

The Archetypal Power of Images in Videogaming

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Whenever I speak with people about videogames, I usually confess that I know far more about them than I'd ever anticipated. Much of my practice as an adult and child Jungian analyst in San Francisco is with adolescent boys and young adult men, who increasingly are online and typically playing videogames. Many of them are quite alienated and report trouble with forming and maintaining relationships. Often, their videogaming is associated with destructive fantasies that these games reinforce. These videogames frequently make use of apocalyptic settings in which to stage battles and fights for survival.

Alienation once meant insanity, and the word alienist indicated those who worked with the insane. Today, alienation is understood as being isolated from others, lonely and marginalized. As analysts, we appreciate that it also refers to being distanced from the inner world, cut off from the vital life of psyche. It is this barrier to internal processes that interests me in what many males describe when saying, "I'm broken".

The video games I hear about fall into a category called *MOBA*, or multi-player online battle arena games. These are point-and-shoot games, in which a player has a weapon and tries to maximize his score by killing as many enemies

as he can. These games are mostly played on the Internet. Two examples are *League of Legends*, released in 2009, and *Fortnite*, released in 2017. Almost 80 million people play *Fortnite* each month, and this game generates revenues of over \$300 million monthly¹. Over 70% of the players are male².



Figure 1 The Numinous Power of Archetypal Images on the Video Screen. [Young man playing Fortnite. Jenny Book / Sutterstock.com, 2018.]

An important issue that comes up is whether video games can be addictive. Supporters of these games will argue no and point to unsubstantiated claims that they promote various aspects of cognition and socialization. *The New York Times* recently reported in depth about the first inpatient rehab facility for video game addiction in the U.S. This article explains that addiction occurs not only to substances, but also to behaviors that become repetitive and difficult to control,

¹ <https://www.polygon.com/fortnite/2018/9/20/17884036/how-many-fortnite-monthly-players-2018>

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/865625/fortnite-players-gender/>

much like with gambling addictions and sex addictions.³ The behavior is primed by an intermittent reinforcement schedule to persist in a false hope of achieving pleasure and satisfaction, both of which decrease with dependence. A neurochemical explanation of this vicious cycle rests in part with the human brain's dopamine system.

Teams of video gamers now compete for money in what *The Economist* calls “an adrenalin-filled corollary to social media”, as if there is a demand to intensify what occurs online⁴. Citing the marketing revenues to be made, they write, “Trigger-happy 15-35 year-olds are literally calling the shots.”⁵ Many mass shooters are reported to have had compulsive or addictive behaviors around videogaming. In my practice, I often hear fantasies about how a young man or boy hopes to earn a living playing video games. These male fantasies have become more prevalent within the last 5 years. Such aspirations appear to be a new sociocultural trend. A 16-year-old boy recently won \$3 million in an international *Fortnite* competition.⁶

The American Psychological Association issued a report from a task force assessing violent video games.⁷ “Consistent with the literature that we reviewed, we found that violent video game exposure was associated with: an increased

³ Jabr, Ferris. October 27, 2019. “Can you really be addicted to video games?” *New York Times Magazine*, pp. 36-55.

⁴ *The Economist*, “Video gamers v couch potatoes”, March 2, 2019, p. 54.

⁵ *Ibid.* This article also notes that global video gaming revenues in 2019 are estimated to reach \$150 billion.

⁶ Humphries, M. July 29, 2019. ‘16-year-old wins \$3M in first ever Fortnite world cup’. <https://www.pcmag.com/news/369799/16-year-old-wins-first-ever-fortnite-world-cup-and-3m> . Accessed September 17, 2019.

⁷ S. L. Calvert, M. Appelbaum, K. A. Dodge, S. Graham, G. G. Nagayama Hall, S. Hamby, L. G. Fasig-Caldwell, M. Citkowitz, D. P. Galloway, and L. V. Hedges, “The American Psychological Association Task Force assessment of violent video games: science in the service of public interest,” *American Psychologist*, 2017, vol. 72, no. 2, pp. 126–43.

composite aggression score; increased aggressive behavior; increased aggressive cognitions; increased aggressive affect, increased desensitization, and decreased empathy; and increased physiological arousal.”⁸ Their conclusions are based on a meta-analysis of thirty-one articles published since 2009 on this subject. There is much debate about how harmful these violent games might be, and those who support the videogame industry assert that there is no causal link between such games and violence. The authors of this report note that there is no proof of causation to endorse that these games lead to criminal behavior or delinquency.

