

Please cite the Published Version

Brock, T (2017) Videogame consumption: the apophatic dimension. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 17 (2). pp. 167-183. ISSN 1469-5405

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540516684185>

Publisher: Sage Publications Ltd.

Version: Accepted Version

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Videogame Consumption: The Apophatic Dimension

Journal:	<i>Journal of Consumer Culture</i>
Manuscript ID	JOCC-15-0077.R3
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Consumer culture, Video games, Griefing, Failure, Laughter, Apophatic
Abstract:	<p>This article applies psychological-sociological accounts of the 'apophatic', a form of negative thinking, to examples of gaming practices to conceptualise a new theory of video game consumption. It challenges the prevailing notion that the games consumer is always a 'cataphatic' thinker, that is, an activist, rational-pleasure seeker, and looks to the 'sorrows' (Holbrook, 1993) of gaming to find evidence of its more undesirable nature. The term apophatic is characterised as an attempt to de-value the rational value purportedly placed on gaming practices. 'Griefing' other players is a good example of this apophatic ethic; where players derive value from the subversion of serious play through the disruption and destruction of other players' game worlds. The struggle with 'failure' is another. As such, the article concludes with a reflection on the almost unsayable nature of videogame consumption, and suggests that consumer value may be derived from its more negative, spiritual-like aspects.</p>

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to express his thanks to the anonymous reviewers who helped clarify the ideas presented in this article.

For Peer Review

Introduction

Apophysis is a common Greek designation for the language of negativity. Apophysis can imply 'negation', but its etymology suggests a meaning that characterises it closer to 'un-saying' or 'speaking-away'. Apo means 'from' or 'away'. Phasis means 'assertion'. Apophysis is thus commonly understood as 'denial', and is often paired with *cataphasis*, which means 'affirmation' or 'saying' (Sells, 1994, p.2).

The aim of this article is to explore the apophatic dimension of videogame consumption and to argue that consumers derive value from its more negative elements. Few have paid serious attention to the more undesirable aspects of videogames, such as the frustration that comes with 'failure' (e.g., the experience of loss through the death of an avatar) or the hurt that comes from 'griefing' (e.g., the intentionally harassing or upsetting of another player). I will argue that both of these elements of gaming practice appear to resonate with what Brown (1999) calls 'the apophatic ethic and the spirit the postmodern consumer'. The modern consumer is seen as someone who derives value from the negation of the rational value purportedly attributed to consumer behaviour in favour for its more 'hellish' aspects:

'For every manifestation of the Holy Spirit of Harrods or Hamleys, for every moment of extra-sensory bliss brought about by burying one's head in a bucket of Ben and Jerry's, there are encounters that only Mephistopheles himself and his mephitic marketing myrmidons could have concocted. Ironically, however, it is these abominable consumer experiences, these Stygian shopping torments, these infernal retailing regions, that render the pleasurable side of shopping so rapturous, exhilarating, joyous, spiritual – to some extent at least. An apophatic dialectic of good and evil, pleasure and pain, sacred and profane thus appears to obtain' (Brown, 1999, p.174).

This dialectic is of concern here also. From its earliest conception, the game consumer has been depicted as a rational pleasure-seeker, whose ability to control and play videogame environments well has been linked with an affirmative conception of enjoyment (Holbrook, et. al. 1982, 1984). Gaming pleasures have been portrayed as emerging from the achievement and success that players attribute to their mastery of gaming worlds (Grodal, 2000). An idea that is then enshrined in players' hedonistic daydreams and fantasies (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2007) and life-scripts (Molesworth, 2009). Indeed, in recent years, it has become popular to talk of games as a rational escape from reality (McGonigal, 2011) and as an instrumental attempt to take control over the socio-economic risks and uncertainties present in late modern life (Molesworth and Watkins, 2014). In each case, videogames are seen to provide the consumer with a temporary relief from the disappointments of material reality, as it is said that what stimulates consumer desire to play more or newer videogames is the drive to overcome these imperfections (also see Campbell, 1987).

This article seeks to offer a new theory of the videogame consumer that moves beyond this conception of consumption as a rational, functional choice. Rather, it suggests that the games consumer derives value from the deeply conflictual, yet nevertheless profound challenges that are presented during play. I will argue that it is within the 'sorrows' (Holbrook, 1993) of videogaming that the consumer finds ways to introspectively connect to inner worlds by way of the elimination of gaming

