The Rationalist's Spirituality:
Campbell's Monomyth in Single-Player Role-Playing Videogames *Skyrim* & *Mass Effect*

by

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'Is the fantastic primarily a literature of belatedness, unmoored from reality, innocent, the repository of exploded supernatural beliefs, expressing a yearning for a lost wholeness, promising transcendence? The answer is yes.'

– J'Annine Jobling, *Fantastic Spiritualities (2010: 1)*

'Fantasy does not necessarily misdirect people away from consciousness raising, it need not be an opiate, but can be the much-needed catalyst for change.'

– Graham Harvey, *Fantasy in the Study of Religions: Paganism as Observed and Enhanced by Terry Pratchett (2000)*

'We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we will be with all the world.'

– Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces (2004: 2)*

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an investigation of how mythographer Joseph Campbell's monomyth narrative pattern manifests in computer and console role-playing videogames (CRPGs). It argues that this pattern is conducive to the CRPG being received as a spiritual experience, one potentially transformative in its capacity to impart and facilitate the practice of monomythic values by players, both within the game world and without. Focusing on two CRPG games, *Skyrim* and *Mass Effect*, it considers noteworthy parallels between the monomythic quest structure of these games and the 'quest' nature of authenticity—the modern, individual, personal search for meaning, analysing how the CRPG's emphasis on the 'epistemologically individualistic' reflects aspects of alternative spirituality (as against traditional institutional religion).

As such, the CRPG actively seeks to reconcile the spiritual with the material in a 'rationalist's spirituality', a fact best represented in the game's logical structuring of the monomythic hero's journey to apotheosis as rites of passage (that is, as successive stages of narrative, but also as a numerical 'levelling' system for avatar development). The spiritual is exemplified by the presence of the monomythic pattern and by how the videogame draws upon themes native to fantastic fiction (ruins, deep time, dark genesis, the sublime), themes which evoke the enchanted world and 'porous self' of pre-modern society and represent a desire for re-enchantment and thus an enduring interest in the spiritual.

These elements together operate within the rationalised framework of a rule-based game system, where the player has the freedom and agency native to the modern, rationally empowered 'buffered self' but is ultimately (and somewhat contrarily) answerable to these very same rules, as determined by a god-like designer. This relationship suggests a continuing

albeit surreptitious belief in the transcendent, validating Victoria Nelson's assertion that art and entertainment in the modern world serves as an 'unconscious wellspring of religion' (2001: viii).

This thesis also explores the CRPG's capacity to fulfil the four functions traditionally played by mythology—the mystical, cosmological, sociological and pedagogical—as described in the writings of Joseph Campbell, looking at how the sociological and pedagogical in particular are addressed by the monomythic narrative and the implicit values of this narrative (such as devotion of the self to the community). It will argue that the CRPG—in its capacity to facilitate embodied learning and action (as ritualised performance and contest)—serves as an ideal environment for the practice and possible adoption of such values by the player.

Adoption, as I will illustrate, is influenced by a number of factors. Firstly, the game itself as an experience (its narrative and emotive credibility, and thus player investment in their character, or more specifically that character is an *idealised construct*—the 'projective identity'). Secondly, how the player's role is framed within the game world, and thirdly, how the player reads his/her experience. This reading can be to some degree shaped by a game's goals and rules, and this is where procedural rhetoric—the use of game-based systems for the purposes of persuasion—may help to foreground monomythic values and lessons as well as encourage active practice of these values in day-to-day life.

Herein lies the CRPG's potential to fulfil the Romantic proposition that art can inspire moral improvement in the individual and instigate efforts to realise an idealised world. While games are ultimately shaped by the tastes of the market and the demands of the CRPG community, the question of whether a videogame should actively adopt such an approach is one that

arguably falls to game designers: authors of the game-as-text.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the thesis, while Chapter 2 explores the transition from pre-modern society to modern secularity as a default position in the West, the disappearance of the enchanted world, the emergence of alternative spiritualities as a recourse to institutional religion, and the 'quest' spirit that characterises the modern search for meaning (authenticity).