Nonetheless, these are troubling findings. For example, the study’s authors note, “The link between violent video game exposure and aggressive behavior is one of the most studied and best established,” and that these behaviors include “hitting, pushing, and fighting.”⁹ Physiological effects include increases in heart rate and blood pressure. This information is not insignificant at a time when many boys and young men are not performing well academically compared to girls and young women. Another example of this gender disparity would be the skew in ADHD diagnosis toward boys, with one study showing over 80 percent of the total are boys.¹⁰ Boys and young men addicted to their online activities are at risk for social and cognitive problems. Many now tell me that because of Google, it is no longer necessary to memorize, learn cursive, or understand math facts. “I’ll just Google it.”

⁸ Ibid., p. 126

⁹ Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁰ Epidemiology: Gender, ADHD Institute. Online, available HTTP: <adhd-institute.com/burden-of-adhd/epidemiology/gender/> (accessed April 27, 2017).

A key finding of this APA task force was that there was “no support for positive outcomes after violent video game exposure.”¹¹ This conclusion belies statements that video games help in various ways with attention, motor coordination, and memory. The finding of decreased empathy after playing violent video games is alarming; we have to wonder about the cumulative effects from playing these games and about temporary effects that may become permanent from repeated exposure. Loss of empathy creates all kinds of relational problems, including an inability to be intimate, delayed social skills, impairment in resolving conflict, and lack of cooperative understanding needed in families and at work. This empathy deficit can be difficult to remediate in either individual or group psychotherapy, and it can lead to resistance for getting psychological intervention at all.¹²

¹¹ Calvert et al., “The American Psychological Association Task Force assessment of violent video games,” p. 139.

¹² For further discussion, see Tyminski, 2019, *Male Alienation at the Crossroads of Culture, Identity and Cyberspace*, London and New York, Routledge.



Figure 2 Albrecht Dürer, The Four Horsemen, from the Apocalypse, 1498.

The iconographic order of the horsemen starts at the right with the first one having the bow and arrow and then moves to the left, second with sword, third with scales, and fourth with trident. This file was donated to Wikimedia

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I believe that we can see archetypal elements in videogames, especially around destructiveness and apocalyptic scenarios. Apocalyptic themes are also prevalent in many doomsday films, for instance the zombie genre, and in other popular media, especially graphic novels. Apocalyptic references show up in political discourse, terrorist imagery, predictions about climate change, and forecasts of economic disaster. Apocalyptic art is spread across centuries of Western visual media¹³. A place where we can find religious details of apocalypse is in the *Book of Revelation*.

Here, a reader encounters the four horsemen of the apocalypse, who bring devastation before the Last Judgment. “And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.”¹⁴ The first horseman with his bow and arrow is thought to represent conquest and plague. Psychologically, this symbolism signifies triumph and then deadness following it. Such deadness occurs in psychic states of emptiness and desolation. I think that the four horsemen can help us understand the destructive fantasies that preoccupy many alienated boys and men. For example, the rider of the white horse can be viewed as symbolizing what

¹³ The iconography of such art is typically based on apocalyptic manuscripts that refer to the Book of Revelation and often proliferate before or after a millennial date, such as 500 CE, 1000 CE, and 1500 CE [N. F. H. O’Hear, *Contrasting Images of the Book of Revelation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art: A Case Study in Visual Exegesis*, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2011].

¹⁴ “The revelation of St. John the Divine,” *The Bible*, King James Version, Oxford UK, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 299–319; Rev 6:2.

happens in compulsions and addictions. There is frequently an inflation-deflation cycle in which a person feels invincible and then empty.

Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of the Four Riders shows the terror that they bring forth. He depicts them spurred on by an angel and trampling over miserable victims. Some believe he made his apocalypse series after an apocalyptic dream that he had¹⁵. Erwin Panofsky, a scholar of Dürer, writes, "Like Leonardo's *Last Supper*, Dürer's *Apocalypse* belongs among what may be called the inescapable works of art."¹⁶ He notes that Dürer's illustrations of the apocalypse were copied extensively and their influence was far reaching. His description "inescapable" tells us that there is something archetypal in this image.

