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Apophatic Gaming: The perpetual *Journey* to 'catch em' all'

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Abstract

This study shows certain video games are fostering apophatic practices. The study investigates both the notion of distance highlighted by Jean-Luc Marion, and the perpetual journey revealed through Gregory of Nyssa's apophatic exegesis of Moses' journey. These notions of distance reveal an unquenchable desire to reach a promised finality. With humanity shown to be limited in the face of immeasurable transcendence, a perpetual journey through a path of discovery is constantly desired by the player. These aspects can be seen in certain video games such as *Elite*, *No Man's Sky*, *World of Warcraft*, *Pokémon* and *Journey* which limit the subjectivity of players in the face of limitless possibility through procedural exploration or endless collection. The study enables a deeper reflection of certain video games which stretch beyond genres or play styles providing a means to dwell in the apophatic distance.

Author Keywords

Video Games; Jean-Luc Marion; Gregory of Nyssa; Pokémon; Journey.

Introduction

> I wanna be the very best. Like no one ever was. To catch them is my real test. To train them is my cause.

> Paige and Loeffler (1998)

Jean-Luc Marion has written extensively on the distance that is perpetually present between God and humanity. This study will investigate Marion's notion of the difference between God and the individual in order to provide an understanding of a metaphysical separation of God who is transcendent. According to Marion this separation, what he terms as *distance*, is impossible to close but invites a perpetual traversal or journey. This enables an experience of participation facilitating an understanding of God within the allowance of what is immeasurable. This notion of distance is considered to be flowing from the long-held tradition of apophatic theology such as the work of fourth century Church Father, Gregory of Nyssa. This study will therefore turn to Gregory of Nyssa in order to show the traversal of distance may be considered in the disposition of one's life, not just the uptake of ecclesial practices. Commentating on the life of Moses was not unusual for the Cappadocian Fathers of the time, yet the Nyssen's innovation is that he frames the separation from God explicitly as a perpetual journey. This aspect of journey will be used to give a frame to understand the distance that Marion writes. Further, the Nyssen's approach will be shown to enable an

understanding of journey as a template for a disposition that one may live. Through categorising the distance outlined by these two theologians I show that in their view (a) humanity is limited, (b) distance is perpetual, and (c) the path is to be discovered and (d) there is an ever-present desire for unrealisable completion.

These features are then shown to be evident in a number of video games which I show by investigating a selection of games, including *Elite*, *No Man's Sky*, *World of Warcraft*, *Pokémon* and *Journey*, that may be considered to provide an opportunity for interplay in the distance. The study will concentrate on the form of interface the games supply and specific kinds of games that assume limited subjectivity in the face of limitless possibility. This will show the particular opportunity these games provide enabling interplay in the distance for the individual player. These games differentiated from their simulator counterparts which place the user in the role of a God or removed hand in the gameplay. The apophatic games I explore situate the player within the experience where they are given the space to explore endless possibilities. I will demonstrate how the construction of certain games explicitly focuses on the negotiation of distance. The study will show how games of a variety of genres enable interplay in a distance due to fostering apophatic practices. Thus, I show that a certain type of video game matches the apophatic view of distance by: (a) the player having a limited subjectivity in the enormity of seemingly endless possibility; (b) the distance is perpetual with near immeasurable content; (c) the path of the player is determined by their own action towards the promised end; and (d) an ever-present desire to reach a finality that can never be realised.

Jean-Luc Marion's *distance*

Marion (2001) approaches the comprehension of God from a Christian perspective. Whilst he accepts that Christ the Son was present on earth, the immeasurable attributions of God remain out of our reach or comprehension (p. xxxvi). He argues that God remains at a perpetual *distance* from humanity. His notion of an incomprehensible, transcendent God is akin to Apophatic, or negative, theologians such as some early Church Fathers (Hart, 2013, p. 31). Negative theology is a nuanced examination of God through a negation of what cannot constitute the divine in order to understand what is unexplainably transcendent. Negative, or apophatic, theologians recognise the enormity of God's divinity and the limitation of humanity. These theologians and philosophers view humans as only being able to comprehend small portions of God's magnitude, which essentially transcends humanity.

Marion is viewed by critics such as Kevin Hart (2013) as innovative in his method of adopting Descartes, seeing the ego as able to consider itself in relation to God (p. 19). God's transcendence thus enables an understanding of ourselves despite our inability to contemplate the immeasurable magnitude. Marion's reading of Descartes sees the very essence of humanity ultimately separated from God. The attributes of 'Being' defined as *cogitans* and *ego* therefore cannot be compared with God who instead is defined only by 'incomprehensible power' [*potential immense, exuperans et inexhausta*] (Marion 1998a, p. 41). Certain aspects of one's own self, or Being, may therefore only apply to the human *ego* and not God. Marion here adopts Heidegger's notion of *Dasein,* arguing the privilege of humanity is a uniqueness of existence amongst all others (1998b, p. 70).[i] Marion recognises the question of Being proposed by Heidegger does not focus on the difference between God and humanity, rather *Dasein* presents a mode to understand Being (p. 134-135). Marion therefore goes further in showing the uniqueness of Being, which can be understood and

defined through *Dasein*, is a difference to God. In this regard, according to Marion, God may therefore be considered as well as approached only as the 'incomprehensible power' (Marion 1998a, p. 42). Humans in this respect have a limited capacity and the essence of humanity, along with the language we use, fail at understanding God who is truly transcendent. It is in this conclusion that Marion's appropriation of apophatic theology can be seen.