Chapter 3 looks at the four functions previously played by mythology and how the CRPG can fulfil them, arguing for a classification of the CRPG as an alternative spirituality, and also as a continuation of a tradition of fantastic fiction representing a desire for re-enchantment, one whose origins may very well be found in modern crises of meaning.

Chapter 4 details the origins of CRPG in wargaming and fantastic fiction, discussing the videogame genre's unique emphasis on player choice, agency and autonomy, while analysing how the monomythic pattern manifests in *Skyrim* and *Mass Effect*, as well as its implied values, such as the commitment of the individual to the service of his/her society.

Chapter 5 discusses how the CRPG combines fantastic fictional worlds with rational rules. The spiritual takes the form of the abovementioned aesthetic themes and the monomythic pattern, which together signal an enduring interest in re-enchantment and thus the spiritual. The rational takes the form of the videogame's distinct emphasis on the powers of the player as a rational agent, powers that nevertheless are shaped by the rules of a transcendent, god-like game designer. This melding of the spiritual with the material, it will be asserted, represents a desire to reconcile these two disparate elements in a form of 'rationalised' spirituality.

Chapter 6 analyses how the videogame as a form of external symbolic media can facilitate the transference of monomythic values and act as an arena for the embodied practice of these values. The transfer of such practice into the world beyond the game depends upon player investment in his/her role (via his/her idealised 'projective identity') and the game as a ritualised performance and contest for, if not representation of, monomythic values.

Chapter 7 investigates how procedural rhetoric may help to persuade players of the significance and possible utility of monomythic values, by not only involving the player in everyday moral/ethical dilemmas within the game world but also giving him/her the freedom to address these dilemmas as s/he see fit, while discouraging actions that compromise the 'heroic' image of the monomythic hero. This chapter will also suggest ways for CRPGs to avoid formulaic storytelling and problematic depictions of the monomythic hero, so as to better improve the CRPG's ability to persuade players of monomythic values and hence fulfil the pedagogical and sociological functions ascribed by this thesis. The question of whether such functions should be associated with the CRPG is one, I will argue, that game designers alone can address.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Modern society in the West has been marked as much by the secularisation of the institutional, the organisational and the personal (Dobbelaere, cited in Lyon, 2000: 27–28) as by the growing array of spiritual/moral options that have appeared in response to the decline of institutional religion (Taylor, 2007: 299). Authenticity, described by Taylor as the individual pursuit—and personalised definition of—meaning, and fulfilment through autonomous exploration (299, 509), is one of the most common of these options. It is also arguably yet another manifestation of humanity's timeless quest for meaning, one that 'transcends the restricted space of empirical existence in this world' (Berger, cited in Partridge, 2004: 39).

This quest is embodied in Joseph Campbell's monomyth, a narrative structure that takes the form of a physical journey combined with an 'inward spiritual one of self-discovery' (Nelson, 2001: 202). The physical trials undergone by the hero of the monomyth are an allegory for psychological and spiritual trials: rites of passage involving the transcendence of the ego and the dedication of the self to a greater cause, usually the individual's community. This emphasis on the individual's internal journey resonates with authenticity and alternative spiritualities, which are both notable for their focus on a mystical, personal, interior, relational, experiential and epistemological experience of the Divine (Partridge, 2004: 20–21).

A number of scholars have attempted to distil the monomyth into a simplified narrative formula sans spiritual implications for use in the construction of fiction.[1] Some prominent and acknowledged examples of the monomyth being consciously and purposefully used in

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[1] See Phil Cousineau's *The Hero's Journey* and Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers*.

fantastic fiction[2] include the novel *Enders Game* (see Collings, 1988), the *Star Wars* film

series (see Larsen & Larsen, 2002) and the computer and console role-playing videogame

genre (CRPG).[3] In such cases, the monomyth also serves to confirm Victoria Nelson's claims

that art and entertainment in the secular era have come to act as a substitute for scripture and

direct revelation, providing a moral framework for the non-religious and serving as an

'unconscious wellspring of religion' and belief in the transcendent (Nelson, 2001: viii, 9).

