machine between us and I found that an incredibly dull experience and we just sat down one day to just have a look at the game and found that that social side of it, just to blokes sitting in the front room playing on our black and white telly was fantastic, was such a laugh.

So it wasn't a two-player game?

No it was a one-player game. We split the keyboard in two so I have all the keys on the left and he had all the keys on the right and one of us would fly and one of us would operate the weapons, one of us would do the flight mode of the game and then we would change to commerce and trade and we actually used to keep a written log book to actually record what we were buying and selling and a map so that we could plan our route and that was part fo the social element, that was it and that was what actually kept our interest. We bought other games and tried to get into them, but it just never tool off... My first machine was an Atari ST which was bought as part games machine and part word processing because I was going to collage at that time... and I used to have an Atari console for a while. And we used to play ...raid? And that was a very good game, very good graphics at the time and we used to get a few mates round and play that of an evening.

Have you still got it?

No, but I rarely get rid of stuff. I mean the ST went, erm about 6 years ago and it was actually still working but I just had no use for it so that went, by way of the dustbin, but I've still got a windows 3.11 laptop with a black and white screen but I'm not sure that I've got any games on that at the moment, but that is my oldest machine. I've actually got four machines, five machines, three laptops and two desktops and the desktops are networked because I play network games with my lad as well so. Then again they are in the same room. We played around with having them in separate rooms and played against each other and...and it actually wasn't as much fun as being in the same room and barracking each other and a twelve year old believe me can barrack...erm... it is actually a awful lot more fun. So we have got two networked machines.

Do you have any consoles or is it just PCs?

No, er, my lad has a console. The reason that I have stayed away from consoles is that I don't find them flexible enough. You know a desktop PC or even a Mac is infinitely more flexible and that is what I need so rather than have a console cluttering up the front room, I just have the PC in the study, so no, I have stayed away from consoles and I find the games on consoles quite linear. I don't necessarily enjoy them that much and they are expensive,

So what console has your son got?

He has got a PS2

And you don't play that?

No, well he lives with my ex-wife so it's in his, in his other house so he's never brought it but he plays on it quite a lot. But erm... we had a placement student who lived with us for a while and he had a Xbox and he used to play with that on his own. He had a couple of games, of racing games on their and two or three times we all gathered round the television and warmed our hands on the tube whilst we played a racing game against him. But erm, you know a lot of it, the game becomes secondary, erm... I mean a computer game that we do play which is bizarre, it is the most bizarre game is one I got – it is actually a console game, but it has only got one game on, it's not great and it's a table tennis game and it's got a sensor on the floor and you have a physical bat with which to play table tennis on and actually [laughs] as a family, the four of us actually play that game, erm, we do hide behind pillows because it does get quite violent. You can only play one person on their because there is a two player option but it just splits the screen top and bottom and it is just too violent, too dangerous to play.

Why, because people will hit each other?

Yes [laughs], because there are two bats and we have only got a 20-inch telly and the sensor sit under the telly and with two people trying to use the same space at the same time it...

...ah, so it is not deliberate?

That's right, they are just waving the bat and it does get that violent. Erm, my wife is just over 6 foot tall so she has got long reach, so you really can't stand that close to her... [laughs]. I mean that game, it is an awful game. If you analysed it as a game it is the most rudimentary game, it is going back to pong. It really is going back that far. I mean the graphics are awful, it plays the Simpsons tune which I expect they have ripped off from somewhere, erm, it cost about a tenner to buy, but as a social event, it is just kind of hilarious.

Can you remember when you bought it?

Last Christmas

And why did you buy it

Because it was cheap and because it looked hilarious. The idea of actually having a physical bat and playing a computer game we just found bizarre and bizarre enough to just buy and juts to have a laugh. We did buy something like it before but it didn't last long and it wasn't that much fun to play, but this one is, its just bizarre, you really juts have to experience it. I may well bring it into the office.

Yeah, I went to visit a colleague in the media school and they had a Guitar Hero on the PS2, I don't know if you have seen it? [then I talk about this a bit]

Yeah, the thing with these is that they only become fun when it is social. I mean if you were to play that table tennis game on its own, to some of the other ones that they do, erm they do [inaudible mumble], but playing them on your own would just be pointless and then you start playing with other people and you get the social interaction and it really brings something, I mean even something rudimentary like, like the table tennis game and it actually becomes enjoyable, you know, you get a

real buzz from it and you get interaction with the family and this is some much more interaction that what you get with say the James Bond game which is what we had on the Xbox when we had the placement student. We did all try to play it and you can play it two player, but everyone else just don't get involved and they just start talking amongst themselves and its just two people playing on an Xbox and perhaps three people chatting and they are chatting about something totally different. And this game, perhaps because it is bizarre and because the person playing it looks absolutely ridiculous, you know at Christmas I was playing it with my cycle helmet on because it was you would like wave the bat so hard in front of the sensor.

So explain again, one person is stood...

...Yes, one person stands in front of the sensor, in front of the television with the sensor on the floor which actually isn't that sensitive and on the screen you've got the length of the table going away from you and somebody standing at the other end, a cartoon character standing at the other end of the table, knocking the ball towards you and you've got to time swinging the bat to hit the ball, swinging the bat over the sensor to try and hit the ball back. And I suppose in theory it depends on the speed that the bat goes over the sensor, varies the hit of the ball on the screen, in practice you just move the bat quickly and violently and sometimes the sensor doesn't pick it up and you just see someone whirling around. I mean my lad, he's 12, he fell over several times he was getting so much in to it...erm... and it was just a completely bizarre game.

And what are the people who are watching doing while this is happening?

They are laughing, in hysterics sometime...erm.. they talk about how good they are, it just becomes social. The game is incredibly absorbing. There is one part of the game where if you knock the ball past the cartoon character more than four times they suddenly burst into flames...erm...coaching tips coming from the sofa, all kinds of comments you know, people taking the Mickey out of each other, its just a very easy social environment and its really just a nice thing to do because its an unusual game

So do you ever play games on your own?

Yes, there is probably three games that I play regularly: the Command and Conquer games. The Red Alert version is what I play the most of. I'm quite like it because of the mods that you can pull down and it just becomes almost like so many different variations and ways of playing the game and also when you play you are actually creating, you are creating something and the background, the fighting becomes secondary. You build something, you try and care for it if you like and that's the absorbing part of it.... Erm.. I also play some of the first person shooter, what am I playing at the moment? Call of Duty 2. I've just popped that back on the machine, Breed, that is another one, partly because it is such a nice game to play because it is free, because there is no linear way to solve the game

Which game is this?

Breed, it's erm, it's probably about three years old now, it's certainly 2 years old, maybe three years old. The nice thing about it is that you can go anywhere, you know there is path you need to take to solve the game, but there's also the ability to walk up that hill and look over there and it maybe that you have to got back sometimes and do what you should have done, but it's just quite nice to explore...erm.. you know, once you have solved the, the game itself, unless you can actually explore some of the boundaries, some of the areas that you didn't go into, the game is finished, it, it, it's irrelevant. But with this game, because it is written more free-form, you can go anywhere and just explore. I mean you can still use the vehicles that are on the map and take them somewhere else, plus it gives you the opportunity to try and solve the game play by mission stage to see what would happen. For me it is the curiosity of what would happen that keeps my interest. I mean Call of Duty is a bit more linear, but there is still some element of what would happen, it you know the Germans are going to come out of that building in about 4 minutes after I have done this, what happens if I go into that building first? You know, are they in there? If I go round the back can I see them, erm.. and that's the thing that draws me back to games like that time and time again. Erm, I suppose the game that first did that for me was half Life and that had quite a big area to explore, but mainly after you got some of the cheat codes in there so that you could fly up off the floor and look down and pop down into another area without actually walking there. But that's what made that type of game good and widened its appeal to me: its long life, if you like, past the 'I've solved that game' and put it on the shelf.

[Long mumble from me as I check the recorder]. What other types of game to you play?

The Sims is something that I did play, but I lost interest because it took too long. I mean to build a house, populate it, don't know what to do, go and have a cup of coffee, come back in an hour, what do I need to do, oh I might need to feed them, it just didn't keep my interest like some other games do, but Sim City, I mean, has been around for donkey's years and I still go back to it, and one of the other ones was Populus, I saw that, I played it when it first came out, it must be over 10 years now. Well I bought another copy of it, erm, about a year ago and I keep coming back to it and it's the tinkering, almost, the game, once you work out the mechanics of the AI, once you know how its going to react and what its probably going to do, you, you've solved it, there isn't any challenge there, but the tinkering, the, oh what happens if, it is still there and that is a game that I have recently come back to. Sim City, in actual fact we played that as a family, a single person game on one machine and what we do is you divide the map up into 4 and we take some much of the cash between us and we build a part of the city each and we just take it in turn and we just sit around the machine and do that as a kind of, er, and just have such a laugh.

So what would you build?

Just a city. If you know Sim City, you just have to build the city and then keep everything going.

So you have to build and then manage, so what is the most interesting part of the game?