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3 obstacles. To borrow from Nicos Mouzelis (2010), I argue that apophatic aspects of
4 human reflexivity emerge as the consumer reflects on the struggles of gameplay. This
5 has the effect of orientating human cognition away from the logico-deductive
6 reasoning of rational choice towards more open-ended self-self and self-other
7 relations. What this means is that the motivation to consume videogames is not solely
8 instrumental, which requires an overly activist conception of the human subject. On
9 the contrary, what I will argue is that the videogame consumer mobilises a more
10 'passive observer-observed' mode of human reflexivity as they come to reflect on the
11 meaning of their failures. This mode relies on the suspension of instrumental thinking
12 and is seen to open up a space for players to connect more deeply to their gaming
13 projects in both psychological and sociological ways.
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17 To begin, I will consider sociological accounts of the apophatic, and I will reflect on
18 its importance to theorising consumer behaviour. From this perspective, theories of
19 the games consumer have tended to emphasise the cataphatic, that is, rational
20 dimension of human behaviour. I will suggest that this position obscures the creative
21 acts that emerge from the volatile nature of play, and that an understanding of its
22 darker side yields a need to embrace the introspective, perhaps even spiritual side, of
23 videogame consumption.
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Videogaming: Pleasure through Control?

The power of play over human psychology is well documented historically. Studies have argued that play is an overwhelmingly pleasurable experience (Deci, 1975). Play is understood to be autotelic: an intrinsically motivated behavior, which rewards people with an internal state of satisfaction and positive affect. When people play, they describe their playful experiences in terms of 'interest', 'excitement', 'enjoyment', and perhaps most importantly, 'pleasure' (Calder and Staw, 1975). A focus on these internal states has led to the phenomenological conceptualisation of play as a site for 'fun' (Lewis, 1982) and 'leisure' (Neulinger, 1981) as well as a site for 'flow' (Csikzentmihalyi 1975): a state of mind where the player is happy and in control.

This understanding of play has had a noticeable influence on consumer research into videogames, which suggests that consumer behavior is driven by these positive affective experiences (Holbrook et al., 1984; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). People feel good playing videogames, and it is the 'experiential' and 'hedonistic' side of consumer behavior that drives its consumption. One popular example of this is the pleasure that players derive from taking control over videogame environments. For example, Grodal (2000, p.211-212) argues that,

'Interactive media like video games create a further sophistication of media consumption by enabling consumers to switch between passive control of their emotional and cognitive states (by actively selecting one-way media) and an active control of these states (by choosing interactive media)'.

As such, videogames provide a way for people to take control over their moods and emotions, and derive satisfaction from the stimulation that comes with playing videogames well (also see Holbrook et al., 1984).

In recent years, this understanding of videogame consumption has been elaborated on to take account for the modern 'credo' of consumerism, perhaps the most significant contribution of which has come from the sociologist Colin Campbell (1987). According to Campbell, the desire for pleasure, as opposed to utilitarian need fulfillment, was driven by a disparity between imaginative anticipation of goods and the imperfect reality of consumer experiences. Disappointment with material reality propels a self-perpetuating desire for consumer experiences, which offers only momentary pleasure. As such, consumer research on videogames has tended to focus on the ways that players purchase and play videogames to help them actualize a sense of control over their lives (albeit momentarily). For example, Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2007) have argued that videogame consumers use virtual collectable items as a way to control, order and make-sense of the 'liminality' in their lives. Here, videogames are said to be a resource for the scheduling of life-scripts, which provide players with the materials required to construct fantasies and daydreams about living better lives. Players use videogames not only to escape from routine (see Molesworth, 2009) but also to actualize a sense of progress in late modern life (see Molesworth and Watkins, 2014).

This perspective is built on a wider understanding that videogaming manipulates players into consuming products that facilitate the experiences of control, which they