This thesis will look at two popular, archetypal, critically and commercially successful[4]

CRPG franchises: *Mass Effect*[5] and *The Elder Scrolls* (focusing on the most recent iteration of

the series, *Skyrim*[6]), and how the monomythic pattern manifests in both. It will explore how

the CRPG genre comprises a contrary blend of the material and the spiritual. The material can

be observed in the game as a designed space with rules and a logically structured path to

apotheosis. The spiritual is present in the monomythic narrative and in the fantastic themes of

ruins, deep time, humanity's dark genesis and the sublime, in the existence of the Other

(representing extra-human agencies) and a game world with a transcendent designer.

These themes evoke the enchanted cosmic existence of pre-modern society, signalling a

desire for re-enchantment and also an enduring interest in the spiritual in the wake of

secularisation. The combination of the spiritual and the material in the CRPG furthermore

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[2] The term is used here to encapsulate the horror, science fiction and fantasy genres.

[3] This thesis will refer specifically to single-player CRPGs and not massively multiplayer role-playing games (MMORPGs). While much of my discussion may be applied to MMORPGs, they bring to the table a number of complex considerations (for example, real-time social interaction with other players as well as a stronger emphasis on spatial narrative). A full discussion of these aspects would require a work of greater volume and scope than the present one.

[4] See LeJacq, 2011 and EA Investor Relations, 2012b.

[5] For clarity's sake, I will look largely at the first game in the *Mass Effect* series, *Mass Effect*, which attends to CRPG conventions more closely than its successors (Mass Effect [Computer software]. [2008]. Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts, Inc.).

[6] Skyrim [Computer software]. (2011). Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks, LCC.

represents a widespread, unconscious desire for syncretism, for the rationalising of the spiritual and a quantifying of the measures required to attain it. This syncretism foregrounds several values emerging from a 'spirit of instrumental activism' (Partridge, 2004: 116): authenticity (in the CRPG's emphasis on choice, and in the game's construction as the personal, epistemological search for meaning); association and cooperation with others within a quest, with the goal of benefiting the collective; preservation of others from suffering and evil, heroism as dedication of the self to a higher cause (e.g. betterment of society) and heroism as rebellion against the repressive forces of civilisation.

Through an analysis of the *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim* games, I will illustrate how general criticisms surrounding alternative spirituality—criticisms regarding its perceived superficiality, shallowness, rhetorical nature and emphasis on individualism—in the light of these values do not necessarily apply to the monomythic CRPG. The monomyth may be more than rhetorical in its exhortations, and monomythic ideals can be realised as much within the game world as *without*. CRPGs can thus overcome their hedonistic aspects, striving to fulfil the Romantic proposition that art can inspire moral improvement in the individual as well as instigate efforts to realise an idealised world (C. Campbell, 2005: 190–191, 185–186).

This thesis will explore the unique possibilities that arise from the monomyth narrative when employed in the CRPG, in terms of the videogame as a space for embodied thinking, learning and practice of monomythic values. It will examine the significance of such play as a performance (one that mirrors the performative nature of 'real' life) and an attempt to realise an idealised self (the projective identity), but also as a symbolic, ritualised contest for that self and the values it represents. It will also consider the videogame's unique persuasive capacities to encourage player adoption and application of monomythic values outside of the game

through procedural rhetoric: the use of persuasion through the procedural aspects of gameplay, in particular the CRPG's quest structure, which defines gameplay goals as self-transcendence and the salvation of society.

This thesis will also analyse a number of hurdles to this persuasive process currently faced by the CRPG as a genre. Some examps of this are the absence of credible plot, character and gameplay, failure to employ contemporary (relevant) moral/ethical dilemmas, the pervasive depiction of the hero as an 'Oedipal' warrior, and the lack of a transparent rendering of the monomythic hero's continued role and significance, not only in the popular imagination, but also day-to-day life. Through this critique I will suggest ways in which procedural rhetoric surrounding monomythic values in the CRPG may be improved via game designer initiative and discussion within the CRPG community, thus helping to realise the genre's potential for fulfilling sociological and pedagogical functions previously fulfilled by mythology.