Trying to keep it going. Knowing what the AI and some of the problems that you are going to be faced with. You can loose some of the damage that can be done as you build the city and once you know the AI it actually becomes quite an interesting game and then again you can through in another what if you know. What if I build another nuclear power station? [inaudible]. Getting quite irritated actually with the people who live in the city. You know, why are they doing that? But the building, the creating, the actually doing something that actually is quite creative. I really enjoy it. It's a bit of a no brainer game. If I was working I would find myself firing it up, doing a bit of building, dropping the window down again and going back to my essay and working for a bit, then popping it back up again and thinking, oh no, look what they've done, doing a bit more building, perhaps do a bit too much building, dropping the window down again, then going back to my... and the ability to... one of the nice things about Sim City is the ability to keep it windowed so that you can drop it down to the task bar, go back to do something else and then pop it back up again and see what's happening and the fact that it just keep churning on...er...Civilisation's a bit like that, but I've never quite cottoned on to Civilisation, it's all right, but it feels like the game is too long; Sim City can be quite compact, you know, you can have a beginning and an end to it and feel quite satisfied with whatever point you finally close it down. Things like Civilisation are fantastic, ever such an interesting game, but they really do go on, you never get to the point where you think I've had enough of that I'm going to turn it off because they are always expanding things...erm... and they reply a bit too much on you having an accelerated development programme in the game. You know you've got to develop quicker than the other nations around you. Else they will just swamp you, well Sim City, unless you link to another town by going to the edge of the map and blocking a road off, you haven't got to worry about them and so it can just self contain. ..erm.. that's quite interesting because it allows you to do a lot more what if, because there is no external threat, erm,. Command and Conquer, once that you have figured the AI out and you understand the easy, medium and hard section and what the AI going to try and do, if you go to the easy level...[inaudible] it will rush you with tricks and whatever it can throw at you as fast as it possibly can, but if you go to the hard level it is a bit more strategic, were you get wiped out by the simple weapon. So you keep it on easy, you know its going to dribble tanks and troops against you as it develops then once you get to super-weapons, occasionally you will get bombarded but by that point you will probably have aircraft and you can just bomb his super weapon.

So you play it on easy?

Yes, because that is the point where you can do the what if, you know, what if I did this? Is it possible to do this? Can I capture the base and keep them going. That is one of the highlights of the game. Can I capture their command centre but stop them from selling everything and just rushing their troops and it is a fine balance there. You have to keep it so that you start by allowing them to develop so much and then you scale down the development by bombing the hell out of them and then you capture the

command centre and then you get that command centre out of there as fast as you can and it actually keeps it going. If their command centre gets destroyed after you capture it just, the AI just sells everything and juts rushes you with troops and the games over, so there is a very fine balance there and I find that quite fun to explore.

How long does it take to play a game of Command and Conquer?

About two to three hours the way I am playing it and the real thing that keeps me interesting is that you can change virtually everything in there and you have the mods. I mean there is now a lot less being developed, but that's fine.

So what mods have you got then?

Just loads, I mean my favourite one at the moment is called Persian Gulf 2, it drops the super weapons right down so that they don't do much, they are still there but they don't over-figure, erm, and it is a lot more....designed for armoured combat, you know you need to develop your tanks you've got, on one side you have got some of the scud missiles and on the other side you have got something similar to patriot missiles and there is an interesting balance there. It has juts changes, some of the strategy of the game just by changing some of the vehicles and their abilities and myself, I'm at the point where I will go in and I'll edit the ini files as well, not so much the ?large? files because I don't want to crash the game, but certainly some of the capabilities. I'll drop some of the capabilities on some stuff down and raise it up on other stuff and you can just change the feel and the balance of the game, erm, you can put your troops abilities up and it makes it much more of an infantry-orientated game and keep them where they are and raise the tanks up or drop them down or you can just change the feel of the game and I suppose for me that is part of the what if. I mean if I do that, what does it do to the game and is it going to be interesting or am I gonna hash it but and have to reset it. I mean my ability to tinker, I am a great tinkerer and tinkering got me into computers in the first place. I mean you go back to playing elite, I suppose in reflection that's what we did. We tinkered with the game. I mean not physically with the game, but what if we did this, you know. What if we go to this planet? What if we buy a load of this. What if we move from just selling legal stuff to buying a load of guns and then going to a planet to sell them were you just know that you are going to get chased by the police? Can we survive? I suppose the that is what I mean when I said that it was quite a social thing. That is what it was. The what if. You know one of us would have an idea and we would both try and worth that idea through.... And the social came from there.... Erm, I suppose the other side of that is competitive play. Tim and I play Unreal Tournament a lot. I think part of it is that it is also a non-linear game. It's a very un-linear game, especially when there is two of you and you place some bots in there as well...erm... and you know the bots are just going to keep coming, yeah, and we play on the same team, we play on opposing teams, erm, and that can be quite interesting. What if I sit on top of this tower with a sniper rifle and how long can I keep the game going....[inaudible] But I'm not really into playing it online , you know like a death match because you have to wait so long before you get to play. I mean in conquer the flag when you play you re-spawn straight away almost and you are off again. So we have played a lot of Unreal Tournament, all three really. The first one and up to 2004 and just to have a laugh

I want to take you back to a couple of things that you said. First you said something about multitasking, where you are working and you multitask and play a game at the same time. Tell me about that. What prompts you to stop working and play the game? How do you balance the two?

You know you almost run through a Hierarchy. At times it is quite a deliberate hierarchy...so.. Taking a break. At times if I'm writing something that is fairly heavy, something which is a bit academic or that just needs a bit of concentration. If I don't take a break and go and do something completely different then I just get bogged down, it just stops, it stops happening. The creative process just leaves you and you might as well juts close it all down. Whereas I have found that if you take a break, I find that if you go off and make a cup of coffee you still haven't had a break so I'll pop a game on or call a window back up when I've got a game running in the background and then it's just totally different, but it's still quite creative though. Your mind is working on something different but creative, the creative process is still there. The what if, the curiosity, that part of the creative process. The what if, the mmm, have I got this right? And that keeps you going and it's very easy then to say, right, back to work. You minimise it back down again, you are still physically sitting there, you haven't got and started doing something else, somewhere else in the house so there is that part and the curiosity has been kept going and you do feel a bit fresher, a bit more...erm...lively when you go back to it. I

wouldn't play a shooter if I am working. Partly because they tend to keep the attention there and your attention then actually becomes a block to creativity because once you give it your attention then it doesn't leave it. No having said that if I am really stressed about something. If I am writing a report it's something perhaps contentious where it makes me feel stressed, I use a shooter as a form of stress relief, you know [laughs], and I'll go and blow the buggers up [laughs again]. Erm, but then I rarely go back to the work. That would be the end of the work and I would have to go and do something totally different and then come back to the work. So I might go and do some gardening, I might go and do some tidying up, go and put the washing machine on, erm, go and sit and read a book. I'd avoid going and doing something like watching telly because as soon as you go and watch telly you have lost it because it is something that has drawn you in and locked you in so I'll go and do a job and then I'll come back to it. So the shooter is probably stress relief, but then that marks a bigger gap that playing something that is a bit more creative.

Ok, so if you then go and play something like Populus...

Yeah

...How do you then drag yourself back from something like that, back to the work?

Well partly discipline. I mean that is the bedrock [laughs], because if you start playing something like Populus, or Sim City, or there was a time when I was playing the Sims and the Sims was probably the worse because you can get very lost in the Sims and because time goes on quite slowly within the game it tends to be a bit stretched out. So when I am working I tend to only play games where I know I can easily put it into the background and leave it and see what happens later. So Populus is a good one an d Sim City is definitely a really good one, partly because, Populus the version I've got still takes over the full screen and changes the screen resolution so when you come out of it you need to save and then quit the game so I'll try and only play games that I can keep windowed [inaudible] Breed is a game that I can keep windowed and keep popping it up and down. And believe it or not if I am just having a stroll about, it sound bizarre, if I am juts having a stroll about in the game then I will play something like Breed where I can go anywhere and I'll just avoid the bad guys, I know where they are so I'll just avoid them and I might have a pop with my snipers rifle occasionally, but really while I'm in there I'm just seeing what is over the next hill.

What is over the next hill?

Usually the next part of the game [laughs]. Erm, it's quite a clever game, breed is and it's one that I've not come across before, most games only populate the next part of he game once you've done something earlier on in the game so you have got to go through a strategy for the bad guys to be there but as I remember if you jump a section the bad guys are still there, and you have got a feeling that they weren't always there, but with breed they are always there and so if I know that in about four minutes where I've got all the tanks here and I've got the gun emplacements there, there is going to be some bad guys high up waiting to snipe me, if I avoid the first two steps the bad guys are still there it hasn't just populated that because I have done the first two steps which makes it a bit more free form, which allows you then to take a stroll. Erm, occasionally the way that the game is written it does re-populate those areas but not always and that, that is just back coding...erm... I suppose just to digress, the interesting is when I play a game I'm not, I actually think quite technically about it. I'm not.. It's actually analysing, who is this damn thing working, what's happening here? I mean actually Half life what the first, no actually I think Unreal Tournament came before that where you could build maps, there was a map creator and you had to start understanding the AI to actually build, to build those maps. And that was one of the games where I started thinking, well how does this damn thing work? And then going back to the standard maps, sort of drawing the map down, trying to work out how they have put it all together and starting to get quite technical about it. And then when you start playing games like Command and Conquer, because the AI is actually not that difficult to understand, it's fairly rigid in what it is trying to do in the end, erm, once you understood it you start playing the game from a different point of view. As I played as it is meant to be played I though about building my troops up and then destroy the enemy, you start thinking, that's where the what if come. You have to understand the game to be able to do that. Erm, I suppose that is also when you start going in to other games like the Sims, erm, I haven't played the Sims 2 yet and I probably won't actually because that doesn't look very interesting.

What is it about the Sims that dosn't interest you?

Well it is this time thing you know. Initially I had a lot of interest in it. I think there were two things that put me off it. The first was, to really see anything develop you have got to play for a long time, and that time element, I don't have a lot of time, you know, I need something that I can play and then drop. If it draws me too deeply then I'll never drop it and the wife will come and crack me across the back of the head and say you haven't done the washing up and it's half ten and I'm going to bed, get on with it.

Oh yes, I know that feeling.