Although framed in connection to Christian ecclesiology, Marion (2001) views God as manifesting 'Goodness' which amounts to the unthinkable *distance* (p. 155). This distance may not be traversed in the same sense of traversing a journey in a worldly sense. Rather it is a participation through traversal in order to intimately experience the manifestation of 'Goodness' (p. 160). The distance therefore is constant, exerted from God who cannot be fully grasped (p. 153). The distance is exerted by the very essence of God that remains as an infinitely foreign other which disappears upon approach. The separation remains in a tension, held apart but in a connected relationship. There is a constant exertion that separates us from God with a distance that is perpetually present. According to Marion, "The definition of distance defines us as one of its terms, and therefore removes us from the other, at the very moment when it exerts its attraction" (p. 199). The distance therefore can never be closed, but a participatory process of being is possible within the distance that enables us to know God. We are therefore given access to God through what Marion terms 'saturated phenomena' (2013, p. 179). In Marion's terms, this is possible through the embodiment of God in what humanity can understand or experience, such as the coming of Christ. Goodness in this regard may be understood as an allowance within a total immeasurable nature, or economy, of God.

While the distance is ever present there is a possibility for ascension or journey towards God. The journey towards God is constant, whilst the traversing does not in any sense 'abolish' the distance (2001, p. 162). The journey may be traversed but according to Marion it is not laid out as an existing path. The distance is not mapped out but is discovered: it is "cleared, starting from a site" (p. 199). Treating the divine as 'goodness,' Marion recognises this distance "neither asks nor tolerates that one fill it but that one traverse it, in an infinite praise that feeds on the impossibility or, better, the impropriety of the category" (1991, p. 76). As God cannot be ascertained by humanity, delving into the distance enables a contemplation of the transcendence of God and defies cognition of the entirety of the divine (Hart 2013, p. 18). In sum, traversing distance is the discovery and traversal that enables the experience of what is transcendental.

While it is not possible to abolish the *distance,* there may be a recognition of it. This recognition and ability for interplay can be assisted by tools that act as a vehicle. However, as commentators have noted, Marion's notion of traversing the distance is through an ecclesial lens. Nevertheless, as Marion has shown: (a) humanity is limited in the face of the immeasurable transcendental nature of God; (b) distance, or journey, is perpetual which is exerted upon approach; (c) the path on the journey is to be discovered by the individual. Before turning to show these aspects in video games, the examination of Gregory of Nyssa will assist to frame the separation and distance with his take on apophasis. We will find that the Nyssen argues more for a disposition, not for a relation in the distance, through the ecclesial practices such as the Eucharist. The Nyssen will assist in broadening the understanding of these aspects of human limitation, journey and path to be discovered beyond ecclesial practices. In addition, and importantly for this study on apophatic games, his work shows that there is an ever-present desire to complete which can never be realised.

Gregory of Nyssa's apophatic journey

The links of Marion and Apophatic, or negative, Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa has been documented by commentators such as Hart (2013, p. 31). Marion (2005) himself recognised the value of the Nyssen's apophatic theology which finds the experience of God rewarded in the search, not in a goal or finality (p. 405). While there is a similarity that is shared between the two approaches, there are differences of language as well as the difference between the significance of ecclesial practices and the advocacy of a disposition. This assists in our study of gaming as it lifts apophaticism from the ecclesial bounds it is often found.

The Nyssen in *The Life of Moses* commences his apophasis in a similar manner to Marion, first recognising that humans cannot comprehend the nature of God (2.162). For the Nyssen, the importance of understanding God's nature is through the journey into the darkness for Moses, who pushes further to get a glimpse at the incompressible nature of God (2.164). It is this ever-present longing and desire to experience the essence of God that is perpetually unattainable which interested and is innovative for the Nyssen (Laird, 2004, p. 64). Early in his writings the Nyssen recognised the *Song of Songs* to be a revelation of the journey, providing an explanation of the longing but perpetual unquenchable desire to experience God. In the *Song of Songs*, the beloved is sought: "I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer" (Song Sol. 5:6 [New Revised Standard Version]). This provides the Nyssen an opportunity to explore the journey of Moses who travels up the mountain towards God.

The Moses narrative interested the Nyssen enough for him to not only focus an entire book on the life of Moses, but it also featured heavily in his other writings. Moses' journey up the mountain to experience God is for the Nyssen a prototype to leading a pure life (1.15). He considers Moses not only as an important historical figure but also a representation of the struggle and desires of humanity. The interest of the Nyssen on Moses is not just to show these lessons in relation to an archetype of how to live life or approach the immeasurable nature of God. He returns to the aspect of journey throughout his writings, which can be understood with the interaction of God and Moses. In the Exodus narrative Moses travels up the mountain and pleads to see God's glory. In response, God tells Moses, "you shall stand on the rock and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen" (Exod. 33:21-22).