The next horse in St. John's vision is red with a horseman carrying a sword¹⁷. This red horse and rider represent war, violence, and killing. From a psychological perspective, this figure perpetrates aggression, lives it out, and inflicts pain on others, perhaps like the shooters at Columbine, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, Orlando, Parkland, and Christchurch. This aggression is sadistic and intent on hurting others.

The third horse is black, and its rider holds a set of scales used in measurement. He is thought to represent famine and greed, when appetites spin out of control. Psychologically, this figure represents internal famine coming from emotional deprivation. He evokes the idea of craving, when appetites

¹⁵ See O'Hear, p. 147.

¹⁶ E. Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (1943), Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Rev. 6:4.

cannot be contained, and moderation is impossible. Such a state arouses greediness when a person wants to dominate others and has contempt for them.

St. John sees a fourth horse, a pale horse, and “his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.”¹⁸ This rider is commonly depicted as carrying a scythe like the Grim Reaper. Both Joseph Turner (c. 1825) and William Blake (c. 1800) drew this rider, who denotes the final end, dying and dissolution—our mortality. He further symbolizes a quest for meaning, a desire for faith and spiritual enlightenment. The pale horse reminds us that our time is limited and that individuation entails giving this finality a meaningful shape in our psyches. How do we respond, with despair or with integrity?



Figure 3 William Blake, Death on a Pale Horse

¹⁸ Ibid., Rev. 6:8.



Figure 4 Joseph Turner, The Pale Rider or The Fall of Anarchy

Both images portray a haunting, dangerous figure. The one by Turner, perhaps, captures a mood of doom better than Blake does. The back-bending skeletal figure of death in Turner's frightens a viewer more than Blake's. The latter's drawing has a cartoonish element to it, and Blake is less true to the Bible's text by having death wear a crown and wield a sword. Turner's painting is by contrast foreboding and menacing.

The four riders are neither empathic figures, nor are they thinking ones. They are simply sent to avenge and destroy. I refer to these figures of the four riders in what Jung might characterize as an archetype to understand a kind of destructive impulse. The four riders hurt others in carrying out an omnipotent doomsday scenario, leaving us with no hope in this world (the only hope being in the afterlife). They may, in this limited context, help to illustrate—and reveal—

what happens in extreme alienation when a boy or young man feels driven to act like one of them.

Images of *Fortnite*, a very popular videogame with boys and young men, show many facets of destructiveness. However, I am interspersing them with images from Western art to amplify their archetypal aspects. Notice there is a glow apparent within each scene. What does it mean? Perhaps it shows a glimmer of hope within this apocalyptic imagery. It is noteworthy how many video games portray war within apocalyptic settings. This glow may at its basis convey archetypally numinous and highly charged energy that is neither destructive nor creative, but is capable of becoming either or both.



Figure 5 Fortnite



Figure 6 Benjamin West, ca. 1796, *Death on a Pale Horse*

In these two images that are separated by more than 200 years, terror at being attacked is obvious, although in the *Fortnite* picture the characters can run, whereas in West's painting there is no escape. West actually is using an apocalyptic scenario—of the fourth horseman—to illustrate helpless submission. I think there are subtle similarities in both, namely being targeted, the use of projectiles and sharp objects to hurt and kill, and the glowing fires in the back. If there is a common archetypal element, it would be meeting one's fate with emotions of fear, helplessness, and wanting to get away. There is more humanity in West's painting in which our eyes are drawn to the dramatic scene in the center foreground of a man, presumably a father, holding his dead wife with two children draped over her. The man holds up his hand in a gesture of desperation. He can't run like the *Fortnite* characters can, but the desperation of the moment may be what excites a videogame player.



Figure 7 Fortnite



Figure 8 Pieter Bruegel, ca. 1562, The Triumph of Death

These two images continue the theme of inevitable defeat and death closing in. The Bruegel painting is an entire landscape of desolation and slaughter. The *Fortnite* picture again shows a character heroically jumping to avoid an explosion. He has an agency that is missing in Bruegel's work. Fire is apparent in both. Bruegel's army of skeletons terrorize the people and mock their vanity, greed and lust, but above all, they satirize human folly in seeking to avoid destiny. These elements of hoping against all odds to defy one's fate figure into why a videogame like *Fortnite* is popular: the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against a single player who may however vainly believe he can beat them if he can jump high enough and fast enough.