That's right, it's a married man syndrome and you know I can't afford that because the next thing that happens is next time I say I'm going to have a play on the computer I get cracked on the back of the head straight away and I don't get a chance to do it so I have to keep the work/life balance and a game like the Sims because it is so involved and takes so long to achieve any results it isn't going to happen. And the second is the attention factor, you know little things happen like I can use he phone and I can order a pizza and I can watch it develop you know someone come and deliver a pizza, but by the, it's time isn't it. I haven't got the interest span to play that game for that long to see anything interesting happen. All the others things happen quite quickly in Command and Conquer and Command and Conquer generals, which is the last game that I have juts bought you can set the game speed quite high so that things progress very quickly and in command and Conquer you can buy some trainers that allow you to create things straight away. Starcraft is another one that I've played and quite liked and when it first came out I got a trainers and again it's the what if and developing things very, very quickly and the game went quite quickly without it over-taxing me. The problem with having a game that plays very quickly normally is than things happen too damn quick and you can't achieve anything, there is no sense of achievement because it just happens so quickly and then you get to the point where you have to become formulaic to actually achieve the games results because there is only one way of doing it, you've got to follow a set pattern of development in the game to achieve that. Civilisation I find like that. You have to develop your capabilities so quickly that there is no, there's no time to...look at the aesthetics sometimes. I mean sometimes the effects are just so beautifully done and so detailed in, in the way that they have been produced, who the sprites on the screen are actually detailed and there is a whole area of that that actually draws you into playing the game, you know.....yeh, the aesthetics of it is also something that's important. I suppose that's part of the what if. I mean if I wonder about in breed it is partly the aesthetics, you know, the way that they have designed the building and some of the complexes, it's fascinating, you know, why did they do it like that. It's actually quite a beautiful game erm, in quite a raw way. The thing that always sticks out in my mind is that they have got quite tall towers in Breed and they are not straight up towers that have got levels to them sticking out of them at odd angles. They are quite militaristic. They look militaristic, they have a militaristic feel to them. There, there is almost a beauty to it, you know the drop ship is em, like the drop ship out of Aliens with quite a square body and there is a practical feel to it that actually appeals to me and I think that's actually quite real you know, somebody has actually though what would that ship look like if it was going to do this job? Erm, the fighter in Breed is.....it is quite square, but actually it has a good feel to it. The Alien, the breed ships, the atmosphere ships are quite alien, they're quite round, they have got spheres on them, erm, they move in.....in a good way. I mena it's been though of, someone has actually taken the time to think about it. Erm, Halflife is quite beautiful really. I haven't played Halflife 2 yet but certainly Halflife, some of the mods that are available for it, it's quite a good looking game. Now something that quite never did it for me is Quake. And it, it did look alright, but it never drew me in in terms of aesthetics. I never really wanted to go somewhere else in the game and find out what's there, just have a little wander about, I just wanted to end the game and I think it was something to do with just the raw violence of Quake at the time that was attractive to me.[laughs].

What was it about the violence that was attractive? You were just taking about all this beauty and then you said' oh the raw violence attracted me' [laughs]

[laughs] I think it was tension. I was just trying to think what job I was doing at the time. [laughs] It's unusual. You know work can be really stressful sometimes and working in the University one of the lovely things is working with intelligent people and intelligent people although they can be infuriating sometimes are actually quite nice people to work with because they can be reasoned in your disagreement and that's one of the nice things, but in industry there is rarely reason and you do it because your boss is telling you to and that, I find incredibly stressful. I'm terrible in, I have to know

why. You can't tell me to do something unless you can explain to me why. It might be a stupid reasons and I actually don't mind that but I still need to know why and there have been jobs that I've done where I have found it incredibly stressful and feeling quite aggressive because of the stress so I think I what to punch his lights out and I'm not an aggressive person, that is not part of my makeup and I will go and sit down and I will say to my wife, look don't talk to me for a while, I'm going to go and do something and that will be when I'd play quite an aggressive game like quake especially. All that is in there is violence. There is nothing else in there. There is no real problem solving in the game and you have to just bang away at it, dump all the aggression in the game and then turn it off...And the secrete then is to know that that is fantasy, that it isn't real and that yes, while I'm playing it I'm in there and I'm blasting the hell out of everything, but when it is turned off, that's finished. And I may feel elated, I may have that feeling of.....erm... buoyancy that, that you get, that other-self-ness, but I can deal with that and that is a lot easier to deal with than stress especially when you feel quite gutted about things inside, so for me there is quite a legitimate use there for quite a violent game and one that's got no point. I mean I suppose talking about Quake, there is no point to it other than that.

What is the point of games like Command and Conquer for you?

[pause] Well... I think it is what you make it [inaudible]. The thing about command and Conquer, especially Red Alert, I haven't found it so much with generals, Generals is quite a different game, it'\s got a different feel to it and there is more of that 'I'm in there' part of it because it's isometric in it's view, Command and Conquer is a top down view and it's watching the other world and manipulating the other world and that is the otherworldness and you can get quite involve with it, you know I get quite involved with it it's almost the what if. I need to build this I need to do this to keep that other world going, it's almost like watching an ant farm just chugging away, erm, I've never had an ant farm but, but if I wanted a synonym that is what I would use, it's my virtual any farm. I'm watching all these people scurrying about and they are living and dying in there, it their little world, in another world, and it's that God eye view, you know we call them God eye games don't we and there is a completely otherworldness about them. First person Shooters, especially ones that, is, where the only point is violence, erm, you lose the otherworldness. You really do start becoming part of that world you know you are seeing that gun through your eyes on that screen and the rest of the world starts to fade to grey and I don't always feel comfortable with that and I do have to be in the mood to want to play that and the games that have come out like Call of Duty have strayed away from that bit because there are things to be done, they might be quite violent, but there is a point to them, you know you get told by your training officer to go and support so and so in the church on the machine gun and you go and do that and there is a point to it, it's not just strolling through and violently blasting the hell out of something. Breed, there is a point to it, but there is also this aspect where you can go around and look, it's actually quite beautifully done. A lot of Breed is outside, there is not a lot of inside and I suppose that is one of the big differences between Quake and Breed, Quake is a lot more inside and you go through quite and enclosed space and that enclosed space actually draws you in because there is no otherness to the space you're in and the walls are...you, you start realising that what is appearing on the screen is very muchness, the same, yeh the walls are actually the same space, there is actually not that much difference whereas something like Unreal Tournament can be quite different because the textures are really quite myriad and erm, when you start building the arena you can draw al kinds of stuff in there, erm, really thinking about it there is probably a limit to what they have put in there you know, I played in ????Class, which is another first person shooter and quite a simple one based on the Unreal engine where you either play the terrorists or you play the police and you try to plant bombs or you try to rescue the hostages and it is very, very simple, very little variation and extremely easy to get killed. Now that one I play online, but I play in online because it uses very small amounts of memory so it runs very quickly, because I've still got dialup at home you see. I haven't bothered with broadband and that is why the games that I play online, erm are terribly brutal, but very short games [inaudible, laughs]

Don't you er, I'm not sure that you have yet told me every thing about what you get from games. I understand what you told me about this aesthetic experience and I understand about the cathartic, er, stress relief and I recognise both of those, but when you are playing and you are building stuff what do you think you are getting from them?

It's.....creativity. I am actually creating something. In the world we live in often there is very little opportunity to create, erm, the only other time I get it, I'm, I, I , my wife is actually quite a good artist, she paints very well in watercolour and when we got married she introduced me to than, but I am

abysmal [laughs], you would not recognise what I paint, even as abstract art, my paintings [inaudible, laughing]. When we go on holiday, we go to a part of Wales which is quite rugged and visceral in a way it looks and I love painting it but when you look at the paintings I have done you can just about recognise it. I've done paintings where I have drawn a bird, I've tried to draw a bird in the middle of the detailed scenery[inaudible], but it doesn't come out, 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, erm, all the artistic stuff in the way it looks is actually done for me so its logo....erm I wanted to use that word, it's Lego again, you know with Lego you put it together, but, er, 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. You can juts change some of the parameters which is what I get from Command and Conquer because I can edit the ini files, so I can change all the parameters and I've done it where I've dropped all the weapons abilities down to as low as I possibly can and still made them mildly interesting so that the biggest super tank takes about 15-20 minutes to destroy the simplest structure because I don't want to play with the tank, I want to build something and I want to build those walls I want to put turrets on the end of those walls and I want to build something that is going to last for a while and that is what keeps me being drawn back to the game at the end of the day. Unreal Tournament and HalfLife, when I was struggling with there map building kit it was actually not what I built in the end, it was the ability to build, It was creating something from nothing and in a fairly straightforward way, I mean Unreal tournament I like because it has a nice map building function that was fairly intuitive to pick up. Erm, Halflife I dropped fairly early on because it wasn't intuitive I mean you started building the structures using juts the lines so there was no structure to the erm texture, so there was juts the lines and then you added texture and you added events and you had to build it from there and that made it quite complicated and I never really had the time to do that so that was put on the shelf. Unreal tournament I picked up a lot quicker and so I actually ran with it so with both the first person shooter and the god-eye view game I was actually building something. Populus because I started it, what draws me back to that I don't have to fiddle about with it because there is always that variation and you [inaudible] and you change the whole feel of the game almost immediately. Now you've got quite a big village {inaudible] and you are away, you are almost in a different game again, erm, sometimes you do something completely daft and you know immediately that it is going to make you start loosing, and you have done something stupid, but there is always that element of creating something. I am actually taking nothing and creating something that if I play with it will actually last and if I was vain enough I could show other people that came round or I could take screen shots in games and I have done that occasionally and sent it to my mate Phil, who we talked about right at the beginning we used to play elite together and we still play similar games and he lives in London and I live down here and occasionally I send him a screen shot and I say 'I did this' and erm, you know he'll send me one back and show me how awful what I have done is.. but it is the fact that there is that creative thing there that just gets addictive sometimes and I think that also changes what kind of games I look at, you know I've bought, erm Rebel Assault, that is a Star Wars game, a first person shooter where you get to play a clone trooper and I bought that because it looked quite nice on the box and it felt like there was a creative element because you where having to work with bots on the screen, erm, but the reason that it didn't really last is because in the end it was just a first person shooter and it was vary formulaic, you couldn't, you know there was no width to the map, you had to do that, you had to go that way you had to accomplish this task before you did it, and one of the ways that I choose a game, that I decide if I am going to buy it is that I will go to the cheat sites and I will read the walk through, you know, are they writing in the walk though, right you can do this you know, but you can achieve it this way and that will light my fire a lot more than a game that just has a PDF file that juts says do this, do this, then this, then this. There is no creativity to that, there is no width to the way that I can play the game. So we have almost defined sort of three different creative parts to the game, you know there are the games where you can create environments to play in, there are game where you have got your god-eye view and you can do the what if, you have always got something new you can play, and then you have got games that have variation and that you can play the game differently, erm, Farcry is a game that I took up about a year ago and I played it incessantly because it is another game in which you can go anywhere in the landscape, you can do anything relative to the landscape, you can play the game in stealth, you can avoid all the bad guys all the way though the game as long as you can get all the stuff you need to get you can progress to the next part of the game, erm it has breadth to it and you can lie on your belly and you can juts crawl everywhere and I, I when I played the first, second and third level I did it without killing anyone, it was fantastic, you know and the creativity that how to solve the game, which is another thing that we haven't talked about, you know, can I solve it this way? Do I have to do that that way? Do I have go though and dust the bad guys or can I just avoid