Not being able to see or experience the magnitude of God on equal footing or face-to-face is an apophatic approach to theology. Moses is never able to experience or understand God and only experiences aspects which are allowed. The Nyssen takes an innovative response to this in relation to the journey to achieve fulfilment. In Homily 12 on the *Song of Songs* the Nyssen writes, "Scripture teaches that a person who desires to see God catches sight of the One he seeks by always following after him and that the contemplation of God's face is an unceasing journey toward him that is brought to fulfilment by following behind the Word" (Gregory of Nyssa, 2004). This 'unceasing journey' or *distance* is what is desired and typified by Moses. It is worth noting that the Nyssen also saw Abraham in a similar light. Through Abraham's journey his ignorance to gain knowledge is explained as a 'learned ignorance' that enables a continued path towards a heavenly ascent that is perpetual (Laird, 2004, p. 72). The sheer magnitude and immeasurable nature of God is sought by the spirit and human personhood with a desire that is perpetual and unquenchable. The vision of God

for the Nyssen is therefore not a being or embodiment, rather it is the never 'satisfied desire to see him' (2.239).

The perpetual journey towards an experience of the divine should not be mistaken for a goalless task. The goal, however, is not to be found in a final end. Just as there are ongoing goals beyond the tasks in other aspects of life, such as agriculture and enjoying the fruit or the shelter enjoyed from building a house, the Nyssen sees an ongoing goal in the journey towards God. The crops enjoyed by the long task of agriculture provide a reward, but the goal for the Nyssen is ever-giving, as long as the practice is continued. Similarly, the journey towards God is not to reach an end but the goal is being able to acknowledge one's own effort in being called a 'servant of God' (2.317). The journey is therefore seen as a goal in itself, being on the journey is what the Nyssen advocates. Similar to Marion's language of 'Goodness,' the Nyssen sees God as exerting a 'nature of Good' which guides and draws one towards in an 'upward thrust' (2.225). Unlike Marion, however, the Nyssen does not state the experience may be through ecclesial practices. He is more open in advocating a life of virtue (2.71), thus showing through a disposition in life may one experience God. Of course, he recognises the value of Baptism (2.121) and the Eucharist (2.132) which are present to whet the appetite in a hope of things to come. However, his focus remains on the life or disposition one must take and less on ecclesial matters than Marion.

Marion is more nuanced in his language and we should not assume the similarity of terms is a provision of discussing the very same matters. Nevertheless, the Nyssen in this context is useful in providing an application for the experience in the distance which Marion outlines. As Marion has shown it is the distance that enables a contemplation of the immeasurability of God. We have seen through the Nyssen's apophasis that it is not a process of consideration to experience divinity, rather the praxis of effort and journey is the experience that is perpetual. The drawing towards an end is ever-present despite the integral aspects of humanity that denote an inability to ever achieve the entirety of one's desire. Not being able to reach an end goal does not dissuade the desire and effort that are all part of being on the journey. This drawing and desire is what the Nyssen saw as integral in the human person. The Nyssen here assists in understanding of Marion's *distance* beyond Christian ecclesiology to more of an encompassing disposition that dominates one's life. This assists when contemplating the perpetual distance that may be traversed but unable to be overcome. The key, and distinction, is the manner of interplay within the distance. This interplay can enable an understanding of immeasurability and is a drive that is ever present. This provides us with our fourth measure of apophasis that will be seen in video games, to which we now turn.

Apophatic interplay of Video Games

As Marion outlined, an ever-present and exerted distance and humanity has an inherent limitation. Likewise, the Nyssen recognised a distance and saw a perpetual desire to complete an ever-present journey through Moses, Abraham and the bridge of *Song of Songs*. To reiterate Marion has showed: (a) humanity is limited; (b) distance is perpetual; and (c) the path is to be discovered. The Nyssen assists in providing a lens away from ecclesiology towards disposition as well as showing there is an ever-present desire for unrealisable completion. These features are evident in a number of video games.

Video games have a number of aspects of journey with set obstacles that enable the individual to exist within a created space. They may be considered subjective, however they are generally created for a type of player with space given to play out the orchestrated

experience. While there are orchestrated tasks or goals created in a game, the end experience can often reach beyond the intention of the original creators. The individual in this space brings their unique personhood to bear on their connection to a video game. Whether purposefully or not, certain video games may be considered to open the space for apophatic interplay. If considered in the measures of Marion and the Nyssen, we find evidence of apophasis in modern games.

Certain games may be understood to evoke the apophatic desire for the interplay in the distance. Considering these games in this way is a unique insight into the kind of games that becoming more prevalent with the maturing of the games industry. It is these games that enable participatory play within the distance. They provide a promise of perfection that is lucrative for the player to continue towards some type of ungraspable completion. There is a constant drive to be in the participatory space interplaying with the game to achieve what the game promises but may not deliver. It is the evocation of longing that is forever offered to the player with content and an end that is promised but never delivered with finality. We see evidence of achievements implicit, or explicit in the case of Pokémon where you can 'catch em' all', that is unlikely to be achieved but is offered to all that begin the journey. These games may have title screens and credits, but with a deeper more nuanced understanding the perpetual journey can be revealed.