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3 cannot get from material culture today. For example, Kirkpatrick (2013) has argued
4 that videogame consumption is built on a wider rejection of material culture or, at
5 least, a re-negotiation of its failures. These failures come in a particular form: that the
6 modern world no longer offers rewarding work or the fulfilling of life opportunities
7 needed to give people a sense of meaning. As such, the consumption of videogames
8 provides a way to recuperate for this sense of loss by providing players with a means
9 to ascertain a form of achievement and success that is rich in status symbolism. What
10 emerges is evidence of players 'happy' to spend hours undertaking repetitive gaming
11 acts, which is not only considered tantamount to the addictive nature of videogames,
12 but also a means through which (the illusion of) control is said to temporarily remedy
13 such liminal anxieties (Goggin, 2008).
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16 The theme of control is not unique to theories of videogame consumption or
17 consumer culture however. Mouzelis (2010) suggests that the idea of control is central
18 to whole 'Western way' of thinking about reflexivity and the human subject.
19 Mouzelis calls it 'cataphatic reflexivity', and in his critique of European social theory,
20 he argues that many prominent sociologists fall into the trap of conceptualising
21 human subjectivity in terms of rational, instrumental action. Mouzelis' critique is
22 broadly aimed at the 'reflexive modernisation thesis' of Beck, Giddens and Lasch
23 (1994). Mouzelis is critical of their idea that the human subject is always seeking to
24 rationally control and construct their biographies. For Mouzelis, our understanding of
25 reflexivity and self-identity should not be limited to the notion that one seeks to take
26 (biographical) control over the risks and uncertainties of late modern life. Such a
27 position obscures the apophatic dimension of subjectivity, which is common to
28 anyone who has thought reflectively about themselves and the challenges that they
29 face. Mouzelis (2010, p.273) captures the 'apophatic' in the following way:
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33 'An apophatic manner of turning inwards is another way of navigating in post-
34 traditional settings. In ideal-type terms, in this case, the turning inwards aims
35 not at doing but undoing, not at constructing but deconstructing. It aims at
36 weakening rather than enhancing the rationalizing, calculating, planning
37 dimensions of the self-self relationship. It focuses less on purposive decision-
38 making processes and more on getting rid of the 'tyranny of purposiveness'
39 [...] The same is true about identity formation. Identities are neither ascriptive
40 nor cataphatically constructed. They emerge apophatically and so does the
41 way they relate to each other'.
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44 The apophatic is not about control, on the contrary, it is an attempt to negate
45 instrumental rationality, and thereby shift away from cognition towards an
46 exploratory, open-ended voyage that brings the subject closer to their inner world. In
47 more secular terms, apophatic reflexivity is about finding a way to actualise the
48 existential importance of *introspection*: an inward looking movement that offers a
49 creative and dynamic widening of self-identity through feeling, rather than control
50 and knowledge (also see Halton, 1995).
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53 Such a perspective has been applied to consumer culture, though only very rarely. For
54 example, Stephen Brown (1999, p.164), in his critique of Holbrook's 'Typology of
55 Consumer Value', suggests that consumer behaviour is built on the very negation of
56 what is often construed as 'valuable' through cataphatic reasoning. To try and take
57 control of consumer value by defining what constitutes 'Quality', 'Beauty', 'Fun', or
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3 'Moral' provides the very conditions of possibility for its re-evaluation *via negativa*
4 and this may be understood as a deeply introspective process. From this perspective,
5 consumption is imbued with a spiritual framing (see Lasch, 1979), which is derived
6 from the seemingly transcendental nature of consumer encounters. Brown (1999,
7 p.176) describes this nature as 'blasphemous buying', and it refers to the more
8 'hellish', almost purgatorial occurrences, which are an integral but nevertheless
9 overlooked part of the consumer experience. It is our doubts, anxieties, tests, torments
10 and temptations that supplicate our convictions and augment our commitments to
11 consumer products.
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14 To align Brown and Mouzelis then, what we see is that the motivation to consume is
15 not strictly cataphatic, that is to say, an activist attempt to derive pleasure from
16 (momentary) episodes of control. On the contrary, to consume is also to turn inwards
17 in a negatory fashion and passively-observe the false expectation that the object will
18 deliver, thus eliminating it, whilst simultaneously bringing us closer to it. In other
19 words, in this self-self relation, the consumption of the object is not about closure; it
20 is not an attempt to achieve a goal. Rather, its negation prompts an open-ended
21 dialogue with the self, which involves an ever-deepening, more intense cycle of
22 introspection. Importantly, it is through this cycle that more spontaneous modes of
23 being and acting in the world can emerge as we further examine others and ourselves
24 *via negativa*. Both Brown and Mouzelis suggest that there is something profoundly
25 spiritual in this process, for it is not an emergent property of rational thinking, but
26 rather it is arrived at 'only through the seriousness, the pain, the patience and the
27 labour of the negative' (Brown, 1999, p.165-166). In other words, it is our consumer
28 abjection that puts us in touch with others and ourselves in ways deeper than that of
29 the pleasure derived from control.
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33 It is based on this understanding of consumer value that I seek to question the idea
34 that the nature of videogame consumption can be explained only in terms of the
35 pleasures derived from control. In the next section of this article, I will suggest that a
36 reading of failure (as a loss of control) is important to understanding the apophatic
37 value derived from the games consumer experience.
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Apophatic Consumption: Failure in Videogames

An exploration of the apophatic raises an important question with regards to the abject nature of videogame consumption: is failure a valuable consumer experience and, if so, why?

Games designer and researcher Jesper Juul (2013) argues that failure is one of the great paradoxes of videogaming – we may dislike failing in games but we dislike *not failing* even more. Indeed, it has long been acknowledged that the principle appeal of playing games is completing fair and challenging puzzles (Danesi, 2002). The more peculiar the puzzle, and the more uncertain its solution, the more we lose ourselves in trying to find its patterns and *avoid* its tricks – what the game designer might call ‘good balancing’ (also see Juul, 2011). Consider, for example, what it means to successfully complete a level in *Sonic the Hedgehog*: the player must be able to traverse the platform environment by avoiding the various hazards and traps that will kill Sonic. Failure to do so informs the player of a wrongdoing – Sonic has to survive to the end of the level – and the level is restarted to offer the player another opportunity. From this perspective, failure is said to motivate gameplay as it informs the player of whether or not they have solved the puzzle correctly, thereby acting as an obstacle to be rationally overcome, i.e., ‘I will avoid jumping into that hole in the ground next time’.