them completely, is there a way that you can do that? Erm Alien versus predator is another one if you play the Alien it can be quite an interesting way of playing the game, you know Alien versus Predator 3 you can play as the humans, you can play as the alien, you can play as the predator and that adds a lot more, it's exactly the same game, exactly the same walk through, exactly the same positions were people are in the game, erm , but you can play it from three different points of view and that creativity is fascinating. How have they done this, why have they done it that way? What happens if, erm... you know the aliens can run up bloomin' walls, fantastic, and you know they can drop from a height onto a US marine with a smart gun and stick that tail through him, but there is the what if , you know I'll play a game and actually not be interested in finishing the level, I'm more interested in how I have finished the level and what does the level allow me to do and for me it always goes back to that creativity. Can I create something out of nothing? Erm, and especially in the world we live in where there is so little opportunity to do that, you know you've got the square box in the corner called a tele', even though we try to call it interactive now, it isn't interactive, that is a way of keeping you glued to your chair with commercial sites and television stations keeping you there for the adverts and stopping you moving away even from the BBC, it's about getting you to stay on the BBC channel, and the variation? There is no variation, you know you look at the digital channels and they are repeats of what has been on terrestrial channels, you know, but it will keep you stuck there and it is very clever in the way it does that but there is no creativity you know you will sit there in the evening and I'm sure that you have done it with the wife and we will be watching something and it will suddenly occur to you, 'why am I watching it!', you know I'm married to this beautiful woman and I haven't talked to here all evening , you know [laughs], I'm brain dead, there is no creativity there, just the hum drum of life, you come home from work, you have some tea, you get the washing down and stick it in the machine ready to put out in the morning, you iron yourself a shirt and think thank goodness it's half past nine, time to watch the goggle box, there is nothing in there that makes me feel that I want to create or that I want to really do something that no one else has done, or has someone else done it, you know and to go to a computer game then, that releases something in me I can play the what if, I can engage my more creative function that is part of me that is me and I can actually do something interesting, I can even do that with someone else, you know some of these two player games, there's more, I mean with Farcry we bought a second copy so that we could network it and we would play co-operatively in that game and that was fantastic, that was quite an interesting way of doing it you know especially when you are willing to cooperate with each other and there is two of you moving through a landscape and I think one of the ...Farcry was one of the only games that engendered it. I started to feel quite protective about that other person that was playing in the game with me, you know actually

What the co-operative person?

Yeah!

Yeah?

Erm, Just a though that come up, it's over a year ago now, but I really did and actually in watching his back, or him watching my back become really quite an important part of the game, you know we talked about not splitting the machines upstairs and downstairs because we lost that facial element that that is what we would lose when we were playing co-operatively I had Stuart sitting next to me, about an arms length away and I can say' are you watching my back', 'what's going on' and he is where I can see him and I can just look across and see his face and see what is on his screen but I don't do that, you know I want him to tell me, erm I actually felt you know quite protective, if he starts getting shot away, you know my screen persona wants to switch around and run back so within the context of that...

Well one of the things that I wanted to go back to was when you mentioned being irritated by your little people in Sim City I think, so I was going to ask you about how you feel about these little people when you are this god, how do you feel about your people?

It's awful isn't it because there is a God persona in all of us dives out and I say I'm going to flatten the flammin' city, I've built it up and now I'm going to wipe it out. I mean I don't always do that, but there are occasions when I get really irritated, the Sims....

...What is it about them that irritates you?

Because they are nothing, they are not behaving, they are being naughty, and it's partly the reasons why I stopped playing the Sims is that I, not just me but, my daughter, she is fourteen she would wall people in, if they were not doing what she wanted, she would brick the door up and just leave them until they died and take great glee out of having killed one of the people in the family that she has created and I didn't like that. That actually, I frowned upon so that is part of the reason Sims came off because it... from my point of view they are too real, there is too much... you can get involved with these things, they are too life like and watching a fourteen year old brick a person up in a room because she is being irritating and she won't do what Anne wants and she won't choose the colours that Anne likes and she won't behave the way that Anne wants, so she bricks her up and she's dead, or putting her in the swimming pool and taking the steps away and eventually they drown [laughs]. But when you play Sim City you are still in the god role but you are a lot more removed so if I get bored and I get the bulldozer and bulldoze half the city there is not that part of me that feels that I killed 4 million people you know which is probably the amount of people in that part of the city, you know and you do bulldoze parts because you want to start again, you know. Traffic jams used to irritate the hell out of me. You know I had built them a city, I've given them a logical grid, why do they want to use that fucking road [laughs], why don't they use the beautiful road on the other side that I have given them, so I'll put a hole in the middle of the road and cut it off and they'll stop using it then eventually and start using the other road. But there is feeling of irritation, you know, why haven't they done that. Populus, is another. You have built them a beautiful village and they will just not behave, they just start wondering off towards the other guys and of course you are going to get killed over there, so I have to design the land to stop you going over there in that direction. Erm, it doesn't tend to be the games like Command and Conquer that irritate me, but the AI irritates me sometimes when it does something like dumps all it's buildings into troops, you know sells the lot and rushes my base, and of course I'm going to get wiped out but that isn't a far game play, that's just giving up too easy, that'll irritate me but the actual, what I've created doesn't, and, and, I don't get irritated by it. But in some of the more social games like Sim city, or Populus where you are trying to raise a society, you know that irritates me sometimes, that gets irritating and it's the AI, when the AI does stupid things...you, you start to realise that it is just badly coded because someone's not bothered, they have put in a 'I can't be bothered I'm just going to give up' part of the game. That just gets you irritated, that's not playing the game and that almost drops you out of the world that you have been immersed in because,...yes, I just drop out and I think oh flippin' 'eck, why have they done that, that was stupid some idiot has programmed that into the game that when it gets to a certain level it just dumps everything and goes for a rush, erm, Sim City hasn't got that because it just never gives up, it has always got problems, but it never gives up and that becomes, you get irritated with the game because you remain immersed in the game, you don't drop out because the AI has done something stupid, so I suppose in terms of getting irritated, I mean it doesn't happen, it doesn't actually happen very often so I've talked about it several times, and while we were talking I was actually thinking, yeh, I actually get irritated by that, you know it was something that I myself didn't realise and that's the feeling, it's irritation, it'\s almost the same as when you get irritated by your kids when they do something stupid [laughs}, I mean you don't bulldoze the kids, but there is that feeling when they do something really stupid, or something that you just can't comprehend, it's a similar feeling, I suppose games do engender that, I mean you do literally start to care for parts of games, not the violent ones, but the more social ones, it actually starts to bother you when they are going wrong.

How are you doing for time?

I'll alright.

One of the things that you touched on that I want to go back to was how you choose games. You talked about going and reading the cheats, the walkthroughs...

Yeah...

... So tell me about how you buy games and where you buy them?

There is a definite hierarchy, I'm never going to buy a game when it's new [inaudible] it's too expensive, I'm never going to spend that amount of money on something that probably will be good, but I can't say it's good. I've got better things to spend my money on. In my mind I have to be fairly sure that it is the kind of game that I want to play, erm, recommendations from friends does actually come quite high up because my friends who are game players will know what kinds of games that I

like and they know what I play and there tends to be a similarity with them so a recommendation from them will come out. The press, I rarely read it, you know, sometimes someone will say, oh have you seen that article on so and so, and I'll read it and think that is the kind of genre I like, and I enjoy playing I'll wait and see what happens. If I see a game that I haven't read about or heard about, say I'm just browsing through Game, or Virgin or something like that I'll have a look at it, I've have a read of it and I'll think OK, I'll keep an eye on that for about 12 months, see how the sales go. I'll look at some of the cheat sites, and if lots of people are putting up lots of different cheats up there, or certainly if they are putting mods up there that tends to mean that it is a very flexible game and that, that's something I'm interested in, so that will start to draw me in and then perhaps a year, or two years down the line when it has gone from chart you know down to budget, I'll buy it as budget. That also means that I don't have to keep my machine so highly spec'ed, I don't have to be cutting edge because I don't have the money to always do that, I mean primarily my machine at home has to be a work machine, it's built around that, the desktop is, the side issue is that I can play games on it, erm, you know with a family I don't get as much time to play as when I was single so, you know the primarily use of the PC is as a work machine. I mean I made sure when I bought it that I had room for a graphics card but that is partly because I had my eye on Vista then because over the next two years I'm going to have to upgrade the operating system... so the games have to fit in, I mean one of the biggest mistakes I've made recently is that I bought Quake 4 and the spec for Quake 4 is so flaming high I'm going to sell it on eBay, I just can't keep up with it I mean I've got a 1.8Ghz machine, 17inch screen, I've got a ATI Radion card in there with 128 meg on it, erm, and it just won't play. Er, it's junk and I only bought it because I thought, oh that's quite interesting and I enjoyed playing Quake and I enjoyed playing Quake 3 which was the version that I stopped at and I wonder what this is like, the other games where quite good games and I fancy having a crack at this. And I didn't really check the spec, because that is the other thing: when you pick it up, always read not just the minimum, but the recommend because if my machines isn't above the recommended I won't even buy it, because I can't afford to upgrade the machine just to play a game. So there is, there is a hierarchy there, that I'll notice it in the press, or a friend of mine might mention that it is a really good game, I'll have a look in the shops, I might read the spec as well, which I normally do and then I'll wait until it drops in price.