2. MODERN RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE WEST AS 'QUEST'

Summary of argument

In this chapter I will explore conditions in the 'enchanted world' of pre-modern society, and how various religious and social reformations led to a disenchantment: the replacing of the porous self with the buffered self, and a gradual transition from deism to exclusive humanism as the default world view in the West. It will argue that that the rise of secularity has not in fact spelled the end of religion, but rather a shift in focus from institutional to alternative, from a collective to an individual search for meaning, one which might best be characterised as having a 'quest' spirit markedly similar to that of Joseph Campbell's monomythic narrative pattern.

From enchantment to disenchantment

Pre-modern society according to scholar Charles Taylor existed in an enchanted world, in which the individual was seen to be 'embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporates the divine' (2007: 152). This cosmos was hierarchically structured, a 'Great Chain of Being' with a transcendent God at the top, extra-human agencies in the middle and humanity at the bottom.[7] The latter lived a 'porous' existence in which they were prone to the influence of the extra-human agencies, including spirit agents (e.g. saints, demons, spirits), super-agents (e.g. Satan) and 'charged' objects or places (e.g. shrines, relics), 'causal powers with a purposive bent, close to incomprehensible' (539).

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[7] Mikics identifies the model for this image as a passage in Book 8 of the *Iliad*, where Zeus 'pictures himself dangling a golden chain from Olympus' (2007: 139). Mazlish notes that according to this conception of existence, 'everything is connected to everything, link by link, and everything has its place' (1993: 32).

Such powers could be physically, mentally and spiritually imposed upon the individual in the form of 'benevolent or malevolent intent' (32), for example in the form of demonic possession. Safeguarding one's self against such influence required propitiation and the protective aid of the Divine; pre-modern society was consequently grounded through ritual and worship in the notion of the Divine, with human flourishing identified as the ultimate goal of religion.[8] Social practices were likewise grounded in the sacred; one prominent example is the practice of 'beating the bounds' (Taylor, 2007: 148–149; Bellah, 2011: 263). When compounded with humanity's porousness and thus vulnerability to extra-human agencies, this fact generated pressure towards religious conformity, rendering belief a default option (Taylor, 2007: 43).

Anti-structure was also understood to be an essential counterpart of structure in pre-modern society, regularly manifesting as 'Carnival': moments of chaos and 'mockery and mayhem' (Taylor, 2007: 46),[9] during which established social roles and statuses were shucked off in an expression of fellowship and an emancipation from 'coded roles' (50).[10] Such events, despite being themselves an expression of anti-structure, were in fact highly structured, involving suspension and crucial appraisal of the current order as a means of renewing and rededication of it (50), thus inadvertently reinforcing the dominant moral values of the day (46).

The disappearance of the hierarchical cosmos, the sacred and the transcendent (as represented in a shift to 'immanent'), magic, extra-human agencies, alternative times (such as Carnival

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[8] Until the Axial Revolution, which Taylor considers to be the first stage of disenchantment (2007: 146, 157).

[9] Some examples given by Taylor are 'feasts of "misrule", various kinds of dancing and the like' (2007: 123).

[10] Carnival in this sense may have played the role of social 'safety valve' (Taylor, 2007: 123).

and other 'higher' times, in which secular time—time that was 'consistently transitive'—was grounded [2007: 55][11]) and the porous self, a process broadly referred to as 'disenchantment',[12] first began with what Taylor calls the 'Axial Revolution'.[13] This revolution according to Taylor was triggered by the appearance of 'higher' forms of religion such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity (2007: x), which introduced the notion of an imperfect social order separated from the cosmos and identified new goals beyond human flourishing: 'salvation, or eternal life, or Nirvana' (439), giving rise to a tension between the pursuit of human flourishing, the demands of day-to-day living and the demands of transcending oneself.

Sociologist Robert Bellah on the other hand has framed his discussion of the Axial Age according to Merlin Donald's description of the evolution of human culture: as a progression through four stages: episodic, mimetic, mythic and theoretic (2011: xviii), with the theoretic marked by the appearance of what Elkana refers to as second-order thinking: 'thinking about thinking' (cited in Bellah, 2011: 275). The axial 'breakthrough' according to Bellah was a product of 'theoretic culture in dialogue with mythic culture as a means for the "comprehensive modelling of the entire human universe"', involving the 'radicalization of mythospeculation' and the birth of the 'capacity to imagine alternative social realities' (2011: 273, 276, 352).

