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ABSTRACT
This paper considers the adult consumption of videogames as a form of escape from routine and often unsatisfactory aspects of consumers’ everyday lives. Drawing from a phenomenological study of 24 adult players, I illustrate aspects of escapism through play, specifically: nostalgia; ‘everyday’ daydreams; media-derived fantasies, and; virtual tourism. I consider these themes in light of the sociology of consumption and of play to highlight adult videogame consumption as a significant trajectory of experiential economies where the market provides commodities that allow for the actualisation of the imagination.

A GROWN-UP VIDEOGAME MARKET
According to Mintel (2006a) UK videogame sales were £2.626bn in 2006 and growing at 17%, significantly more than other leisure activities such as pre-recorded music, cinema, live entertainment, or visiting museums and galleries. Globally a similar picture is presented. Kolodny (2006)cites PricewaterhouseCoopers data that predicts that the 2010 global market for videogames may be worth $46.5billion. The message from this data and its reporting is that we should ‘take videogames seriously’ on the basis of their considerable economic contribution.

This market expansion also defies the popular view of videogames as the preoccupation of male teenagers, obsessively playing alone (see Poole, 2001). For example, the Entertainment Software Association’s (2007) claims that the average age of players is now 33 and that less than a third are under 18. In the UK over half of adults between 20 and 55 play videogames at least occasionally (Mintel, 2006a) and 17% of adults (over 18) play video games in any one week Mintel (2006b). To reinforce the ‘importance’ of adult digital play, Mintel’s (2006b) analysis of UK leisure highlights the very limited amount of time adults have for such activities. Leisure time is precious and more adults than in the past are choosing videogames to fill it. In this paper I therefore provide one account of what adults do with videogames. In doing so I note consumers’ use of the imagination-aided by the consumption of technology-to ‘escape’ the limitations of everyday life.

THE CONSUMPTION OF THE IMAGINATION

It is easy to dismiss escapism as idle daydreaming. Yet there is an established body of work in consumer culture that places the imaginary at the heart of our consumer society. First let’s consider imaginative play. The imagination is implicit in the most significant play theories of the 20th century. For example, it is seen in the non-materiality of the ‘magic circle’ articulated by Huizinga (1938) who goes on to argue for play as a foundation of culture, and in Caillois’s (1958) paidia, the chaotic, ‘free-play’ that is the opposite of rule-bound ludus. Other theorists such as Turner (1982) and Schechner (1984) are more explicit about the role of imaginative play as an outlet for fantasies that cannot be actualised in everyday social life. Here, aesthetic endeavours are a way to ‘deal with’ societal issues in a way that is separate from everyday life.

This recognition of the significance of play of the imagination, according to Sutton-Smith (1997), has its roots in the Romantic period as a reaction against the growth of industrialisation and urban lifestyles. As thought and behaviour was increasingly ordered through work practices, a movement grew to free individuals from these constraints. And such a need to escape routine is a central focus of Cohen and Taylor’s Escape Attempts, (1992). Their account of resistance to everyday life suggests that as individuals become aware of limitations in the apparently scripted life-plans that society gives them to follow, they seek various strategies to escape them.

What consumer researchers add to this is the detail of how the market now provides both the source material for this imagination, and activities that aid emancipation from routine. The call to consider the fantasy in consumption was first made 25 years ago by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) and there is now a significant ‘playful turn’ in consumer research. For example, McCracken (1988) argues that goods may act as bridges to desired, but ‘displaced’ meanings. Individuals create idealised states of being in their imagination—a golden past, a utopian future, or a promised other land—that are then deliberately removed from the everyday context to avoid possibly that they are revealed as less than what is imagined. Commodities are then used to access these desirable daydreams. This suggests a speculative, ‘wishing’ mind, discontended with everyday arrangements, and seeking to actualise fantasy through consumption. The implication is that ‘daydreaming’ about commodities is more than simple distraction, but rather an activity for meaning making and personal transformation.

Campbell’s (1987) sociology of consumption is also consistent with this discourse. He describes a ‘modern hedonism’ that has developed from a Protestant ethic that suppressed overt desires, and that flourished as indulgent imagination as a result of a Romantic influence. Consumers have therefore become 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, especially 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 physical ones, but ‘modern hedonism’ is not, as Boden & Williams (2002) suggest, 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. In other words, daydreams are bolted onto material objects or experiences.