You say that you don't have much time to play games but your description seems to be that you play them quite a lot, how often do you play, I know it's difficult to answer...

No, it goes in splurges, I actually...it partly depends on work...I mean at the moment I've got three academic papers to get through at the moment, so I won't play a game now until they are in, I daren't, because I have really got to concentrate on them. I tend to read books.., because I actually write an academic paper on paper, because I need the creativity of holding a pen, to write something as creative as that. If I'm writing a report, if I'm doing lots of reports for my job, I don't need that type of creativity and so I'll just whack it into the computer and yet when I think about it a I'll play a game so...er...it's my wife that actually dictates how I play games ...er, Anne and Stuart, they live with their Mum, so I see them every other weekend, so occasionally every other weekend I'll just have Stuart and me and him will go and play games for half a day. If Anne is there as well, she's not interested in games, she's 14 so she is growing out of playing games now as a girl, so we will go and do something as a family, we won't play games that weekend, that would be a non-starter. But the social games we would play in the front room, like the table tennis game. That will come out at the drop of a hat. You haven't got to set it up, just plug it into the aerial socket, stick it in and it's a no-brainer, but it's quite social. And we play that and we've probably played that since Christmas several times, and that's not a huge amount, but that's been a whole evening and that's been from when my youngest, who's almost two, she goes to bed at about seven, we've had tea while we've been playing the game, so it's like pizza and drinks and then until half past ten, eleven o'clock and we've suddenly said, yeah, we really should go to bed now and we will go to bed and we've just played the game all evening. But it is social because we will have talked about what we've been doing, we've had a laugh and I think because a game like that you don't actually have to be intellectually involved, you actually continue, you get quite involved, but you can continue with a conversation, erm...when things get really stressful you will quite often find me playing more games when I come home and it's part of my decompression really, it might only be an hour, 'cause that's all I'll get, but I'll come home, I'll say to Sue 'don't talk to me, I need to dump the day, [inaudible] I need to be somewhere else for a while and I'll go and play a game and she'll come in an hour and say 'you've had an hour' and that's my clock. I've...I... I've learnt that if I don't want to suffer pain...[inaudible, laugh]. Games you can't save mid-level are one of my big pet hates. If you can't same that game mid-level it's a non-starter. It will probably stay on the shelf for quite a while, erm because I need the ability to save half way through.

How many games do you think you've got in total?

I've got about 120

Wow!

But that, that's bought over, since I got my first PC, which was a 386, so that runs, that whole all the life of the modern PC, cause my first [inaudible] for my 386, that would be a very simple game, erm...yeah, I've got about 120. I buy probably 2 or 3 games a year, that's all and the important thing is that they have got life in them, if a game hasn't got life in it that drives me nuts...

...so you keep all the games do you?

Yeah, yeah, I mean I sometimes put, I mean the original Command and Conquer actually won't run well on er, XP so I've got a second partition for Windows 98 on a second PC so that I can run games on that I mean it's a bit more effort to get there, to play it, but it plays...I mean it's like reading a good book. I mean I've got...books have always been my passion; I've got four walls floor to ceiling with books. They're work books, they're computer books, they're novels and I'll read a book six or seven times until it falls apart, especially novels. I only buy novels that I enjoy reading and I'll I know I'll read again.

So what books, what is your book collection? One of the things I wanted to get on to, and we may need to meet again it that's ok...

Yeah, yeah, that's fine...

..'cause you've got. One of the things I've found is that when you start talking to people about games you find they have a lot to say, it's not like they just say, 'oh I played a few games last year', lots of issues start to come out...

...One of the things I think would be interesting to look at is whether there is a different between people with consoles and people with PCs

Yeah, well I don't know and I'm not really looking for any correlation because I want to know about the individual experience rather than creating something normative... But I spoke to someone the other day who has a console and what they told me is not that different to what you have said.

That's really Interesting.

But one of the things I wanted to get from people... didn't want to just see people as gamers I wanted to talk about the other things people do as well and of course you have spoken about your job and your family, but you have now told me that you have got this massive book collection, so tell me about these books.

Well my first academic subject was theology and philosophy right, which is a book-based subject really, erm, you information comes from written text and especially when I was studying because the internet, we were still using bulletin boards and you would rarely find a philosophy/theology bulletin board, because they were quite stuffy old professors, so my book collection partly started there and I come from a family that values books. My grandfather, my maternal grandfather left school at 12 and became, and taught himself to read and write and taught himself mathematics and loved Dickens and Shakespeare, erm Shakespeare and Bible, those were the first two books that he ever learnt to read and literature, good literature, interesting literature, cleverly written literature has always been a part of my life. My first book I recollect my grandmother reading me was tale of two cities and I still remember the story. Erm, My favourite book, the most favourite book I have, the one that if I had to take a book to a desert Island would be , erm, Cyrano De Bergerac. It's a play but it is beautifully written and it has this beautiful language. The concept within it are quite beautiful. The human struggle with Cyrano finding love but not being able to touch it is one of those elemental, human things that comes back time and time and time again. So my bedrock of why do I buy a book starts there, erm, and then gets bizarre, because I love science fiction. I absolutely adore it [laughs]. I think it is quite beautiful the first book I

ever bought was I robot by Asimov. Actually it's not an easy book to read, Asimov is not an easy writer.

It's a collection of stories as I recall, not one story?

It is yeah, and Foundation trilogy is the same and one of the things that I've found over the years is that I buy collections. I never buy one book and part of the reason is because some of the books...erm the [inaudible] series by [inaudible] Sullivan is a collection and it grows characters and you won't read about them in seven books and then in the eighth book they will suddenly reappear again and you go back to the third book to find out, how is this person, I know, I get quite involved will my trilogies and whatevers, collections and some of them are quite trashy, erm, I'm reading one by a guy called Steve Right at the moment about the invasion of earth and galactic empires are trying to support the United states and as a novel it's complete trash, it's a bog book, it's a book you read when you are sitting on the toilet, but there is a collection of them and there are just two or three characters, I mean Mike O'Neal, he's in all the books and he just pops up and it's one of these book that is not written from one person's point of view but jumps between people, the president, the guy fighting in the trenches, the woman left at home. Suddenly, within a chapter you have a whole thing on what's happening somewhere totally different and yeah in might [inaudible], but the fascination for me and very clearly form my point of view it is badly written literature but they are fascinating people and it's the person within the book that I'm quite interested in and a book like that, a series like that, I'll actually read several times and I'll just read one person's bits and I'll skip the bits in between because I have read them, I know what's happening, but I'll read this person and I'll try and think, 'is this working', does this person actually exist?' And I've enjoyed doing that over the years and that is the analytical part of me that goes back to good literature. You know, could, have they written this person quite well. If they haven't then it probably won't actually be a book that I'll go back to. But if the characters, if the people within the book, forget the scenario, if the people, if they come alive, if they could be real people, then I'll enjoy reading it. And I think even in a trashy novel that you read in the toilet, actual I read quite a lot in the toilet , but you know within that private and enclosed space, if you can ever get in [laughs] if the person is real, that lights my fire. If the person isn't real I actually won't finish the book and the book will go. There is actually a second hand bookshop in Boscombe where I take books and I get credits for it so that I can buy other books and that is fantastic, I love it.

Tell me a bit more about which books that you remember with some enthusiasm then?