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[11] Higher times took three forms during the Middle Ages, most significantly the 'time of origins', which referred to the 'Great Time': a remote period in the past in which order was first established (e.g. the formation of the world). This period did not exist merely behind man (i.e. in the past) but also *above* him, and was seen to be approachable via rituals that concentrate on renewing and rededicating society and its ties to the past (Taylor, 2007: 47).

[12] A term first defined by Friedrich Schiller as representing the 'progressive erosion of magic from the world' (Repphun, 2009: 13).

[13] This concept was first developed through the contributions of the following: Alfred Weber, Max Weber, Eric Voegelin, S. N. Eisenstadt and Karl Jaspers (Bellah, 2011: 271).

Successive religious and social reformations by the clergy and by other elite respectively (most notably the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment) served only to further these processes, leading to changed notions of time, faith, self and society, and the decline of religious belief (Taylor, 2007; C. Campbell, 2005; Weber, 2003). These changes were primarily characterised by 'a process of cultural rationalization, in which the intrinsic value or meaning of values or actions are subordinated increasingly to a "rational" quest for efficiency and control' (Gane, cited in Repphun, 2009: 14).[14] One of the most significant and influential examples of this emerged during the Renaissance: the ideal of civility.

This ideal sprang from the notion of the 'free' individual whose destiny was determined by his inner self (Slochower, 1973: 26; Taylor, 1989: 82), from a new sense of human agency as 'active, constructive, shaping' with reference to humanity's capacity for ethical improvement (Taylor, 2007: 99). This sense arose from the concept of free will and individual responsibility, conscience and sensibility (170) first established by Lipsius and further developed by Descartes. This concept called for a detachment from desire and an empowering objectification of the world, a concept to which the Protestant ethic added further momentum, through its stress on 'inner-worldly' asceticism (C. Campbell, 2005; Weber, 2003). Like previous forms of Western monasticism, the Protestant ethic drew upon:

> A systematic method of rational conduct with the purpose of overcoming the *status naturae*, to free man from the power of irrational impulses and his dependence on the world and on nature. It attempted to subject man to the supremacy of a purposeful will, to bring his actions under constant self-control... (Weber, 2003: 118-119)

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[14] The shift in religious belief was gradual: one from a default position of theism to deism (in which God is seen to be a 'designer') to 'Providential Deism' (in which God is seen as responsible for establishing an order, whose laws humanity is obliged to obey), leading finally to exclusive humanism. See Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) for a more complete description.

These factors together helped to lay the groundwork for the scientific spirit that imbues modernity (Lyon, 2000: 25), leading to an erosion of the supernatural world [Thomas, cited in Partridge, 2004: 11], and the decline of humanity's concept of itself as 'porous'—prone to extra-human agencies—in favour of the disengaged, dispassionate, rational agent: what Taylor refers to as the 'buffered self'.

Modern religion and spirituality

The emergence of the buffered self was a key driving force behind the process of secularisation, one that affected the institutional, organisational and the personal profoundly (Dobbelaere, cited in Lyon, 2000: 27–28). The shift to exclusive humanism however by no means spelled the end of religion; faith and religious practice not only endured in the wake of the 'eclipse of transcendence' but were subject to 'renewal, relocation, restructuring, and resurgence' (Lyon, 2000: x). In some cases they were marked by a drift 'in the direction of enhanced choices for individuals and toward a deeply personal, subjective understanding of faith and well-being [sic]' (Roof, 2001: 129).