A prerequisite of the type of games that can deliver on the promise of a never-ending journey is a solid set of rules and near infinite possibilities, stretching beyond the possible achievement of one single person. According to Salen and Zimmerman (2003), "In every case, play exists because of more rigid structures, but also exists somehow in opposition to them" (p. 304). This space is therefore enabled by, not restricted to, the rigid structures which enable interplay. The infinite possibilities are provided by the setting of rules with the allowance of space for the player to dwell. Graham H. Jensen (2013) has made the case that Video games in this regard are not differentiated with other mediums but share the same aspects where spaces enable interplay by holding organizing, or centripetal, and disrupting, or centrifugal, forces at a tension (p.70). Will Wright (2004) has termed this a 'possibility space' where the player has not inhibited despite being bound within sets of rules. Wright purposely creates games with a possibility landscape that players must balance aspects of to successfully navigate the game in a free space within a set of rules. To understand the alternative Jesper Juul (2005) has recognised the aspect of discovery in games which is defined as *emergent gameplay*, where players are set to discover rather than the polar opposite type of game which is defined as *progression*, which are linear experiences (p.76-82).

Certain video games thus provide an experience of infinite possibilities through experience as every journey within the gaming space enables the discovery of what can and should be done, based not on observation but as if "emerging from our cave for the first time" (Leibovitz, 2013, p. 19). With the abandonment of the individual's responsibilities or limitations, the promise of an end is delivered within the medium of an alternate world. However, the apophasis of a perpetual journey is limited as long as the game is consciously limited by the game creator. In order to overcome these limitations there can be the creation of a vast amount of content or choices made to enable a near endless space for players to dwell. The limitation of human time and effort has led to procedural generation of content becoming used more often in order to lessen the load on creators. Players have been reported to welcome this with more content able to be explored but the generation must still exist within bounds set by human game creators (Phillips, Smith, Cook & Short, 2016, p. 92).

A break in the trend of gaming that was dominated by lives and scores came from the creation of the first 'never-ending' games such as *Elite*, to which we now turn. It is these types of games that are vehicles to experience the perpetual distance fostering what Marion and the Nyssen see as present in spiritual pursuits.

Space Simulators

Named after the maximum potential level that may be awarded to the player in the game, *Elite* is a space simulator title released for 8-bit computers in 1984 (Crookes & Braben, 2014, p. 23). This game was unique for the time as it heralded a break from the penny swallowing machines of the arcades. Using minimal technology, the intuitive programing and creativity led to implementation of features such as mirroring of 3D wire frame objects to save space and build in more content. The creators, David Barben and Ian Bell, were able to fit eight galaxies with 2,048 star systems, each with a number of unique planets, into the minimal storage space. The game's removal of 'lives' and difference with all other titles previously meant Barben and Bell struggled to find a publisher willing to take on the title initially. Thorn EMI's refusal of the game without three lives and a score demonstrates the limited appetite of the industry at the time (p. 23). According to Braben, *Elite* was initially developed as a tool to progressively generate star systems (p. 25), curated to ensure inappropriate names were not used (Phillips et al., 2016, p. 83). The implementation of a spaceship and ability to travel to other planets or systems resulted in a journey of discovery that was almost endless, yet there was something lacking in this early prototype of the game. According to Braben "I put a spaceship in the environment and it felt okay. You shot one ship, then you shot another, then you shot another but there was no real sense of progression" (Jones, Braben & Bell, 2008, p. 27). It wasn't until the implementation of trading of items and status tiers that saw it have a final form that was able to reach its renowned status. As a promotion, the publishers offered badges to be printed to the first players to reach the 'Elite' status. The first recorded success was by Hal Bertram who, according to *Your Computer* magazine, was admitted into the "hallowed fellowship of the great immortals of computer gaming" with a ceremony with "as much due pomp and ceremony as you get from the BBC's sound system" (IPC Electrical-Electronic Press 1984, p. 50). It was this lure of a distant status that enabled players to enter into a perpetual journey. Reaching the 'Elite' status does not deliver a finality for the journey within the game, nor does upgrading a ship or the discovery of the many galaxies. Despite the tiered status, the game's content is nearly endless with success coming from the constant drawing. It is a constant desire which is ever present as a perpetual journey towards an end.

While the game's potential for seemingly endless play is shared with puzzle or simulator games, *Elite* differed in the implementation of the player within the created space. What makes this game different from alternative simulator type games such as *The Sims, RollerCoaster Tycoon* or *Spore* is that the character plays a role and is drawn towards a finality, even if the finality can never eventuate. Where other simulator games place the player in the role of a 'God' or removed creator, *Elite* was created to enable the player to exist within the created universe, with a single life and presented with endless possibilities. This is the personification of apophatic interplay enabled through the vehicle of video games. It is evident that: (a) the player has a limited subjectivity in the enormity of seemingly endless possibility; (b) the distance is perpetual with near immeasurable content; and (c) the path of the player is determined by their own action towards the promised end.