I would suggest that there is an apophatic dimension to this act that has been overlooked. The appeal of failing in games reaches beyond this logical way to resolve a given puzzle. Indeed, we like failing in games because, like with other areas of consumption, we derive value from the emotional turmoil that accompanies it (also see Holbrook, 1993). In particular, I would suggest that Hegel’s notion of ‘the labour of the negative’, adopted by Brown (1999), encapsulates this dimension: that one derives a sense of authenticity through the pain and seriousness that comes with failing in an antagonistic game world. The question is to understand how failures in videogames facilitate such abject experiences, and the psychological and sociological manner in which value is derived from them.

Generally speaking, the apophatic dimension of videogame consumption is built on two accepted assumptions within game studies. First, players have ‘active conversations’ (see Bogost, 2008) with the boundaries that videogames construct, including other players who play, e.g., in the case of online gaming. Second, these boundaries are designed to grant players the freedom from consequences. We like videogames despite acknowledging that we will fail, perhaps on many occasions. This is because games allow us to deny their judgment on our behavior. For example, we recognise that they are artificial designs that have been created to make players experience failure. Sometimes this fallacy is compounded with numerous bugs, glitches and the generally accepted issues of rendering, at least graphically, within a videogame (Juul, 2011).

These assumptions are important for understanding how games provide a way for players to plausibly deny the negative experiences that are derived from the failure of in-game performances. We can blame the game, we can blame a team-mate, we can even blame ourselves, but in a way that is cognizant, and perhaps even accepts, the pseudo-illusionary nature of the environment within which we are immersed. I stress

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3 the pseudo-part because it is this very ambiguity in play (see Sutton-Smith, 1997) that
4 allows us to navigate failure in a way that makes it valuable.
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7 Importantly, it is the intra-active relation that players establish with a videogame that
8 makes it valuable. This is only possible because it *relieves* the player of a sense of
9 agency. Players must forego a sense of control in recognizing that what is presented
10 before them is designed (to varying degrees) to determine their behavior. They
11 embrace the fact that the environment is a pre-designed unknown and a special set of
12 rules and actions that circumscribe their capacity to play. For example, in order to win
13 at *Sonic the Hedgehog*, I must accept the bounded control of the environment's
14 physics engine, which circumscribes how fast I can run, jump and bounce. Similarly, I
15 must accept that the levels progress in a sequential order and that I cannot know all
16 the tricks and traps of each level before I play. To borrow from Mouzelis (2010,
17 p.274), it is this very suspension of instrumental thought that facilitates the deeply
18 personal connection that I have with the game. It is only through the delegating of a
19 sense of my agency over to the gaming environment that I can initiate a 'passive
20 observer-observed' mode of reflexivity. This mode is not concerned with mastering
21 the puzzle viz. logico-deductive reasoning, but rather establishing a sense of *trust* that
22 I can have in the game as it guides me through its design (see Koster, 2013). Again,
23 this is an intra-active relation because it emerges spontaneously as I entrust myself to
24 the game's play mechanics. Thus, as I voyage through the levels of *Sonic the*
25 *Hedgehog*, I am engaged in two active dialogues: I seek not only to negate its
26 obstacles – to avoid its hazards – but also I recognise that failure is never the end. I
27 trust that I can always return and start over. This relation acquires permanence and
28 solidity so long as I understand what it is to fail, that is to say that the game does not
29 change its rules, and as such I can derive value in acceptance of the game's eternal
30 recurrence. In other words, my anger at the death of my avatar only turns me inwards
31 as I entrust to the game the experience of what Holbrook (1993, p.157) terms the
32 'rhetoric of rebirth': 'the joy lost through sorrow to joy regained'.
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36 *Tragic Gaming*