One significant example of this was the 20th century explosion of alternative spiritual/moral options, what Taylor refers to as the 'Nova effect': the 'mutual fragilization of different religious positions[…][and] outlooks of belief and unbelief' [2007: 595]). From this emerged alternative spiritualities: a range of 'Mystical, cultic, epistemologically individualistic spiritual beliefs' (Partridge, 2004: 36–37) which emphasise essentialism, holism and relativism, as well as the personal, experiential and relational (21), while embracing eclecticism and spiritual bricolage: the forming of a 'patchwork of beliefs, practices and

rituals which provide the meaning, consolation and experiences of the transcendent'

(Wainwright, cited in Partridge 2004: 51).[15]

Alternative spiritualities are an outgrowth of the 'confluence of secularization and

sacralization' (Partridge 2004: 4) and thus may be seen as a compensation for the decline of

mainstream institutional religion and its ability to meet the moral and spiritual requirements

of life in the modern West (40). Where religion may traditionally be described as 'a system of

symbols that, when enacted by human beings, establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-

lasting moods and motivations that make sense in terms of an idea of a general order of

existence' (Bellah, 2011: xiv),[16] alternative spiritualities I would argue usually comprise

multiple systems of symbols (due to the bricolage approach employed by its practitioners).

While I do not dare to speak for the moods and motivations that arise from alternative

spiritualities, I would indicate that the source of this experience is interior, where with

religion it is exterior (e.g. a deity). I would also note that bricolage also undermines a

cohesive, shared sense of (and thus allegiance to) a 'general order of existence'; any attempt

at wholesale organisation and institutionalisation of such spiritualities to the extent that is

possible and common in traditional religion is thus impossible.

These alternative spiritualities Partridge argues are rooted in Romantic thought, specifically in

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[15] Alternative spiritualities have been accordingly 'referred to as "do-it-yourself-religion" (Baerveldt 1996), "pick-and-mix religion" (Hamilton 2000), "religious consumption à la carte" (Possamai 2003) or a "spiritual supermarket" (Lyon 2000)' (Houtman & Aupers, 2010: 5).

[16] We must note that Bellah is paraphrasing Clifford Geertz's own definition:

> (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 1973: 90)

the perception that individuals can 'intuitively or by the use of imagination access the infinite through the finite, discovering the metaphysical within the physical, see the spiritual flowing through the material' (2004: 72). As a movement, they are representative of a widespread subjective turn towards the self (16). The term 'alternative' thus is somewhat inaccurate, for such spiritualities now 'appear to be part of the dominant culture of today's society; that is, part of the cultural logic of late capitalism' (85). The bricolage approach for example is very much in keeping with the postmodern zeitgeist of pastiche (Partridge, 2004: 40; Lyon, 2000: 11), one that can also be found in the principle of authenticity (more on this below).

Alternative spiritualities have traditionally been criticised on the grounds of being superficial and shallow (reducing 'the ascetic to the aesthetic' [Partridge, 2004: 35]), resulting from their close relationship with popular culture. Remark has also been made of what is believed to be the essentially rhetorical nature of alternative spiritualities ('believing without belonging' [188]), the danger they pose by promoting an individualism that sometimes verges on 'narcissistic subjectivism' (74)[17] and the perception that alternative spiritualities fail to play a role within the public domain (Aupers & Houtman, 2010: 136). Alternative spiritualities have also been accused of being 'shallowly rooted, trivial, historically insubstantial, ephemeral, and socially, intellectually and existentially precarious' (Woodhead, 2010: 33).

Such criticisms however are not entirely accurate. Western alternative thought for example is pervaded by the sense of a force greater than the individual self (Partridge, 2004: 73) and imbued with a 'spirit of instrumental activism' (116). Many alternative spiritualities also

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[17] I must note nevertheless that such individualism reflects a much wider shift in the modern West, characterised by 'the cultivation of individual spiritual development and personal religious experience' at the expense of 'cultivation of loyalty to, or protection of, particular religious groups, identities, or systems of doctrines' (Dawson, 1998; Lambert, 1999; Roof, 1999; cited in Dawson, 2005: 23).

possess what Taylor calls an 'ontic component', and have had notable social impact; consider for example the incorporation of alternative and contemporary approaches into modern medicine (Partridge, 2004: 10), the origins of the environment movement in deep ecology (25) and the allying of the psychedelic movement with the civil rights movement (98).