Although fantasy may feed from an unlimited use of the imagination—i.e. may have no grounding in material existence—such extremes are a problematic way of escaping mundane reality because they cannot transform that reality. As Belk Ger & Askegaard (2003) explain, desire requires there to be hope that the object of desire can be obtained. The desire is also argued that desire is not attached to an object because of its intrinsic qualities, “but on the consumers’ own hopes for an altered state of being” (Belk et al, 2003:348). Cohen and Taylor 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 words, 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)

For example I may happily desire a new car (and subsequent transformed life), but to desire to be a wizard or Jedi would ‘normally’ be ‘futile’. Society therefore has established imagination ‘norms’, especially related to commodities. Yet 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 videogames to Campbell’s list of media and note that through these technologies, even the desire to do magic may be actualised. This is relatively new. The result, as has been previously argued (Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2007), is that there may be a continuum of imaginative labour from daydream to fantasy with varying degrees of potential for actualisation through both material and digital virtual consumption.

So play is at the heart of culture and now of our consumer society and videogames represent a trajectory towards the consumption of fantasy, aided by technology.

RESEARCH METHODS
To understand the lived experience of adult videogame consumption I draw on part of a larger phenomenological study of adult videogame consumption.

There has been growth in the acceptance of interpretive research methods in consumer behaviour over the last 20 years (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Goulding 1999) with Thompson in particular becoming associated with phenomenology (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989; Thompson 1990; Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994; Thompson, 1997) and other consumer researchers also drawing from the lived experiences of consumers. For example Belk and Costas’ (1998) investigation of mountain man retreats; Kozinets’s (2001) study of Star Trek culture; Kozinets’s (2002) study of the Burning Man Festival; Holt’s (2002) investigations into consumer resistance to brands; Belk, et al’s (2003) investigation into consumer desire; Martin’s (2004) study of Magic the Gathering, and; Stevens and Maclaren’s (2005) study of the use of women’s magazines to evoke the imagination. Such studies also provide evidence of the market’s ability to either aid the ‘escape’, or re-imposes itself after a temporary, ‘carnivalesque’ period. The result is recognition in consumer research of a desire for escape from societal norms, and a range of interpretive approaches that might be used in such studies. I have drawn on such methods here.

Thompson et al (1989) explain that phenomenological interviews focus on actual experiences of the phenomena under investigation. A phenomenology then seeks to reveal patterns of experience or ‘global themes’ that are supported by direct references the reported experiences, and as a result the analysis remains closely tied to the specific data generated, and in the ‘emic’ world of the participant (Thompson et al, 1989). Hence the idea is to generate nuanced narratives of consumers’ experiences rather than generalisable theory. The value of such accounts lies in the insight they provide into consumer experiences rather than predictive models.

For a phenomenology sampling is based on participants’ ability to relate in detail their experiences of the phenomena under investigation. A small number of participants may be sufficient to arrive at global themes. For example, Thompson (1990) considers the lives of working women with reference to just four interviews; Woodruffe-Burton (1998) considers male shopping using case studies of three men, and; and Holt (2002) considers consumer resistance to brands using 12 participants. Ideally a researcher simply continues to talk with different participants until no new experiences are revealed so that ‘exhausting’ the range of experience is more important than large samples. For this study I interviewed a total of 24 adult videogame players from a range of social backgrounds, professions, and domestic arrangements in order to understand experiences of consuming videogames. Fieldwork took place in the South of England, over a 5 month period in 2006. Here I draw on the experiences of six participants as illustrative of the themes specifically relating to ‘escapism’.

VIDEOGAME CONSUMPTION AND THE IMAGINATION
Four themes emerged from discussions with adult players in the context of escapism: a form of nostalgia; the 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); the exploration of fantasies that are beyond what they might ever experience in the material world, (but which may have been stimulated by books or films), and; the experience of novelty, through ‘visiting another world’. I will now illustrate each.

Nostalgia (being as you were)
Most of players I spoke to re-played old games from time to time. For example Matthew is a 26 year-old Soldier who lives with his fiancé in a small house a few miles from the army base where he works. He has recently been posted in Bosnia and in the Middle East and has now decided to get married and leave the army. He explains that most of his friends live either some distance away, or on the base and therefore he seldom socialises with them. Throughout the interviews Matthew recalls playing videogames as a child and teenager. He also explains that he still plays some of these childhood games.

“I asked for the Amiga because what I wanted it for was the Football Manager game you see. And to this 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 where 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, 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 a dissatisfaction with the re-experience of playing old games. He is drawn to play them to recapture an experience he remembers as pleasurable, but the experience doesn’t live up to the memory that it allows him to access. This is a recurring theme amongst those players that re-played old games. 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 such games is ultimately of disappointment. The warm feeling of nostalgia that accompanies familiar graphics and controls soon fades. The ‘problem’ with nostalgic play is that players soon realise that ‘things have moved on’. At the time players had never seen or experienced anything like it, but in subsequent years technology has developed and the things that make the game originally special, are now ‘routine’. Perhaps more significantly, those that they played with are absent. Recognition of this prompts reflection on their own life that has continued along a plan they cannot now change.