The successful sales of *Elite* led to many sequels and spiritual successors, arguably none more controversial than the 2016 release of *No Man's Sky*. Publisher *Hello Games* created *No Man's Sky*, much like *Elite*, as a procedurally generated game expanded far beyond the humble 8-bit beginnings to include over 18 quintillion worlds to explore. If there was no time required to travel between systems, land on planets, gather resources and restock the ship it would take approximately 585 billion years to visit every planet for a single second (Guinness World Records, 2016, p. 105). As with *Elite* the exploration is not the end within itself, nor is it the main draw of the game. The unnamed protagonist in *No Man's Sky* starts the game with a damaged spacecraft and is immediately presented with an option to follow the path of 'The Atlas.' If accepted, this sends the player on a journey across galaxies collecting 'Atlas Stones'. When these are finally presented it results in the creation of a new star. Each discovery of a stone reveals the destination of the next, with no path clear from beginning to end. Rather, it is through system 'jumps' that travel from goal to goal. Once the 'Atlas' path is complete, the player is provided with the option to generate a new distant system - the journey does not have to end. The player is then left to their own free will to journey towards the centre of the galaxy. The constant drawing towards the centre, finally reached after countless hours of ship upgrades, resource farming and trading, results in the player being sent to the edge of yet another galaxy. It is a potentially perpetual journey of discovery and interplay in a distance towards centres that can never be reached in finality. This builds on the base of *Elite* and reveals, an ever-present desire to reach a finality that can never be realised.

No Man's Sky has been plagued with negative reviews both by publishing magazines and pooled gamer rating systems such as *Steam*. This is not so much due to the unending possibility of the game, rather the marketing and advertising strategy of the company that some have viewed as misleading and was investigated by the Advertising Standards Authority in the United Kingdom (Sinclair, 2016). Although the largest game ever created may be destined to be the largest disappointment for many gamers, there remains a drawcard of an unending game with an ever-present perpetual unachievable goal. The games explored so far have largely focused in space, where the endless journey is easy to simulate through the sparseness between distant worlds. Yet for never-ending video games space is not the final frontier.

MMORPGs and the *World of Warcraft*

Online engagement with other players has existed in an organised format, replicating pen and paper games such as *Dungeons and Dragons,* since 1979. Through a technological advancement the lineage of Multi-User Dungeons, TinyMUDs and Multi User Dungeons Object Orientated (MOOs) set a solid foundation which led to the creation of the first Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) in the 1990s (Sanchez, 2009). These were the precursors to the ginormous online worlds of *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*.

Certain online interactions such as the 2013 release of *Second Life* recreates the world and blurs the lines of existence within and external to the game. Some argue that appeal for many who create an online *Second Life* 'avatar' is to buy items or explore the possibility of cybersex. However, there are users who treat their avatar as an extension of their own personhood and hope to live eternally within the game (Geraci, 2014, p. 108-109,). In a survey of players, Geraci found that the approach differed, with individuals either seeing their avatar as an *extension* or *separation* from their own personality (p.112). The differentiation

between *Second Life* and other online interactive games is the community largely sees the game, if it can even be classified as one, as an extension of reality. Even considering the players who have approached their avatar as a separation from their own personality, approximately 71% from a survey of 252 users saw earthly religions as having a place in *Second Life* (p. 117). The sandbox style of creation in the game replicates a real world for users to choose a new life; true to its title, these 'second lives' are seen as fitting within the familiar ruleset of our own existence. The experience provides an incentive to return, with users seeking to further improve their avatar or creations, however the game lacks a driving force. The lack of a pull towards an end that is present in other titles differentiates *Second Life* as a title that is unlikely to personify an apophatic perpetual journey, at least concerning an ever-present desire. It is possible the perpetual journey could be present within the game, however this would be created by user experience and not explicitly enabled by the producers whose intentions were to create a social online space.

Where *Second Life* seeks to replicate the world in intricate details such as products and clothing, the fantasy themed *World of Warcraft* replaces the human dominated existence with a world shared with Orcs, Gnomes, Goblins and Elves. Created as an MMORPG, the 2004 release of *World of Warcraft* (*WOW*) is based in the realm created nearly a decade earlier in the strategy title *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*. Unlike its predecessors, *WOW* enables users to create an online persona as one of the mythical races and set off completing quests. The sheer size of the world, estimated at $200km^2$ (Guinness World Records, 2016, p. 104), with the thousands of quests available, near endless possibilities of equipment personalisation, as well as the possibility to create items within the game, ensures the *WOW* experience for the player, like the aforementioned space simulators, is filled with content that could never be completed or explored entirely by a single player. There is a limitation to the amount of a things one can do in *WOW*, however it is unlikely that one will ever complete every element of the game. The journey is close to an endless journey due to the sheer magnitude of the created world.