A serious book... I do have favourites. They are old friends and they look like old friends they are well thumbed through and in the serious friends there is one called Condition of Evil written by a psychologist and it juts talks about the human condition and is evil real, you know, could we touch it, do you...how do we understand it, how does in manifest itself and what is bad and what is evil? And it is a good book, it really, it's one of those books that grabs your heart and does a little tweak every so often because it ground it, it, well basically we all have the potential for evil, nobody can say 'oh I'm good', everyone, you know has that potential with them and it's the choices we make in life that moves us from being Carl or Mike Molesworth the vicar and there is a certain amount of what we call evil in the world that is involved in personal choice and it also talks about corporate and community and culture wide choice and I... that book still fascinates me 20 years after I bought it, it was twenty years ago that I studied this so that is 20 years old and erm, there have been other books I've bought that are similar, I mean I went though a phase of working in youth work and it was working with some people, with two or three people with personality disorders and one of them was schizophrenia and I needed to understand schizophrenia so I bought a book called Voices in the dark which was written by a parent whose child is schizophrenic, was an adult schizophrenic and it, the book is in two parts and the back half of the book is printed the other way round so you physically turn the book upside down and read the medical, psychological stuff, but the first half of he book is the parent coming to terms and helping a child whose mind is different because that is where they have come to, they are not, you know.. the mind is different and they see the world differently and the have to cope with the world in a different manor and from that parents point of view it is beautiful, erm, even talking about it I feel quite emotional, I mean I'm a parent and that book engaged me and the second half of the book is quite academic, about the condition, but you have to read the first half first because then when you read the second half you are reading about a person and it actually really helps, draws you it to the subject of schizophrenia and that was a great help. So there's two very serious books. Computing books, I don't want to talk about them because they're reference, you read them when you need them and they are there when I need them, but I wouldn't call them old friends. Erm, philosophical, philosophy books,

Trotsky, I actually enjoy some of his early work, erm, it's quite heavy, you have to really concentrate at times but there are some interesting thoughts in there. Now Cyrano de Bergerac, you see I, it's a play and it's quite pointed, it's a very good play but it's also philosophical, and so I would count that as part of my philosophical books, erm some of the eastern mysticism books, erm, they are not well known, [inaudible], but they are quite interesting and I will go back to them. Books like that I find are an oasis, because they are not about the world we really live in, they are actually about the world that we can inhabit if we allow ourselves the space and the time and we are supposed to be creative, erm, they are little oasis books. When I have found life difficult, even though I have used them for study, I will actually go back to them and I'll read them, erm, if I feel angry I'll go and read something about how society should be rather than how society is, which is why I mentioned Trotsky, erm, he had a vision, not so much his later work, but some of his earlier work, it's about quite a beautiful vision of a society were we can live and I'm there for you and you're there for me, in the end it is utopian and it doesn't interest like ht earlier book about our potential for evil, but it can be an oasis, it can be a place to stop re-gather, something we talked about earlier, there energies. And there is something about gathering myself and asking myself who am I, what do I want to be? And what kind of person do I want to be in the society I'm living in, so it is a very philosophical book. It's probably quite a broad range. Why I haven't got a particular favourite.... er... I then go on to novels that set a problem up and work in through. A recent one that has made me work quite hard: Dan Brown and the DaVinci Code.

When you said problem I knew you were going to say Dan Brown

Because, I just get so irritated with him. And I've actually got to my book shelf and taken books down so I can prove him wrong [laughs, inaudible] And you would think that is a nice quiet book to read an bedtime and we can both sit there like a couple of old fogies, but I find it really good to read books in bed, and she will get it and say ' well this is rubbish'. And I'll explain why I disagree with him and there have been nights when I have actually gone down stairs into my library and had a look for a book that helps me think of a thought about why he is wrong and actually he has made me work quite hard. But then I'm engaged, he's drawn me in, he's made me argue with, it's a book, I can't argue with a book, you know I almost felt like writing margin notes at the time and actually sending him the damn thing because it is actually totally inaccurate, there are so many holes in his theory that it is incredible. I mean the last book that got me this annoyed was Erich von Däniken and his UFO books, he wrote in what, the 70's.

Yeah, erm what was it called, Chariots of the Gods, that was it, wasn't it

Yes, I absolutely, now I was quite a young lad them, I can't remember how old I was, I must have been 15, going on 16. Those books used to irri...that ain't right, anyone can see that ain't right, and I had to go down the library and try to find out why I thought it was wrong because it annoyed me, but it was a book that engaged me. I actually bought every one of his books, I mean he made a fortune out of me [laughs] and I used to really get irritated with it, it was an irritable book, but I used to love reading them, erm, I love debates I mean being brought up, er, studying theology and philosophy you learn to debate very early. You don't actually necessarily learn to debate in writing, because you want to be able to change your viewpoint very quickly because those kinds of subjects someone will say something and you'll go 'you're right, I'm wrong' because it is quite fluid, especially philosophy, you can have a point of view, but you can also find yourself in a conversation within a debate changing very quickly to another point of view and it might be that at the end of the conversation you go away and read up on something, or you go and look into it deeply, so I love debates. Part of your problem today is that I will talk 'til the cats come home. And er, I love drinking in pubs, and it's because, er, em, the people I drink with we love to talk and solve the worlds problems, so I think a book should make be have a dialogue, if I can't dialogue with it will get trashed, I rarely read books that just shut my mind off, unless something is happening in my mind while I'm reading it I won't do it. Catherine Cookson, I've read the Cinder Path, yeah, and I really enjoyed that book. I'm trying to go through logically my library. I'm moving down.

So have you got the games on the shelf in order like the books or not?

Yeah, [inaudible] My office, on every wall apart from one, is floor to ceiling book shelves and they have to be logical because I have to be able to find a book, I've also got four bookshelves upstairs in different bedrooms, so I do have a lot of books and I've got about six boxes of books in the roof.

Right, when you talked about your books and you described them in certain ways, how do you describe your game collection?

Er,... in a similar way, but they are different though because some games, they will engage me creatively and they do feel like old friends and they don't get quite a weather worn as a book. You can see when a book is and old friend, because physically you have changed it, it's worn, it's shiny, you know, especially a nicely bound book, I mean the most beautiful book I've got is a second edition Pilgrims Progress, it's my great, great Grandfather's book and it's been though three, well, my great grandfather, my grandfather and my mother and then more recently it has been past on to me and it will go to my son and it is, it is an old friend and as a book it is quite beautiful, but it's beautiful because it has been changed by the people how have touched it. No a game can never be like that, you know if you damage, if you change that CD, or DVD or even a disk, as think as disks are. If you change it by handling it you lose it, you can't use it any more, it becomes something you throw out. You know the plastic packaging you can't change physically, so if you... it is quite difficult, but they are old friends, you know, I'll pick up, er...in my mind I have the games I'm playing at the moment, so I'll pick up Command and Conquer, or Breed, or Sim City and they are old friends, you know you immediately become acquainted with them and there is some intellectual engagement in the how does it work, but you don't actually get anything back, the game doesn't intellectually challenge me in the same way that a book does.....And that may well be my age, you know, I left school in the 80's and books were still predominant... you didn't have in the school, computer studies my brother did, he's two years younger than me you know that's the difference between our actual ages, so erm, intellectually a game doesn't engage me. The internet does, erm, I've always been involved with bulletin boards and er right back in the early days of the internet we used to use 28k modems, you know, so in that sense debate using a computer is something that has been there. One of the games, one of the things that I'm starting to look at are these worlds that have been created, it's sort, I can't remember the name of it, it's the BBC one where you create an Avatar and there is no point but engaging with other people and that, I'm quite interested in that, in the concept and I only have it here because my machine at home is only on 56k dial up and it is too graphically intensive to run on anything but broadband, but I started to tinker with that and you know I'll go and have a little wonder about and I might engage with a couple of people, I might just sit and watch the world go by...erm...that's become quite an interesting concept to me, you know I'm quite interested in actually doing this...erm... the only thing that doesn't engage me is that with that one you need to put credits in so you need a credit card, you need to put real money in and that ain't gonna happen. Er, Elder Scrolls, when I played some of the online games in a similar way I liked having a character, I'd forgotten that game... the Elder Scrolls game

Morrowind?

Yeah, now there was a time, that was for about a year and a half, that was the only game on my computer. That, and I bought three expansions, erm, the Sword Coast, there was another one, in between the expansion packs. I, I daren't put that game on the computer because I AM in another world [strong emphasis]. Completely. I love it, it's, it's you know, it's got everything in there, for me. There's the intellectual having to solve puzzles and they can be quite devious puzzles and it's not juts the get in there, whip your broadsword out and hack the head off, you've really got to think about it. Then there's the commerce side of it, going and buying stuff and it not costing me any money, fantastic! [laughs] Erm, there's the interaction with others...

...What do you go and buy?

You know just stuff to keep the game going, new swords, new armour, new potions, magic items, new know it's all about enhancing the characters ability.

But why did you say that was fantastic?

[pause] It's just. It's variation. What a cool thing. If a game hasn't got variation, and variation according to me, not according to the game producers erm, I'm quite specific in what I want. I want to create. I want to wonder. I want things to be interesting to look at. I want to go places and kill people you know [laughs]. They are all part of the package of why I buy a game you know if those elements aren't there, or if one of them is unbalanced....erm, Quake, the new one, you know it looked like a game where you could wonder round and do anything and the thing that's unbalanced is that you, in theory you can do that, but there's too.. you have to keep fighting...you've really got to concentrate on

the gore element, the blowing things away. You daren't take you eye off things or you're gone like that. Erm, Doom was similar and with Doom it's still on the shelf, the original version and for a time it was an interesting game to play but because one element was far to stressed and the whole game looses the appeal. Farcry the element's in there, that violent element, if you want it, but you can actually complete it just sneaking around so that there is....on one element that is overly stressed in that whole game and I suppose even with Sim City there is always the balance there you know you can play it one way, you know do you want to make the most money you can or do you want to keep the city going, there is a balance there.

Which do you want to do?

I want the balance. I want the ability to choose

But when you say you can make money or not make money?

Well I want the ability to choose. I... if you... I don't want...yeah, no I want the ability to choose. I want that ying/yang. You take that away from me the games gone. It will go on the shelf and it will probably stay there. And after I time I will send it to [inaudible] or flog in on eBay, you know. He'll buy a game and send it on down to me when he's finished play in and I'll send it back to him and we've done that occasionally, especially with games that look like they're going to be really good.

Well I want to keep talking, but I'm also aware of how long I've been here for, er we can meet again to talk?

Yeah

I don't want to take too much of your day either

No problem

Are you alright for a few more minutes now?

Yeh, go on...

... I've got a few things that you said that I'd like to pick you up on. We've been an hour and 25 minutes...