37 That players are cognizant of the fact that they are playing within a special set of rules
38 is key to understanding the abject value that consumers derive from playing
39 videogames: videogames are mediums that provide a (relatively) safe space where
40 players can experience tragic emotions.
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43 Juul (2013, p.108-110) draws this out most clearly in his analysis of tragedy in games
44 but the key point is that it is only possible because we feel able to relieve ourselves of
45 a sense of responsibility for the characters involved (including the one we control)
46 that we can experience of tragedy. He suggests that tragedy in games would not be
47 possible otherwise – after all who would want to take control of *Anne Frank* and *Anna*
48 *Karenina* without a clear sense of being relieved of responsibility? The irony for Juul
49 is that players would probably take on these roles but that this would necessarily
50 involve a kind of self-abnegation – much like watching Patrick Bateman in Mary
51 Harron's film *American Psycho*; we distance ourselves from the atrocious murders he
52 commits but we recognize the strategy behind how he hides the bodies as
53 uncomfortable as this might be. The same is true of playing video games: when we
54 fail we must acknowledge that we are ineffectual in some way. Such a feeling is self-
55 abnegating, and yet we subject ourselves to it anyway because we trust in the
56 possibility that there is a fair chance we might redeem ourselves.
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4 To extend Juul's analysis, I would argue that such feelings have a psychoanalytic
5 framing that contain strong apophatic elements. The relationship between apophatic
6 theory and psychoanalysis is well documented elsewhere (see Henderson, 2013), but
7 it is worth noting that both theories emphasize the idea that an individual finds it
8 deeply therapeutic to find and achieve goals *on their own terms*. The purpose of the
9 analyst is not to suggest goals to the patient, but rather to have the patient *become*
10 *aware* of those goals, in their own time, and *eliminate them* accordingly. What is said
11 to emerge is an expression of self that is not imposed from the outside (i.e., by the
12 analyst or the game) but rather as an intra-active relation that develops spontaneously
13 from within the subject's inner world. This connection adds a layer of meaning to
14 play that logico-deductive reasoning cannot, for it allows the player to experience
15 emotional vulnerabilities, including fear, anger, sadness, and shock (see Sutton-Smith,
16 2003).
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20 Consider, for example, the feelings of anger that accompany losing three or four
21 hours worth of gameplay. This is a very real possibility in the one of the most
22 critically acclaimed, yet difficult, videogames ever produced: *Dark Souls*. Produced
23 by Hidetaka Miyazaki, this action role-playing videogame is largely celebrated for the
24 manner in which it subjects its players to combat encounters that often result in the
25 experience of death and defeat. Internet commentary, including reviews and forum
26 discussions, salute the game's ruthless nature: players who fail to proceed with
27 extreme caution, learn from past mistakes, or find alternative routes to explore, will
28 die. Indeed, 'you died' is the game's most infamous screen image as players find
29 themselves time-again victim of the game's clever programming system. For in *Dark*
30 *Souls*, enemy and boss battles are purposively designed to trick players into thinking
31 that they have mastered their combatants' techniques. Players will spend hours
32 cautiously learning how to defeat a single boss or a group of enemies only for the
33 programming to change fighting style and to catch them off-guard. The result is death,
34 and the player will be set back, often quite substantially, and asked to run the gauntlet
35 again as if new.
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39 Understandably, the prospect of losing hours of gameplay is rarely considered a
40 pleasant experience in *Dark Souls*. And yet, it might be suggested that it is these
41 cycles of struggle-death-rebirth that make it such a critical success. As one reviewer
42 of the game suggests, 'Trying, failing, trying again, failing again – *Dark Souls* is an
43 ongoing process of skin hardening, of toughening up... [it] intrinsically recognizes
44 the importance of failing. You died. But you are back. You failed. But you can try
45 again' (see Smith, 2016). Death makes for a good teacher in *Dark Souls*. It helps
46 players transform the experience of failure into something therapeutic: a valuable
47 lesson. Consider how the same reviewer reflects on the experience of death as
48 analogous to his own neuroses:
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51 'By the end of *Dark Souls*, I felt as if I had matured [...] I couldn't handle
52 failure. And I don't mean failure as in professional failure, or even perceptible
53 failure – if I so much as spilled a drink, or spent what I thought was too long
54 getting ready in the morning, I would deteriorate into self-loathing. I might
55 argue that *Dark Souls* mirrors what was once was my mental state [...] There
56 were times, plenty in fact, when *Dark Souls* drove me to despair. It made me
57 hate myself, scream at myself, hurt myself for being a failure – but maturity
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3 begins with confrontation. And contrary to its reputation, *Dark Souls*, for
4 somebody acutely sensitive to personal or perceived failure, is immensely
5 reassuring. By the end, I understood that making mistakes was not just
6 acceptable, it was essential’.

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9 This description clarifies the apophatic dimension of videogame consumption: it
10 shows that a player who connects intra-actively to the abject experience of failure
11 (through death) may derive a deep personal connection with this videogame. *Dark*
12 *Souls* helps the player *set his own goals*, which he strives towards *on his own terms*;
13 what emerges (within this sandbox environment) is a spontaneous expression of his
14 will to eliminate challenging obstacles. This experience opens up the player to
15 emotional vulnerability, which he observes and reflects on, informing how the game
16 shapes his sense of self. What makes *Dark Souls* a critical success is that its cycles of
17 struggle-death-and-rebirth help this player to reveal a personal tragedy (see Nietzsche,
18 1872 [1993]) – his neuroses. The game is experienced as a tragic drama, and rather
19 than furthering the player’s nihilism or obsession with rational control *it becomes a*
20 *means of confronting it* and bringing it into check. Through fear, anger and sadness,
21 the player comes to disclose a truth to themselves: that mistakes are not moments for
22 mortification and self-flagellation but rather are an important, constructive, and
23 necessary aspect of the human condition.
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27 By way of the annihilation of their avatars, videogames offer the consumer remedial
28 experiences that can help them confront their emotional insecurities. In the remaining
29 section of this article, I want to further clarify this point through an analysis of the
30 apophatic dimension of ‘dark play’. In considering some of the most conflictual and
31 perhaps upsetting gaming experiences around, I intend to show how laughter emerges
32 as a cathartic and transgressive act that is important for establishing meaningful social
33 relationships.
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The Funny Side of 'Dark Play'