The perpetual quest of *WOW* alters as one progresses in the game. Initial quests require completing mundane tasks such as collecting items or slaughtering a certain number of beasts, but the levelling system drives the character on. The quests get larger, the character's engagement with their chosen race and professions becomes more engrossing as the player continues. Equipment upgrades are another focus where the character is given better armour or weapons awarded at the end of successful encounters. The rarest equipment are 'legendary' or 'epic' items that are unlikely to be awarded and are highly sought after (Geraci, 2014, p. 91). Beyond the collection of items or smaller quests, the game in its higher-level states requires teams to work together to 'raid' larger and more dangerous encounters. This draws characters together to overcome increasingly difficult enemies. There is no definitive end and the game-world provides an experience without a finality and with a constant draw to do more. Despite the limitation of the number of raids, equipment or mini quests, the sheer magnitude of content results in an experience that is unlikely to be completely explored or completed by a single player. It is an experience likened to transcendence that is seen not just as a play within a created space, but a "stepping-stone on our way to a greater evolutionary future" (p. 99). While the game gives small rewards for the smaller quests, as one plays the cost of upgrades increases with each 'level' thus driving the character onwards beyond smaller encounters. The game encourages the player to look at the quests not as ends, but as tasks intertwined in the perpetual journey. In this regard, *WOW* is particularly good at enabling interplay in the perpetual distance. It is evident that *WOW* meets all four of our aforementioned criteria of apophatic journey. It is the ever-present goals that

are offered in succession that cannot be determined at any point of the journey in finality that ensures the perpetual interplay.

Interaction in online created worlds are no longer limited to replicating aspects of the physical realm. They are being created as worlds within themselves and the lines are forever blurred on where the created character ends and where I as a player begin. Although created worlds and online spaces are creating a more engrossing experience, it is evident not all provide an apophatic journey. But it is clear that the perpetual quest is consistently and obviously apparent in *WOW*. The desire to journey up the mountain and complete the next task is the apophasis that can also be seen in *Elite* and *No Man's Sky*. Not relying on the notion of space and the advantage of interplanetary distance, *WOW* proves that apophatic journey in gaming is not associated with a single genre. Much of this desire comes from being part of a larger community, a race or a group known as a 'guild.' The interaction of players in MMORPGs enable not only endless possible choices of the individual player but also of those who one chooses to interact with. The game has a constant drive of character self-improvement, a path of self-discovery to interact within the world and immeasurable content that would be unlikely to be 'completed' within the lifespan of any single player. The definition of 'completion' in this regard falls away. There is no evidence of a planned end to the ever-expanding content, no princess at a final castle to reach, instead it is mini-quests, raids, gear improvement and levelling that continues to drive the ongoing interaction of *WOW* ensuring millions of subscribers faithfully continue to return to the game.

Although the setting of space and interaction between countless players pertains to an endless journey, there need not be endless content to show the apophatic perpetual journey is present within a video game, as we see with the next two titles: *Pokémon* and *Journey*.

The promise to be the very best in *Pokémon*

For a game that has the subtitle 'Gotta catch 'em all!' it would not be unreasonable to assume a certain finality may be present or achievable. However, it is the *Pokémon* series that typifies a wonton desire for perfection that is constantly out of reach. The promise offered to players of the game is the ability to 'catch' the Pokémon, or pocket monster characters to fill an electronic encyclopaedic diary within the game known as a *Pokédex*. The very theme for the accompanying original television show repeats the same promise and need to catch all of the Pokémon in order to be 'the very best' (Paige & Loeffler, 1998). Yet with the original release of *Pokémon Red*, *Green*, *Blue* and *Yellow* as well as every iteration since, it is impossible to actually complete the promised task without manipulating the game through unintended glitches or cheats, which are not evident to the player without relying on external texts or guides. Whilst beyond the scope of this study, glitches or cheats could be explored in regard to hidden meaning in the game which parallels non-literal exegetical methods, such as allegorical or typological responses to text.

The game shares much with other Japanese Role Playing Games (JRPGs), including a quest to battle successive 'bosses', known as gym leaders, in the *Pokémon* games, before taking on a final rival (Thorpe, Sugimori and Masuda, 2014, p. 24). The *Pokémon* franchise games differ from other JRPGs with the protagonist collecting a party by capturing small monsters in capsules. The player is limited in this regard as they cannot enter the play field, instead relying on the *Pokémon* to interact with each other using certain 'moves'. This limitation pushes the player into collecting and training the Pokémon in order to progress. At the end of the adventure, however, there is the true final task, the journey to fill the *Pokédex*.

Each generation of the *Pokémon* franchise is released with at least two different versions of the game with certain Pokémon missing from each. To fill the *Pokédex* players are required to use link cables, or the internet in later versions, to swap Pokémon with each other. In the early versions, the link cables meant one would need to befriend other players of the various games to get to the assumed final number of 150 Pokémon. However, this did not complete the task with a final hidden 'legendary' Pokémon, Mew, who was given out at special events and occasionally appeared in unintended glitches. Mew was a Pokémon added late in development of the game after the developer tools were removed from the code and was untested in the final product. Instead of breaking the game when discovered, it ensured the journey to be 'the very best' was a promise that is unlikely to be fulfilled by the vast majority of players. The *CoroCoro Comics* store held the first Pokémon event by offering the release of Mew. This resulted in over 70,000 applicants, with only 20 Mews that were initially released to selected players (Thorpe, Sugimori, & Masuda, 2014, p. 25). With a special ending of a certificate presentation built into the game when one filled their *Pokédex* to the total of 151 Pokémon, it is evident the creators intentionally created a game with a lucrative promise that most players were highly unlikely to fulfil. Later games continued the same formula, including the recent augmented reality release of *Pokémon Go*. Releasing certain special types of Pokémon at different events or locations allows a perpetual quest that is unlikely to ever be fulfilled.