...The beauty for me in some senses is that we have talked about something that I actually never talk about. It is quite interesting to see how you do actually think about it. Now, because all those feelings are in there and they are part of me, erm, they probably effect the way I see the rest of the world, I mean we started talking about books and I realised that I, actually I do look at games in a similar way to how I look at book. Now I've got my trashy games, and I've got my games that engage me, erm Morrowind, which is why it is suddenly jumped back in my head, You, you have actually be quite canny in Morrowind and you've got to engage in what's, you know commerce, in, in being nice to people, because if you have been nasty to them and then you go back, it remembers you were nasty to it and when you play the online Morrowind you are playing with real people as well. I mean I didn't do that for long because even the cost in was on the phone call was high, but that really quite engaged me because there were real people there that I could interact with. It was social, I could go into a bar and have a drink. Er, you know and there is an otherness there was always that dark part of a person that says 'I think I'll juts go into that bar and I'll juts wipe everyone out', you know and there is that.

Have you ever done that?

Yeah![laughs]

Were you worried about the consequences?

Well only worried that I might lose the character. If I never want to play that character again I'll walk into a town and, and you'll find that at that stage I have actually disengaged from the game already. I can't be engaged in that character and in that game and do that. I have to disengage. I have to do that. It

has to become a sprite on the screen doing that, but that's because it is in a community setting. That little spot gives me a community and if I storm through that community killing everything that I come across, men, women, children and chickens, you know, I have to be disengaged. There is part of me that, that if you were engaged in that and I would do it I'd feel quite guilty, because that would be a dark side of me that shouldn't be there. Er, I don't it's there but shouldn't be able to be expressed. Because that is a dangerous thing to encourage within a body. We talked about me talking Sims of because it was encouraging some quite dark things in my two kids. I wasn't just that I disapproved on that it was that I saw that as unhealthy that the games drawing out things like that, that they don't need at that time in their life, that they don't ever need in their life. They don't need to express a very dark side and if that happens in actual fact the game comes of the shelf and goes into the banned section, you know and that will probably end up in the bin, because you don't need that. You need stuff that I think can draw good things out of you as well as can aid to dump your stress and can aid to escape into a place where all the stresses of your life aren't. Erm, when I went through my divorce interestingly I played a lot of games. It was part of my escape, living in a house with someone who quite physically at times hated me and there was no escape. Well there wasn't, it was a horrible time in my life and my escape was playing games. I would come home from work…

What games did you play?

I was just trying to think. I don't remember. I honestly don't remember. I can't… I would have to think about that. [pause] Command and Conquer was one I had on the machine and it was probably one, the first version of Command and Conquer. I remember at that time I probably bought Red Alert and the expansion pack, so I was probably playing those two games [pause] Doom wasn't on there, but Quake probably was I think I bough Quake two about the same time as well, So there was still a balance there but it, I think for me personally it was about leaving the world behind. You can do that. I mean the situation I was, you can do that when you go to work. I have pictures on my wall of my kids and my family to remind me why I'm at work sometimes 'cause the job I do here especially can be quite involving and I'm sure that you find it with your job. You get so sucked into something it's half past six, seven o'clock and I've got kids and I should be at home, sop I keep pictures around me so they draw me back. At the time I was teaching when I went through the divorce and teaching can be very encompassing and I would be at work at seven o'clock sometimes, doing legitimate stuff, but that was also one of my strategies for losing myself. But when I was at home them, especially when the children had gone to bed, I would play games, because I could turn the lights off and my whole world then would be what's on that screen and I could get very, very involved and it didn't involve the pain I was going through. I'm very sure there wasn't transference there. I didn't want to play violent games, so it wasn't me transferring my anger at my ex-wife into a game. I just wanted to get away from it. I wanted to be somewhere else. And in a non-physical way, that was a way of doing that. [pause] erm, I haven't though much about this, I was seven years ago, so it's quite a time now. [voice very quite here and much slower]

Well I don't necessarily dwell on negative things…

…No well…

…On the other hand I don't what to stop you talking if you want to talk about it… In my mind there are 4 or 5 things that made me think I must pick up on that. And I don't remember them all now. So I'm going to have to meet with you again after I've listen to the recording. But one of the things that did occur to me was that erm, I don't think I have quite understood completely…

…Yes, yes…

…When you talked about the commerce in Morrowind, you were really enthusiastic and it reminded me, of course you talked about games with a trading thing in Elite, so when you started with Elite you talked about the trading and things and then you talked about this enthusiasm for this in Morrowind.

Yes

But you then, when you talked about the free online games that require you to buy stuff you were quite negative about it.

Yeah, well it would cost me money.

Right?

I mean I won't say that I'm a frustrated entrepreneur, because I'm not, erm, I'm creative, but I'm too flitty to be an entrepreneur, you know I'll blaze ahead with new stuff but once it gets down to having to do the day to day stuff I get bored. Erm the buying and selling in games? It's just quite a lot of fun, you know to be able to own something that you haven't actually had to pay for, well you have paid for it because in the game you have to go away and make money so that you can pay for it, erm, there's that bit, but there is also the ability to do that and it's actually quite easy to make money, you know Morrowind I can be an adventurer, I can [inaudible] from a to b [inaudible] and on the journey back I can take on a challenge and earn some more money so it is actually quite easy to make money, if it was difficult to make money, I start to loose my interest. And so there's that part of it. There is the ease of being able to make the cash. There is also the cheats. Not online, but offline where you can dump a million credits or a billion gold pieces into an account.

And have you done that?

Oh yeah, definitely.

And what do you do with the money?

To be able to buy. To be able to own. To be able to upgrade.

But what do you buy?

Yes, the most, well it depends on he game. The, the purest form, I'll go back to Elite, because you are buying and selling and it's commerce. It's the em, how would we rationalise it....I mean I'm a brummy and the way I would rationalise it it's the Indian shopkeeper in me [both laugh] I know that's terribly un PC.

No, No, go on...

... The, I want to make money. Now I want to go from A to B and I want to the home transport system and I want to sell it and I want to make a profit on it and I know why because I'm the MD of this firm and I want that control. And then there is also the upgrade you spaceship, you can get a bigger spaceship and you can go forward and do more can't you. Elite 2, interestingly enough I dabbled with that and it's quite interesting because the commerce element was there but there was too much story line it actually got in the way and I didn't enjoy playing it as much as Elite one because there was no storyline. I mean there were lots of rumours, I mean on the bulletin board that there was then, that there were these secret areas, spaceships you could board and all kinds of stuff, I I've never come across any of that, but to find that to do that you had to enter into the commerce part of it. You had to make the money. You had to have a ship to be able to survive that pirate attack you knew you were going to get because you were going into a chaotic galaxy to sell the stuff and it was a bit rough you know, but that's the shopkeeper side of me. Within Morrowind, partly you buy to survive because you start with such rubbish kit that you can only tackle the most basic tasks and you have to buy to build up, but then there are the peripheral things that like allow you to buy a clock on invisibility, fantastic that is, I can now do stuff that allows me to do the what if. If I follow the shopkeeper into his back room what's there? And those games are quite beautifully make because we go back again to the width and the breadth and the depth of the world that you are actually in and you can do the what if there. Erm....so....

What about the Sims?

Erm the Sims you can get money quite quickly I mean I did buy stuff, you can buy furniture and that stuff and I downloaded a load of furniture at one point and I got a DVD full of furniture and pictures and stuff like that that I can use in the Sims. In actual fact I don't buy stuff in the game, everything I need, I build before I start playing the game. And If I couldn't do that, again the game wouldn't interest me. Erm we all use, the whole family when we play the Sims we use the cheat to increase our money because we are not interested in making money, that's a part of the game that has little interest, partly

because your character gets up and goes out to the car and goes to work and then comes back again, there is no interaction there, it's juts a way of knocking your credits up, so we use the cheat, juts keep it simple and then you don't have to send someone to work. I mean one of the fun ones was seeing how long it would take before they lost their job. Awful really when you think about it. But you know the commerce side of that just didn't engage because it was out there. The commerce I do engage with you actually have to do something to earn the money. If it's too difficult it turns me off. I mean Command and Conquer you've got to gather the ore and in the Tiberian [inaudible], which is the next one on from Command and Conquer, you have to collect different Tiberian Ore and you have got to do it quicker than the other player. And there is a mini commerce element there. So there is an interest there, and erm, I can't see a stream. I mean it is all about keeping in the game. Sometimes it's about being able to do things that you couldn't do before because you've got something or you have bought something, or you've paid someone an amount of money to get some information. So a lot more of it is part of the game and I will feel that if I can do a cheat to get more money, it detracts nothing from the game to me. Because the making the money is a peripheral thing. I suppose that is because I do it for a living, hopefully, you know, it is a normal part and that just bores me, but the buying, the owning something, er, Morrowind you can erm, if you find a chest and it's empty, say in a castle or a dungeon or even in a house you put your stuff in and the chances are when you go back – that's the squirrel in me – when you go back it will still be there. So in my last incarnation in Morrowind I think I had chests all over the map full of my kit and it always used to be a challenge to remember where I had put everything. Erm, Like I said that was a game that drew me in far too much, that was a game where I existed within the game and probably one of the few that I did, erm Elite one would probably be the same, you know the fact that we actually kept a paper log book of what we were buying and selling and what the price were on the planets that we'd visited. I mean bizarre. I mean looking back on it and looking at it from the cold light of day, but that was really important, that was such an important part of the game, and we used to, you know we would be in a system and, and John Would say is so and so round here? And we would go back to the paper book and we'd look it up and say 'yeh, oh, but you can't sell anything here but you can but so lets' go here and then lets go back to there' and it wasn't real but it was such a integral part of the game. Erm and it wasn't just that you could but cheap because you could sit there is space, just on the outskirts of a system where the police didn't chase you and you could blow people up coming out and pick up there stuff using a ram scoop if you had bought a ram scoop of course, but then of course you'd need a bigger cargo hold to hold it, so you are drawn straight back into the commerce, it was so ingrained in that game that it was seamless and I honestly can't remember finding that boring, then looking at some of the other games more recently the money side was... I'd use the cheat rather than,... because I just don't enjoy it as much. Morrowind was probably slightly different because the tasks to make money were fairly interesting and more diverse and it's quite a free-form game and you can go, you can play it rigidly following the quest, or you can juts go off and do some, I think I spent a time as a hired mercenary and all I did was find orcs for about six or seven hours game time, you know and actually quite enjoyed it.