The philosopher of play Miguel Sicart (2014, p.9-10) argues that one of the defining characteristics of play is that its pleasures are derived from a central tension between 'taking control' and 'letting go':

'Play is always dangerous, dabbling with risks, creating and destroying, and keeping a careful balance between both. Play is between the rational pleasures of order and creation and the sweeping euphoria of destruction and rebirth, between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac'.

Here, Sicart too makes reference to Nietzsche's (1872 [1993]) *The Birth of Tragedy* to suggest that central to the human psyche is a battle between rationality and irrationality. For Nietzsche, tragedy sums up the colliding tensions of Ancient Greek culture: between the order and sobriety of the Apollonian and the embodied, passionate, irrational, and irreverent Dionysiac art. Nietzsche considered how the genre of Greek tragedy effectively merged the two, allowing artists to move between both. Sicart (2014, p.9) argues that through play people find a way to navigate the Apollonian and Dionysiac tendencies in the human psyche (also see Caillois, 2001). He characterises this struggle in the following way: 'not only with the obstacles and needs that play imposes on us, but also with the permanent temptations that happen in play'. In other words, when we play, we often find it tempting to break the rules or corrupt the very values appropriated to the playful context within which we reside. An example of this can be seen in *Lego*, we often find ourselves building things without the need for any plans or instructions – what Caillois (2001) refers to as the 'formal' or 'intrinsic' qualities of play. This is what makes it enchanting: it allows us to let go of the elements of rationality that typically structure our decision-making processes. We can even be reckless: building elaborate constructions only to make them unsteady and watch them as they are destroyed. Indeed, when we play in this manner, we can find that something very powerful emerges from the process of balancing (dis)order: laughter.

Laughter as freedom

Perhaps it seems odd to discuss laughter in an article about the negative experiences of videogaming, but for the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) laughter has a deep spiritual meaning that often emerges in dark times. He considers laughter to be one of the fundamental forms of truth concerning human nature, and suggests that certain aspects of the world are only accessible to laughter. One of these aspects is liberation: to laugh is to liberate oneself from external and internal censorship. It liberates us from prohibition and inhibition alike. Laughter is said to unveil within us a sense of renewal, one that leads us to reflect on the fallacy of seriousness itself. For Bakhtin, such liberation was encapsulated within the play activities found within the Carnival. Play was said to be an example of a 'carnavalesque activity': a way for people to express themselves by challenging the rational structures or institutions within which they operate. Humor or satire, key to the carnival, provided a way for people to open up a space for freedom, and this would be expressed through laughter. Carnivals were seen as ways of temporarily dismissing the oppressive forces of established rationality, and facilitating a space where people could be critical of the world in a deeply embodied way: people would laugh and hurt at the same time.

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3 Carnivals were not spaces of fun but, rather, catharsis; they functioned to provide a
4 space to purify the soul through ambivalent laughter, and to provide a ritual that could
5 supplant religious austerity. As such, laughter is at its most powerful when it takes on
6 an intra-active form of truth: when it gets the subject to question his or herself and
7 their relationship to nature and/or other people.
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10 Videogames are spaces filled with laughter. But to understand why, one needs to
11 move beyond the widespread assumption that videogaming is a 'normatively positive'
12 and voluntary experience (Malaby, 2007). Indeed, such an assumption obscures the
13 dark and playful attitude that often penetrates the formal design of games, opening
14 them up to carnivalesque activity. For example, Mäyra (2015) talks of 'dark play' as
15 an approach to play situations in which one finds anarchic pleasure in the breaking,
16 smashing and failure of gameplay. Through examples of *Lego Star Wars* and *Lego:
17 The Lord of the Rings*, Mäyra argues that laughter may be commonly associated with
18 the tragedy of failure and (more broadly) the 'playful destruction' found in videogame
19 environments: children are often found excitedly demolishing in-game surroundings,
20 or laughing at the humorous tragedies that befall Lego characters. Under the control
21 of children, Lego-characters appear to die under the most calamitous of
22 circumstances, argues Mäyra (2015, p.95), and these episodes of dark play are said to
23 demonstrate, 'how the ambiguities of power and transgression in play are intertwined
24 in complex renegotiations of (active or passive) agency and of new realities generated
25 in play'. In other words, videogames provide children with the space to let go of the
26 seriousness of the very subject material presented, and thereby explore the morality of
27 violence and death through the laughter that accompanies failure. This relieves them
28 of (some of) the agency that life and death decisions bring, whilst also introducing
29 them to the funny side of our controlling, existential being.
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32 33 *Griefing 'for the lulz'*