Figure 9 Fortnite

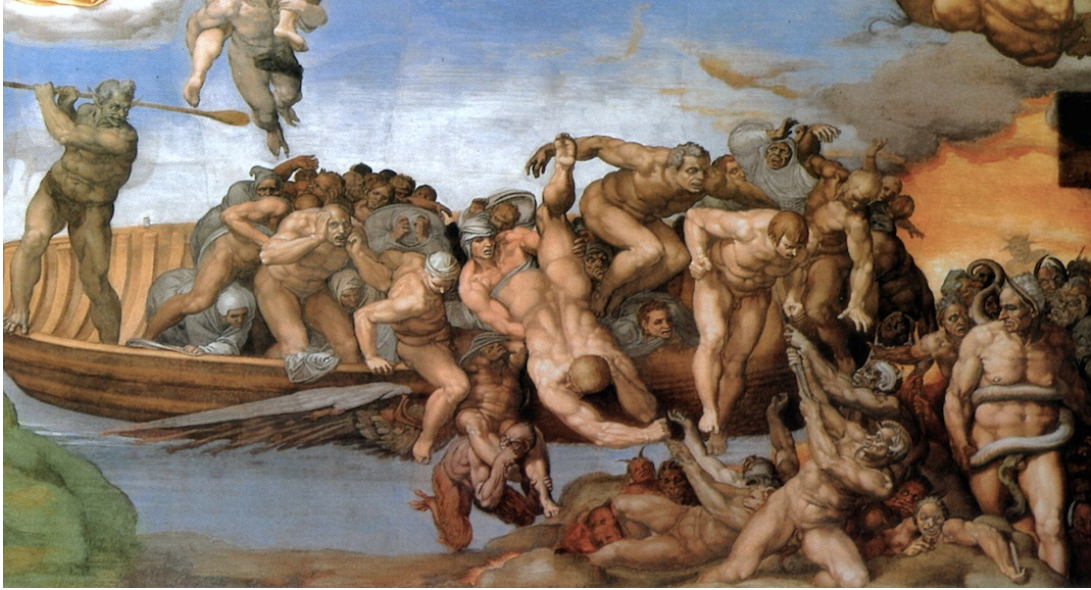


Figure 10 Michelangelo, ca. 1541, *The Last Judgment*

This Michelangelo detail is taken from the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican and shows Charon (from Greek mythology) ferrying the dead across the river Styx and Acheron. Charon is wielding an oar to force the unwilling to get off the boat and enter Hades. The emotion of despair is evident. *The Last Judgment* of course uses the Book of Revelation to show the scope of the apocalypse. Charon appears monstrous like the unstoppable giant in the *Fortnite* image. While fate has already happened for the souls in Michelangelo's detail, it is closing in on the players in this image from the videogame. The fiery glow in the Michelangelo might be hellfire, and in the videogame image, it is a centrality of destruction that cannot be avoided. Like fate.



Figure 11 Fortnite



Figure 12 William Blake, ca. 1810, The Number of the Beast Is 666

The number of the beast—666—also comes from the *Book of Revelation* (13:18) and indicates the devil, here winged and with horns. This watercolor is aglow in a way that reminds a viewer of fire and hell. The *Fortnite* image shows a winged demon with glowing eyes in front of what appears to be a full moon. In addition to their wings, these demons frighten and threaten to let loose havoc. Even the leg musculature in Blake's appears close to that of the *Fortnite* demon. There is an implication that either figure can pounce viciously at a victim. Archetypal demons—daimones—are thought to have magical powers and be identified with divine will. Once again, we have an element of fate at work in the painting and in the videogame.