The rise of alternative spiritualities nevertheless reflects the parallel rise of a culture oriented around 'authenticity': the individual pursuit of values and fulfilment, characterised by self-determination (Lyon, 2000: 75), autonomous exploration (Taylor, 2007: 509) and freedom from metanarratives ('truth' and 'morality', for example), or rather, a preference for *personal* metanarratives, where selfhood is seen as a constructed 'project' in the making (Lyon, 2000: 93, 69). The origins of authenticity as a phenomenon may be traced to the Romantic Movement (Lyon, 2000: 93; Taylor, 2007: 473), specifically the Romantic desire for a 'more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth' (Roof, 2001: 86).

Authenticity has since become a standard feature of modern Western life, most commonly expressed in the modern 'identity project', with consumerism serving to define 'the ways in which people build up, and maintain, a sense of who they are, of who they wish to be' (Bocock, cited in Lyon, 2000: 74).[18] Authenticity in this sense may be classified as a form of 'higher selfishness' that designates self-cultivation as the imperative (Brooks, cited in Taylor, 2007: 477), sacralising the self (Lyon, 2000: 18) and placing emphasis on the wholeness of that self. Its widespread appeal Taylor suggests may be a product of a widespread dissatisfaction with life in the 'immanent' order, one that by many accounts is experienced as

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[18] This phenomenon began in earnest during the consumer revolution (springing out of the Industrial Revolution), which as Colin Campbell notes 'embraced the rise of the novel, romantic love and modern fashion… to the widespread adoption of the habit of covert day-dreaming', which best characterises modern consumption (2005: 88–89).

'empty, flat, devoid of higher purpose' (Taylor, 2007: 506), for reasons I will elaborate upon in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the conditions of pre-modern society are a far cry from those in the modern, disenchanted West, with the latter marked by the prominence of the buffered self and an emphasis on the individual experience, as seen in the rise of authenticity and alternative spiritualities. These together exemplify a contemporary social shift from 'belief-oriented religion to an attitude of religious quest' (Roof, cited in Besecke, 2010: 90), one that bears surprising similarities to the quest structure of the monomyth, as we shall see in the following chapter.

3. THE MONOMYTH AS AN ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY

Summary of argument

In this chapter I will argue that the four functions served by mythology in the past (the mystical, cosmological, sociological and pedagogical) have been inherited by those examples of fantastic fiction that employ the monomythic narrative pattern. The sociological and pedagogical functions can be observed in the essentially symbolic nature of the hero's journey, which represents the universal journey of the human spirit. In the context of the monomyth's distinctly individual focus, such functions suggest a classification of the monomyth as a form of alternative spirituality,[19] with works of fantastic fiction serving as a site for the spiritual transformation of the modern consumer.

I will also argue that the consumption of fantastic fiction—a platform for consumers to experience enchanted life—represents in turn a desire for re-enchantment. This is in itself a response to the state of uncertainty in the modern West, arising from the rise of exclusive humanism as the default belief system and the parallel decline of religious outlooks, traditional methods of social embedding and concepts of time. Fantastic fiction that utilises the monomythic pattern, I will assert, may thus be viewed as a response to these contemporary crises, with the modern mythic hero serving as a new source of identification, a

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[19] It is not here claimed that the monomyth is in itself always an alternative spirituality. Rather, what I am interested in exploring is how the monomyth touches upon aspects of alternative spiritualities (i.e. how it can be reflective of, or an element of, or be present within such). Furthermore, rather than adopting a single understanding or usage of the monomyth, I have preferred in this dissertation to use it in a number of ways: as a tool of analysis, a 'values' oriented narrative to be advocated for, the type of narrative under exploration, and an integral element of CRPGs.

means by which the consumer may realise a 'transvaluation' of his society's moral codes and standards.