34 Conceivably a more extreme example of this is 'griefing' (or 'trolling'), where a
35 player intentionally ruins the gameplay experiences of another 'for the lulz'
36 (laughter). Griefing is commonly defined in the negative. For example, Warner and
37 Raiter (2005, p.45) argue that griefing is the 'intentional harassment of other players'
38 through the utilisation of game structures or physics 'in unintended ways to cause
39 distress for other players'. Chesney et al., (2009) suggest that the practice is common
40 within online worlds, such as *Second Life*, where griefers proceed to play games to
41 make trouble and irritate others. Some examples include:
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- 44 • Entering a player-owned house or establishment and blocking entrances/exits,
45 thereby delaying the gameplay of others.
- 46 • Spamming the in-game chat with vulgar and obscene language or symbolism.
- 47 • Hacking accounts, crashing servers and orchestrating large in-game events
48 that subvert the control and restrictions of the game players and server
49 administrators.
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52 Understandably, those on the receiving end of this kind of play tend to find it, at least
53 to begin with, emotionally upsetting. The imposition of having one's hard earned
54 efforts destroyed or tainted is souring to say the least. It prompts us to question the
55 time and effort we've put in, only to have our project(s) miscarry. Foo and Koivisto
56 (2004) suggest that victims of griefing often dismiss the activity as a simple
57 maleficent attempt to frustrate and harm other players. Indeed, it is said that griefers'
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3 actions are pointless and have no intrinsic value – why, after all, would anyone seek
4 to subvert the structures of rationality and control designed into the game?
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7 A more nuanced perspective would appreciate the apophatic character of grieving, and
8 suggest that it is an example of how players will turn the serious treatment of
9 gameplay ‘on its head’ to find another layer of meaning (also see Schrank and Bolter,
10 2014). Bakioglu’s (2009) analysis of ‘Goon Culture’ in *Second Life* resonates strongly
11 with this. Bakioglu argues that the origins of grieving in online videogames can be
12 traced back to web forums that were orientated towards subverting the use of the
13 Internet for serious business. ‘Goons’ were videogame players who would object to
14 the serious treatment of videogame play through their creative and disruptive
15 gameplay styles. This would include attacking players, hacking accounts and crashing
16 services ‘for the lulz’. Grievers find it funny telling and showing others that they
17 should not take this videogame too seriously. Indeed, O’Brien (2010) argues that
18 grieving in *Second Life* is an example of ‘theatrical play’: it threatens the authenticity
19 of the immersive environment precisely to prompt users to contemplate the value that
20 they attribute to it. From this perspective, grieving negates the seriousness with which
21 people immerse themselves within these worlds. It is a transgressive act; a cheap shot,
22 perhaps, but one which is conducted in order to elicit a laugh and open up a space for
23 frivolity, which can bring grievers and victims into emotional contact with one
24 another.
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28 The idea that victims of grieving may find it funny should not be so alien. As with an
29 apophatic account of failure, players may find grieving confrontational, yes, but it is
30 also therapeutic to have the veil of control lifted from one’s eyes. There is a humorous
31 sense of relief in accepting that one’s effort to control things has been annulled. The
32 Slovenian philosopher of comedy Alenka Zupančič (2008, p.143) captures this point
33 when she discusses politically incorrect jokes: these jokes *should* cause a kind of
34 ‘existential anxiety’ but instead a ‘certain amount of pleasure gets realized and makes
35 it possible for us to laugh also in [sic] face of its discomfoting dimension’. To have
36 one’s gaming efforts ridiculed or attacked operates in a similar manner: it confronts
37 the player by exposing the arrogant pretensions of their arbitrarily created order(s).
38 Like failure, grieving has a remedial capacity then: it creates the conditions of
39 possibility for players to turn inwards (intra-actively) and find humility in the funny
40 side of dark play.
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44 Importantly, such experiences are not only psychological in character, for laughing at
45 one’s own or another player’s misfortune is also a ‘social performance’, which can
46 bind players together within a group or larger community (Goffman, 1967). For
47 example, Conway (2013) argues that laughter, whilst cathartic, is also an important
48 part of any video gamer’s communicative apparatus. Laughter is a point of
49 socialization that can give players license to engage in conversation, perhaps even
50 with complete strangers. Laughter is said to be an example of how ‘phatic interaction’
51 (2013, p.22) emerges within gaming communities: a player will use laughter in order
52 to confirm their own reaction to a particular incident by way of conferencing with
53 another that they are ‘on the same page’. As such, it may be suggested that players
54 embrace the hostility of the carnivalesque as a way of establishing inter-active cues
55 that can foster social cohesion.
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3 Consider, for example, the kinds of ‘grief play’ found in pre-match lobbies of online
4 first-person shooters, like *Call of Duty* (see Meades, 2015b, p.65-68). Trash talking,
5 ridicule, and ritualistic laughter are all examples of the social cues that operate
6 apophatically in this space– they negate the terms of service because their
7 manifestations are found to be offensive, problematic and abject. And yet, they are
8 also social cues that validate members of the group as ‘normal’. Ridiculing someone
9 for a tragic kill-death ratio/score in *Call of Duty* is a rite of passage, which players
10 recognise as part of acting appropriately within the game’s frame. By laughing at a
11 poor score, players are given license to ‘laugh it off’: to remedy the disappointing
12 play experience and the tense social situation that may follow. Laughter ‘breaks the
13 ice’ of playing poorly, and sees players acknowledge to one another that ‘mistakes
14 happen’, or that it is ‘just a game’. These cues are important for experiencing a sense
15 of social cohesion within online gaming environments, particularly as laughter
16 operates to lessen social responsibility.
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20 In closing, I would suggest that there is a role in videogame consumption for the
21 Jester as well as Master – the licensed fool whose inappropriate behavior confronts
22 and keeps in check the seriousness with which other players treat the game. In making
23 jokes, and playing incorrectly, the Jester can become an accepted part of a player’s
24 social performance. They ridicule but also laugh at their own efforts in an attempt to
25 subvert the instrumental structures that typically characterize ‘playing well’ (see
26 Kirkpatrick, 2013; also Meades, 2015b). From this perspective, the Jester is an
27 apophatic character: someone whose mischievous and risky behavior is acknowledged
28 (perhaps even celebrated) as a way to invite players to think intra-actively about their
29 gaming practices. Thus, the fool who kills himself and his teammates in calamitous
30 ways (e.g., by throwing a poorly-timed grenade out of a closing elevator) sets fourth
31 the *possibility* for all those involved to become a little bit closer: to laugh and
32 recognise that there is more to gaming than rational control.
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Conclusion