This formula has continued in each version, where more Pokémon are added to an ever growing *Pokédex* with each generation containing its own special Pokémon that need to be legitimately obtained at events. There are presently over 800 types of Pokémon that fill the complete *Pokédex,* according to the recent *Pokémon Ruby* (Lanette, Route 114, *Pokémon Ruby*). However, even if one was able to participate in every event, including the first-generation Mew release, there are many variant types of Pokémon that are randomly generated. These include 'shiny', mythical, legendary, as well as gendered Pokémon that far outnumber the space that the player can hold. It is therefore impossible to fulfil the goal, despite the alluring call 'Gotta catch 'em all!'. While this is the subtitle of the English versions of the game the original Japanese versions known as *Pocket Monsters* instead have the subtitle '*getto suru*' literally meaning 'getting' (Allison & Cross, 2006, p. 197). This differentiation with the subtitle localisation indicates that the aim is not so much to collect them all, but to capture and 'get'. The true goal is a task not to capture but to catch and discover with the constant drive of collection the purpose of the game. A participatory process of a perpetual journey.

The path is not immediately obvious to the player who first concentrates on beating their local rivals or gym leaders. The journey however continues to spread further afield, giving aid to the respective crisis in each game until one seeks out rarer Pokémon to fill the *Pokédex*. Playing the game therefore requires a perpetual motion of travel (Allison & Cross, 2006, p. 196). The Pokémon are discovered in different areas, at different times and at various 'levels'. Constant movement and travel on a journey towards an ineffable goal is what drives each of the trainers onwards and forwards. It is being in the experience which is the goal itself. As the Nyssen and Marion have shown, being part of the journey is the end itself. The perpetual journey of the trainer in *Pokémon* is the end of the game played out in countless hours over the multiple generations of games. While the four aspects of apophasis may be implicit in the *Pokémon* games they are abundantly explicit in the final game of our study, *Journey*.

Apophatic journey in *Journey*

In comparison to the universes of content of *Elite*, *No Man's Sky*, *WOW* and *Pokémon*, the video game *Journey,* developed and created by *thatgamecompany,* is a relatively small adventure. Taking a few hours to 'complete' it adopts motifs from a variety of religious traditions as well as Joseph Campbell's cycle of a hero (Chen, 2012).[ii] Despite the length, the completion of the ever-present goal can never really be reached, with the end result returning the player to the beginning of their journey.

There are no instructions, in-game menu or voice overs to interrupt the experience that begins *Journey* just a simple instruction, '"x" New Journey'. The short introduction sequence which follows shows a bright light, analogous to a shooting star, drawn over a vast desolate desert. The player then commences *Journey* by assuming control of a cloaked avatar who sits in the vast desert. Climbing the first small hill reveals the destination that is present always in the distance, a mountain with a bright light beyond the clouds. Playing the game, the player soon discovers the only interactions possible are to jump or float and to let off a single tone. The desert appears as an immeasurable landscape with only one goal with no explicit instruction for progression. After playing for some time the player may come across another cloaked figure: in reality, the cloaked figure is another player connected through the internet some place in the world also playing the same game. Communication between the players is limited to the single tones and they are given space to explore the distance that appears immeasurable. The stripping back of interaction and controls of the game is in order to enable the sense of wonderment. According to creator Jenova Chen:

> I started to realize there is an emotion missing in the modern society, and of course missing in the online console games. It is the feeling of not knowing, a sense of wonder, a sense of awe, at the fact that you don't understand, at the fact that you are so small and you are not empowered. And so our focus for Journey was to make the player feel small and to feel wonder, so when they run into each other in an online environment, rather than thinking about how am I supposed to use my gun on the other player, we wanted them to feel a connection to another player.

> Chen (2012)

Pressing on together, or diverging on their own respective paths, the player is left to discover their own way through the distance. It is not a set out obvious path; rather it is a journey in a space that needs discovery and traversal, towards the ever-present goal. Ruins, small hills and buildings are placed throughout the game, bringing the player's focus onto the journey ahead.

The player continues with wonderment along the journey until the end of the game. The final section is akin to flying through the air towards the mountain, landing on the summit and then slowly approaching a white light beyond the crevice of the mountain peak. This perpetual journey which can be considered an apophatic interplay in the distance was not always present in the game. In the second year of Journey's development *thatgamecompany* included an end level different to the summit in the final product. In contrast to the end product, which allows freedom and builds a sense of wonder by ending with the fade to white, the initial version had the player reaching the summit with an end playing out on a controlled 'rail'. The feedback they received was largely negative so they purposefully altered the end level in order to end with freedom and mystery in order to evoke a perpetual loop (Chen, 2013a). The

final ending in the game has the player walking into the white light getting dimmer and smaller until they finally disappear. The credits begin to roll with the bright light seen at the beginning of the journey released from the mountain peak, travelling back through the areas visited in the game before resting behind the very first small hill the player climbed. The choice to continue the journey towards the mountain is left up to the player: they can now re-join the interplay within the distance to act as an experienced traveller to other players or further explore the expansive landscape. This builds a perpetual state of journey that can be continually looped by the player, enabling the interplay in the distance at the base of the mountain. Each 'journey' can be different with other players entering the field with their own individual unique response.