So how many hours do you think you have played Morrowind for?

Oh, I think that was quite frightening, but I don't think I could put a figure on it. Erm, It was quite early on in my second marriage and I think that was when I realised that the reason I was wearing the screen on the top of my head was that I had been playing it too long. And at that time I would be up until; two or three in the morning playing the game, you know, coming home from work and going I'm going to have an hour and I would probably pop my head out to have tea and I'd be sitting there thinking about Morrowind and actually it was quite a dangerous game, but I really did engage with that game, I got far too involved which was why it came off the machine.

Tell me, when you described it as dangerous...

... Time ceased to exist. Completely. And when I said I was up until two or three in the morning, that's a Monday morning, or a Monday evening and I'd gone through to Tuesday morning and I had to go to work next morning and the Tuesday night I would be there, but it was all... That game was far too much horizon, because there was that part of the game, 'what's over the next horizon'. I remember buying, I remember quite clearly buying, having to buy the expansion pack Talisman Sword Coast because it added a whole new set islands and mainland to the original two expansion disks. So it added a whole new world, it added Europe to our Great Britain. Erm, I remember feeling quite compulsive about that. I think I bought that as soon as it hit the shelves, which is very unusual for me because like a said earlier I have to wait, but it was the new horizon it was the ability to go elsewhere and as you can

travel across the landscape quite quickly, I think it was that getting really locked into the world that made it quite dangerous for me to play, you know when you do a week of two in the mornings Friday, the weekend comes you actually sleep more that I spent time with the family and I remember having quite, one or two rows over it, quite noisy rows and it being quite early on in my marriage I was thinking, no, that's not right, there are other priorities that are equally as fun, but that early on in the marriage it the games became something to monitor [laugh]

Ok, how are we doing, an hour and forty minutes, there's still loads of stuff....[interview ends here with agreement to meet again]

Appendix B: Example of interview notes

'Max': Summary notes

Names and places have been changed to ensure anonymity. Notes written up immediately following interviews

13th June 2006

Max is a 31-year-old PhD student. He has previously worked in the interactive media industry, but he is now in his final year of study. He is from Germany and his friends and family, including his long-term girlfriend lives there. Max tells me that they talk most days and visit most holidays. After his studies he plans to move back to Germany.

I visited Max at his home in Winton at about 12 midday. We spoke for about 30 minutes (recording 1) about a game that he had been playing than morning. We then took a 2 minute walk to local shops for lunch. Max chose where we ate and this was Subway. Max chooses the deal of the day. During lunch Max talks about Winton and where he normally eats and also tells me that he tends to spend much of his time in the house. He tells me that Parkstone and Bournemouth are boring and expensive. Max also tells me that he has everything he needs in his room. He doesn't want to have 'pointless' conversations with strangers in pubs; he would sooner surf the web and play games. After lunch we returned to Max's student accommodation. Max shares a house with 4 other students, but he says he does not really know them. Max has only lived there a few months and tells me it is temporary accommodation. There is another student in the house, and Max acknowledges him as he makes a cup of tea, but they don't speak and I am not introduced. We then return to Max's room and talk more about Max's experience of playing and buying games. This interview lasts about 1 hour (recording 2). Max has a large room with a double bed, draws and wardrobe. There is also a 21inch TV, a PC with two monitors and a laptop. There is an Xbox and a Gamecube. Also in the room are various bits of computer equipment and a shelf mainly containing games, books and comics. Max has 24 console games on the shelf but tells me that he tends to sell games that are 'crap', so this represents only his 'current' collection. There is a picture of Isabel by the computer but overall there are few personal decorations in the room. Having spoken about Max's collection of games we then play one (Mariocart on the Gamecube) and Max wins, but the game is never very competitive. We then talk some more about Max's other interests and about his hopes for the future. This last interview lasts another 30 minutes (recording 3). I leave Max's house at 3.45.

14th July

I met Max today again at his house and we spent 2 hours or so playing games and talking. We then had lunch and after lunch I interviewed him again for about 40 minutes. We then played an hour or so more games. The game play was interesting because Max's girlfriend had just gone back to Germany and he had been playing games with her during the visit. He tells me that he misses her and that he is looking forward to returning to Germany. This and our play prompted Max to think and talk a lot more about 2 player games both collaborate and competitive.

Max: Summary of interviews

Taken from recordings/transcripts and used to identify key themes. Numbers in square brackets refer to notes on recordings (interview: note number(s))

1. Max starts by telling me about Rollercoaster Tycoon. He has played this type of game before (Themepark Tycoon). He plays in Sandbox mode because building is his objective. **He is trying to create a park** he would like to visit: an idealized park based on his imagination. His objective is that the Sim-people have fun. He isn't interested in making money from his park. This is his 2nd park. The first had mistakes and Max wants to put these right in the 2nd park. He has lost interest in the first park. He sometimes watches what he has created. He likes money not being an issue. He likes **the control** this game give him. He is **annoyed if the Sim people don't have fun**, but occasionally he confesses to being mean to them. [1:1-10].

2. But he also notes that this new park also has mistakes and then he may start a new one. Max also notes that the **game doesn't run probably** and that this might be a reason to get a new graphics card. [1:1-16]. But after his girlfriend's visit Max has stopped playing. Real life more interesting, but also feels he has done it all now. [4.1, 4:19].

3. Max recalls when he first got into **gaming as a child**. Played VCS, then C64, then Lynx and Megadrive. Fondly recalls playing Mario with friends. [2:1].

4. Max recalls excitement at **buying a Gamecube** in lunch break. Bought it because it had a Star Wars game. Played at work with colleagues [2:3].

5. Max notes the Star Wars games he has bought over the years [2:2]. Max remembers watching Star Wars as a child and has **fantasied about this universe since.** Buys lots of Star Wars media (dvds, and videos), but knows it is a rip-off. Has his own version of the films in his head. Plays games **to 'be in' the Star Wars universe**. Wants to fly Xwing, etc. [2:4-6]. Plays Rebel strike. It's not a good game, but it's Star Wars [2:8]. Recalls playing Star Wars game in an arcade and blowing up the death star. And then described a dream of fighting Darth Vader [2:18]. Notes that after playing Mariocart, when driving a real car he imagined the game and the power-ups. [2:19].

6. Max notes that if he played the Sims he would not give them a situation like his current one, but rather **an 'ideal' life** [2.25]. Max explains that his life is on hold until he completes his studies [3.4]. He is conscious about going out and spending money in general. So games and web are 'cheap' entertainment [3:6, 3:10]. He also uses Dell site to fantasise about new PC [3:9].

7. Max **buys games when they are discounted** because there is no point to him in spending more when you might not finish a game [2:7]. Recalls getting Wolfenstein for £2.79 and being pleased with it even though finished it in 2 days [2:22].

8. Looks for **innovative games** and wants something different [2:22]. Max notes that he likes all technology and media technology. So he monitors sites and downloads media and 'plays' with computer hardware [3:2] [3.9]. Notes he pleasure at coming back to the same game with new graphics card [4.26].

9. Max notes that **Rebel strike calms him down**. He notes that as a child you are told not to break things, but in a game you can and notes that after a bad day you pick a game and **it distracts you** (from not being with his girlfriend, from work, from lack of local friends, from temporary accommodation). For Max it's an alternative to drinking. [2:8]. But this type of play can turn into fun [2:11].

10. Max also **plays to distract himself** from work [2:9]. Surfs the web for this too. Playing games can be like surfing the web. Describes a range of game and media-related sites [2:13]. Consoles are best for **the quick fix** [3.11]. Max tends to play the quick fix games [4.2]. Notes that Metroid Prime to complicated and couldn't get into it [4:8]. Notes that he gets bored of web and games and moves between the two to pass the time. [4.21].

11. Max also **plays videogames with friends.** He notes the fun **of 'trash-talk'** [2:12]. Also recalls playing mariocart with three friends. [2:19]. Talks about fun of playing with other people and sharing experiences [4:18] and also to impress other player [4:22-23]

12. Max notes that Luigi's Mansion **got his girlfriend hooked** on Gamecube [2:16]. Bought a DS for girlfriend, but actually also for him to play [2:22]. When Girlfriend visits they play a lot of games together as a **way to be together** and have fun [3.3] Girlfriend bought him DS [4.3]. Notes that they share Nintendog and describes playing games with girlfriend during her visit. Max likes it that his girlfriend likes videogames. It gives them something to do together [4:4-7, 4:9-12].

13. Max notes that he plays Halo and other games on easy level because it's **about being entertained** and doesn't want it to be **frustrating** [2:17]. Notes that a bad game is one that is hard to play and doesn't do what you want or if you die too quickly [2:20].

14. Max describes playing Eternal Darkness **and loosing track of time** and it being 2.30 in the morning and he was so scared that he didn't want to got to the toilet but needed to [2:18].

15. Max explains that **few games have a good ending** and that this is frustrating. He blames the industry for a lack of imagination [2:21].

16. Max explains that he **used cheats** for Wolfenstien because it is about playing and finishing and he doesn't want it to be frustrating (he has lots of other frustrating things in life, like his study and living away from home) [2:22].

17. Max explains that we **doesn't like online multiplayer games** because you always get beaten by children. This is no fun [2:22].

18. On **violence in games** Max explains that it's not him, it's Han Solo and it's what Han would do in this context [2:25]. Again says he does feel for the 'pixel people' in his games and wants them to be happy. [2:25]

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