By referring to psychological and sociological accounts of the ‘apophatic’, a form of negative thinking, and applying this to examples of gaming practices, I have tried to show that videogame consumption is not only motivated by affirmative pleasures, but is negatory in the form that it takes. This culminates in a new theory of the videogame consumer that is built on the following assumptions:

1. The consumer connects with videogames in both *intra-active* (self-self) and *inter-active* (self-other) terms. In the cataphatic case, the consumer connects with the game in an activist manner as an object to be instrumentally overcome. In the apophatic case, the consumer connects with gameplay as an open-ended voyage to be observed and commented on passively. The latter is important because it opens up consumer studies to helping explain the more ‘hellish’ aspects of gameplay, particularly the appeal of ‘playing darkly’ (Meades, 2015b, Mortensen, et al. 2015).
2. Playing a videogame is often an *unknown* and *uncertain* experience. One’s perception of what is controllable is contingent upon our interactions with the design of the game and other players. As such, videogames should be understood as *oblique* (Kay, 2011) environments that are premised on a player ‘mucking through’ disappointment, failure and frustration. As such, videogame consumption may be driven by *not getting what one is looking for* as opposed to a pre-conceived notion of self-realisation/self-actualization. What is perhaps spiritual about playing video games is that consumers may derive a sense of (self-) knowledge and expression from the process of negating previously unknown obstacles established through their gaming journey.
3. From this perspective, a discussion of the apophatic allows us to acknowledge that consumers can connect with themselves and others on a level beyond means-ends thinking. This provides mutual grounds for the recognition of what Brown (1999) calls ‘the labouring of the negative’ in consumer value – that players credit one another with expressions of solidarity that emerge from the most frustrating, perhaps even hurtful aspects of their consumption. Psychoanalysis helps us understand the intra-active aspects of this consumption as a remedial catharsis built on a relational trust between the player and the game. Symbolic interactionism helps us understand the inter-active aspects of this consumption as a social performance built on open-ended phatic interactions that prompt social solidarity and (a momentary) critical stance towards the seriousness of playing well.

Each of these points captures the tensions that characterise videogame consumption: between the cataphatic and apophatic, affirmation and denial, winning and losing, pleasure and pain, sadness and laughter, control and letting go. As such, videogaming may be considered an example of what Bateson, et al., (1956) terms the ‘double-bind’: a somatic practice that carries conflicting messages that result in an emotionally charged dilemma. Such dilemmas are evident in players’ deep intra- and inter-personal struggles with the possibility of defeat. Interestingly, Bateson noted that there was a spiritual dimension to this dilemma, as in attempting to transcend the constraints of its dualism, subjects would recognise the impermanent nature of their reality. This article has shown that videogame consumers may too experience such

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3 transcendence. Videogames offer them a sense of redemption through the annihilation
4 and re-birth of their avatars. That such deliverance is possible speaks to the
5 contradictory manner in which players experience and value the desire for dis (order).
6 That games consumption is an act of negative labouring, and that one may derive
7 spiritual meaning from its black magic, points to its tragic and yet alluring quality.
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