Whereas other games are implicitly fostering an apophatic interplay in distance, *Journey* is explicitly recognised as a spiritual quest. The comparative work of Joseph Campbell (2004) in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* enabled Chen to adopt elements from many religions into the one game. After playing *WOW* for three years Chen became frustrated with MMORPGs. When seeking an emotional connection with other players he found their feelings were largely focused on collecting goods or violence. Thus, *Journey*'s stripping back was purposeful in order to bring a focus of the connection enabled by the game. According to Chen, barrenness in the game is akin to what the first scientists who visited the moon felt. In a barren environment, Chen (2013a) says that "there is a strong sense of unknown and awe. And that is the basis for anyone to fall into a belief or have a religious feeling". It therefore makes the other player the focus, and the distance that makes the player feel small. The focus is on the immersion of the player into an emotion, as Chen and the team at *thatgamecomany* wanted to create a sense of awe that is integral to creating a feeling of catharsis. It is this awe, the unknown, that is built into the game that fosters on the principals of the distance between humanity and God. As with the Nyssen's exploration of Moses who constantly seeks God but is unable to breach the distance, the player in *Journey* dwells in the distance. It can be understood as setting up the situation for the player to exist in an apophatic state consciously removing power to evoke a state of wonder and curiosity.

Journey goes further and removes any aspect of identity including sexuality, age and language. It builds in anonymity with players unable to communicate in normative ways. The physics of player interaction is even removed, meaning players cannot damage each other. Rather, damage is reversed to a 'warmth' shared between the players treating each other as a font of resources. There is not even a tutorial or complicated menu system with language removed when the game commences (Chen, 2013a). Where other games allow interconnection with other players via language, Chen has said the removal of language is intended to facilitate the connection that one can feel with another player. He views the game as an experience allowing strangers to understand the other as a pure human being. The identity of players is only revealed with the exposure of players' 'gamertags' after the completion of *Journey* (Chen, 2013a). The support for any type of online communication between players is removed. Communication between players outside of the game is possible with the revelation of 'gamertags' after the completion of one loop, yet this possibility remains outside of the experience and thus does not cloud the purity of the game experience. You cannot use a microphone to speak or 'chatpad' to type. Even the regular ability to invite 'friends', or connect online profiles is removed as Chen feared a frustration would be present for those who could not speak to their friends in the game (Chen, 2013b). As with the apophatic approach to God, words fall short of adequately demonstrating what is transcendental. The words removed in *Journey* enable one to dwell in the constant distance before the mountain. It is an apophatic journey *par excellence* yet an end may seem present

for players with a single loop of the 'journey'. How many loops each player chooses to complete is up to personal preference and the perpetual nature of the game is left for discovery.

Conclusion

We can consider a number of video games as enabling an apophatic interplay in the perpetual distance that is outlined by Jean-Luc Marion and Gregory of Nyssa. Considering the criteria that is outlined above, it is evident a number of games meet many of these conditions, some more explicitly than others. To reiterate these features of the apophatic approach to God by Marion and the Nyssen can be seen in a variety of manners for certain games. First, it is evident humanity is limited in the face of the immeasurable transcendental nature of God. In relation to the games mentioned above, there is a stripping back of language, the limitation of the player is built into the experience, and there is a sense of awe at immeasurability and seemingly endless possibilities. Second, faced with this limitation, there is a distance, or journey, which is perpetual and exerted upon approach. The perpetual space, evident primarily in space simulators, can also be seen with games of enormous content as well as relatively smaller adventures. It is the choice of the developer which may result in the creation of the distance where the player can dwell. Likewise, the path is determined by the choice of the player with their engagement with the distance. Third, the path on the journey is to be discovered by the individual. Each of these games allow a freedom of the player to approach in their own individual means. This can fail to become an apophatic interplay if there is a lack of a constant drawcard that appears just out of reach. Fourth, what is evident in games that do create an apophatic journey is the ever-present desire to complete a journey which can never be realised. It is the drawing to complete the collection, get to the end of the journey or reach the end goal for the community which remains out of reach, and that ensures the interplay is apophatic.

This study has shown the apophatic features in video games that are evident beyond the boundary of genres. This is a valuable way to reflect more deeply on these games which are clearly taking on these characteristics. Discussing games in this way enables a deeper understanding of the interplay, providing an understanding of the drawcard of perpetual journey which is traversed by discovery and demonstrating the limitation of human subjectivity.

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[i] Marion here references Heidegger's *Being and Time* and his notion of *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1962, p. 67).

[ii] Chen here is referring to two books *The Power of Myth* (Campbell & Moyers, 1991) and *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 2004).