What are the risks for alienated boys and young men who compulsively and addictively play violent videogames? I believe there are many arising from their living out destructive aspects of themselves in cyberspace, which is a binary-sourced version of reality at most. William Gibson, in his 1984 science fiction novel *Neuromancer* anticipated a dystopian outcome for addictive uses of cyberspace, a term he uses there for the very first time. Among the risks I see are:

- Degrading our relationship with all things symbolic
- Giving wide expression to magical thinking
- Narrowing our appreciation of otherness and differences
- Reinforcing defensive splitting—polarizing us
- Concretizing our exchanges

- Distancing us from one another (virtual is unreal and disembodied)
- Creating more risks for boys and men
- Propagating poor definitions of masculinity and gender

I am not claiming that the Internet or videogaming is bad. Rather, I emphasize that these things are tools (for work, research, writing, etc.) or used for entertainment (as with streaming, gaming, shopping, etc.), and as such, they should have limited parameters within human experience. Moderation and self-control have become underappreciated values and attitudes in our discussions about cyberspace and all that occurs there. A manic belief in “more” is not helpful at all for individuation and social connection in the real world. Shrugging off these effects of our addictive behaviors around cyberspace only colludes with passivity and indifference about consequences.

This leads me to ask: Why aren't we talking more about what our tolerance for videogames and screen usage are doing to our minds and capacities for relating, especially for heavy users who tend to be boys and men? The above images from *Fortnite* and from Western art show an archetypal basis for our fascination with destruction; it is nothing new in terms of human psyche. We may even find it to be a source of arousal and excitement, which unfortunately can lead to all kinds of severe acting out behaviors. If violent videogame exposure is not curtailed, an archetypal disposition or possession may gain advantage in a vulnerable mind and deplete it in the serious ways I outline above.

I wouldn't trust either videogame makers or Internet giants like Google and Facebook to help with any of these problems or with a discussion about them. Their business strategies are now creating public health harm, and we should be alarmed at this. Intensification of online experience is often behind attempts to keep a person—boy or young man—from disconnecting. I hear many stories about how someone starts watching a video on YouTube (owned by Google), say a lecture about American military history, then gets a recommendation for a lecture by Jordon Peterson (a conservatively oriented psychologist in Toronto, who uses Jung in his lectures), gets a further recommendation to watch Ben Shapiro (a conservative activist), and finally ends up seeing a video by Richard Spencer (a neo-Nazi white supremacist). YouTube maintains it has no responsibilities for disseminating such videos as part of their intensifying which suggestions a viewer is exposed to. However, this radicalization of recommendations is part of their business plan to keep viewers watching. Videogame makers now hire neuroscientists to be able to better shape a user's desire to stay in a game and not stop playing. Their profits depend on users' screen time, and they only pay lip service to the need for regulation and more direct warnings about risks.

The use of archetypal images, whether heroic, destructive, demonic, or godlike, in these games certainly contributes to their popularity. They are powerful inducements—attractors—for the psyche to discharge aggression, and they fuel destructive fantasies. When someone is in a state of alienation, he may not have either the self-control or the social supports to monitor himself. I

mentioned earlier the glow in the various images above. I believe it could point toward at least two things. One would be an unmet spiritual need for enlightenment—to discover a path out of an alienated darkness. Many young men speak to this need as a wish to contribute, to be part of something bigger, to belong, and to make a difference; they are begging for initiation. They are looking for an inner light to lead them out of a shadowy world, and videogames offer a projective screen for disguising this wish.

The second would be our arousal at destructive potential, a fire that cannot stop. This would potentially mean dissolving into nothing in a hope of be recreated and reborn. A personal rebirth can ultimately lead to individuation and psychological growth. However, when this arousal is projected, it can result in acting out of severe and dangerous behaviors that have potential to hurt many. This kind of arousal can also become addicting.

Jung wrote about compulsions, and implicitly addictions, in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. There, using language that elaborates upon a glowing thing, he says, “...compulsion is the great mystery of human life. It is the thwarting of our conscious will and of our reason by an inflammable element within us, appearing now as a consuming fire and now as life-giving warmth.”¹⁹ Perhaps then, the glow in those images has something to do with paradoxical compulsions in us. We seek to find warmth, comfort, and even excitement, but instead end up mistakenly overwhelmed by a heat we barely understand.

¹⁹ Jung from *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 1963, vol. 14 of CW, para. 151.

This article is a beginning attempt at understanding archetypal underpinnings for the popularity of videogames. I hope it will stimulate others to pursue this line of thinking following on the preliminary sketch that I offer here. It is important for us to study whatever role archetypal imagery has in contributing to the addictive aspects of videogaming. Further research into this area will help not only psychotherapists and analysts, but also teachers, parents and the players themselves. Such exploration has the potential to provide a way for us to recognize the unspoken power that images in videogames might exert on any of us when we're not paying attention.

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