**Actualising daydreams (being a better you)**

Players may look to games for experiences based on things they feel they should have done, but never actually achieved. So Matthew also tells me about playing military combat videogames, explaining why he enjoys such games, and comparing them to actual combat that he has not experienced despite his recent tours of duty.

“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.”

Janice is a 39 year-old forklift and delivery driver who lives with her partner in the suburbs of a large city, a long and slow commute from her work. She explains her enduring interest in motor sport. 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 do. 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 and it’s a matter of going at some speed.”

Later in the interview Janice returns to this idea:

“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.”

Here Janice actualises her interest in racing through a videogame, recognising and overcoming what she perceives as impossibilities in her work and financial limitations of a low paid job. She cannot afford the exotic cars that she enjoys driving in games, or afford to risk losing her driving licence. Luke, a 29 year-old single web designer provides another account. Here at least part of his actions in videogames are about consumer daydreams that he may still hope to materially actualise. He talks a lot about sports and hobbies, and in particular about his interest in customising cars. He uses games to explore these interests:

“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 a car to change its performance, that kind of thing. It gives you an incentive to learn things in a way. You are virtually experiencing doing that 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 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 it. 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…. 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, probably in a weekend, whereas in life all you are going to hit is rejection and well you might succeed, but the chances are small. So in the game you can achieve it, you know it’s achievable, it’s not just a pipe dream, sort of thing.”

Everyday life seems to produce 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 threat of speed camera); some may be more enduring such as the desire to be good at sports. These may accumulate over years, yet never be acted on, leaving individuals with a sense of something that might have been and that may be re-visited through game-play. With other daydreams there may still be a hope of some achievement (when finances allow, 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 role for games that allows specific and managed access to the imagination.

**Actualising fantasy (being someone else)**

Although the interest of some gamers remains in the order of daydreams, for others games are pleasurable because they address more fantastic imaginings. For example Elaine is an 18 year-old student who lives in a cramped apartment with her divorced mother who often works long hours. They are under considerable financial hardship. Elaine explains that she has few friends and little money to go out socialising. She provides an account of playing *The Sims* that suggests that an individual may use the same game for both daydreaming about their future and to engage with a fiction-derived fantasy. She starts by explains how she creates the ‘perfect’ life:
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). ... the cheats I use mean that 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. ... 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.”

Max provides a similar story. He is a 31-year-old overseas PhD student who lives in student accommodation, isolated from friends and family. He explains an 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 tells me in detail about many of the Star Wars games that he plays but there is a recurring theme:

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.

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. However games may give them more direct access to these fantasies. They allow players to become the heroes of 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 world altogether in favour of some other type of ‘ideal’ existence, first imagined, then actualised through a videogame.

**Virtual tourism (being somewhere different)**

The final way in which these players articulated escapsim was in terms of simply wanting to ‘be somewhere else’ or ‘experience something new, beautiful, or exciting’. For example Carl is 40-year-old IT manager. He is married (for the second time) and has 3 children (2 from his first marriage). Carl explains that for him games are a space away from demanding work and from his complicated family arrangements:

“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 sniper’s 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.”

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 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. Yeh, the aesthetics of it is also something that’s important. I suppose that’s part of the ‘what if’. I mean if I wander 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. 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.”

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 report taking pleasure in exploring game worlds. Rather than acting out a daydream or fantasy, here the pleasure is in the unknown; the excitement of not knowing what comes next and of having no clear script to act out. 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’ 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 may 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.

**PLAY, THE IMAGINATION AND ‘ESCAPE’ FROM ROUTINE**

I now want to consider the implications for such imagination-based consumption. I start by reviewing the consistency of these
observations with existing ‘Romantic’ consumption theories and more broadly with theories of play. Here I argue that there is a need for more theoretical consideration of the interactive between consumption, the imagination and technology. I also want to consider possible critiques of such consumption activity, noting the tension between the libidary discourse of ‘escape’ and the market structuring of the imagination.

Players imagine times past, ‘lost’ and ideal futures, and fantastic worlds, both familiar and novel. In doing so they may temporally and spatially extend their existence in a series of digital virtual activities that seem to confirm McCracken’s (1988) strategies for displaced meaning. We might also see such behaviour as contemporary examples of the ‘escape attempts’ articulated by Cohen and Taylor (1992). As they put it: “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…” (1992:90). Only now the switch is on the console and not just in our head. Videogames provide various ways for the player to remove themselves from their everyday lives. As an ideal commodity form of our time (see Kline Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2003) games therefore represent a significant point in consumer culture; not just a move from Fordism to experiential consumption, but perhaps to consumption as the actualisation of the imagination, aided by technology. In consuming videogames we are literally buying into our fantasies and this seems a solution to economic and material limitations in markets and in consumers themselves. There is almost no limit to what may be produced and consumed in the digital virtual spaces of videogames. This is also an expanded view of the consumer imagination that doesn’t just desire novelty, or desire itself, but also craves the past, fantasy, or just to ‘get away’ from material reality. Videogames are therefore not trivial, but for there users are significant resources for the management of everyday life.

In terms of Caillios’s (1958) broader sociology derived from play videogames and the experiences they create are a reflection of society’s rules and freedoms. This idea is also articulated in iterative relationship between the aesthetic and the social that Turner (1982) and Schechner (1984) articulate. The popularity of videogames tells us something about the society we live in. We see adults dealing with a life-world that promises so much more than they might ever materially achieve. This is perhaps less a Romantic society (see Campbell, 1987) than one where consumers’ imaginations are over-stimulated, (there is so much to want) in contrast to the reality of a rather mundane adult existence. They then look to marketised technology to bridge this gap.

For example Players find and re-play old games as a conscious way to access memories of pleasurable times in their lives that are now lost to them. However this is seldom a satisfactory approach as such memories provoke a realisation that the past may never be recreated; that they are stuck in their adult world. This is also McCracken’s (1998) complaint against nostalgia as a suitable location for displaced meaning.

Other locations may be more suitable for successful actualisation. Games allow for the maintenance of a long-held interest in sport, driving or other ‘possible’ activity, allowing a player to maintain an interest, but at a distance. Players hold an ideal scenario in which, for example, they are a professional basketball player, or a skilled race driver. Games become a way to access many such desires. When they play, players may experience a temporary and partial actualisation of their daydreams without risk of ‘breaking them’ by subjecting them the harsh reality of material attempts at such activity with their legal, physical, or financial implications.

For others the media (books and films in particular) 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 existing media narratives were articulated clearly (Star Wars and Harry Potter). These ‘public’ fantasies are sufficiently detailed to allow them to be evoked in the imagination. Players may spend considerable time playing these games, diverting their attention from the circumstances of their daily lives. This is also like the form of distancing described by Cohen and Taylor. By being able to tell themselves that their everyday life isn’t ‘all they are’, players may better manage the scripts of daily routine. And material commodities—no longer limit such imaginative acts, as Campbell (1987) and others suggest in theories of imagination-based consumption. Now fantasy becomes that which may be consumed and the limit is the imaginations of writers and filmmakers who may produce fantastic adventures for us to fill our minds with, and then the skills of videogame producers who may create these worlds in a form that we may inhabit. The player is therefore involved in the sort of mental management of scripts that Cohen and Taylor articulate, balancing a ‘mundane’ and/or unsatisfactory existence with fantastic escapes.

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 take these trips for just an hour or so in the evening. The desire is to simply lose oneself in the spectacle of a previously unseen landscape. As Featherstone (1991) suggests of other contemporary consumer practice, it is controlled deconstructing; a measured and managed sense of other-worldliness, now enabled by technology. We might question the nature of authenticity in such activity. For example both Urry (1990) and Cohen and Taylor (1992) highlight that tourism for many has become the futile search for an authentic experience against the recognition of a manufactured lifestyle. But in games, authenticity is abandoned in favour of endless, novel manufactured worlds. The result is a space where players are free to enjoy an aesthetic experience, and to forget their paramount reality for a while (especially where this reality is depressing or unsatisfactory).

This may all sound liberating, but a critical analysis of such ‘escapes’ might present videogames as complex leisure ‘pacifiers’ like those described by Huxley in Brave New World (1932). Videogames combine aspects of Soma, Centrifugal Bumble-puppy and the Feelies; they may calm those frustrated with life, involve them in complex and expensive leisure consumption, and/or distract with interactive spectacle. They are a technological cure for the consumer enmoui Shankar, Whittaker & Fitchett (2006) describe, leaving players to carry on with the rest of their life-script as planned. Yet we might note that much of their angst for a better life results from market and media derived desire. As consumer culture, games may therefore serve a conservative role, channeling resistance into activities that deflect criticism away from broader market ideology. Like other studies about emancipation from the routines of our consumer society, the conclusion is that such escape is ultimately ‘futile’.

Yet 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 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 scripts these players find ways of using videogames to ‘cope’ with the frustrations of life and their occasional recognition of its futility, to feed, experience and to actualize their imagination. To reduce players to a predictable ‘alienated consumer’ script would be a denial of their complex and nuanced life-worlds. Emancipation from the market may be an impossibly for these consumers, as might the material actualization of an ‘ideal’ life, but their skill and success in ‘making the best of it’ might still be acknowledged.

REFERENCES