Campbell's theory of mythology

In the absence of a discipline specifically devoted to myth, theorising around the subject has ranged from the anthropological to the psychological and sociological, with each strand focusing invariably on questions 'of origin, function, and subject matter' (Segal, 2004: 2). Some theorists have attempted to identify patterns within mythology, among them Johann George van Han, anthropologist Edward Tylor and folklorist Vladimir Propp (Segal, 1987: 1– 2). The most prominent of such interpreters however have arguably been three 20th century figures: psychoanalyst Otto Rank, mythographer Joseph Campbell and folklorist Lord Raglan, who wrote in the tradition of Freudian, Jungian and Frazerian theory respectively (Segal, 2004: 87).

For Campbell, storytelling as a tradition is broadly concerned with inspiring and spiritually exalting the individual, instilling self-knowledge, cultivating relationships, creativity and spiritual growth, nourishing the psyche and giving succour to the soul (2004: xxxii–xxxv). Myths play a special role in this tradition, serving four functions: the mystical (opening 'the world to the dimension of mystery, to the realization of the mystery that underlies all forms'); cosmological ('showing you what the shape of the universe is, but showing it in such a way that the mystery again comes through'); the sociological (supporting and validating the current social order) and the pedagogical (teaching the individual how to live a spiritual life) (Campbell & Moyers, 1991: 38–39).

Segal has observed that Campbell's insistence on the "uniform meaning of myth […] [as] the oneness of all things" would naturally imply an effacement of "the very distinctions assumed by all four functions" (1987: 139). He also makes note of Campbell's failure to explain how these functions might operate (39); a product, he suggests, of the fact that Campbell was first a mystic before he was scholar, and was thus concerned more with 'reveling in myth' than analysing it (140). While this does not in my estimation undermine Campbell's basic argument, for clarity's sake I will nevertheless attempt to address these shortcomings, firstly by offering an analysis of myth's sociological function later in this chapter.

The pedagogical function I would suggest is tied up with the sociological, in so far as they are both concerned with communicating basic lessons regarding human existence and life in society, although the pedagogical emerges more from the depiction of the monomythic hero and his/her adherence to what I will call 'monomythic values' during the course of his journey (more on this below). The mystical and cosmological functions appear to emerge from the monomythic narrative's evocation of elements of the enchanted world (see Chapter 5). The consumption of mythology and fantastic fiction does not necessarily mean that these functions are fulfilled outright; the CRPG however presents a rather interesting—and complex—case in this regard, owing to its use of procedural rhetoric, a point explored in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

Beyond these four functions, Campbell sees myth as conveyed in a highly symbolic language, wherein the metaphysical realms of mythological tales serve as representations of the human unconscious (J. Campbell, 2004: 240). Campbell also subscribes to the view that myths function more broadly as symbolic descriptions of the world, with symbols acting as 'vehicles' of communication, offering timeless wisdoms about human existence and clues to

the spiritual potential of the individual (Campbell & Moyers, 1991: 28). The personal and spiritual realities of myth serve to teach people about a deeper human existence, exorcising infantile images, reconciling them to 'aspects of the world which cannot be controlled' (Segal, 2004: 28) and facilitating their growth and maturation (219, 93).

This reflects what Joseph Campbell believes is mythology's fundamental theme: freeing the individual from slavery to ego, recognition of his/her oneness with the rest of humanity, reconciling his/her will with that of the universe (2004: 221) and accepting the mantle of 'world redeemer' and thus commitment to the service of his/her society (323). This is myth's pedagogical function, but also its sociological function, in that it facilitates the transmission of the institutional 'body of knowledge' to the individual as objective truth and its subsequent internalisation as a subjective reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 67).[20]

Social order depends upon this transmission and internalisation; yet as Berger and Luckmann observe, with each new generation the character of historic institutions is periodically thrown into question and requires legitimation in the form of explanations and justifications that ascribe 'cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings […] giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives' (1966: 111). These for example may take a number of forms: 'schemes […] directly related to concrete actions' such as 'Proverbs, moral maxims and wise sayings […] legends and folk tales' (112), a list to which I would also add mythology. As a concept of reality, mythology also serves as the oldest form of universe-maintenance and legitimation (110).

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[20] Mythology in this context can play the sociological function within both primary and second phases, relative to when the individual is exposed to it (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 135–136).

By universe, I am referring here to what Berger and Luckmann call the 'symbolic universe', a 'matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings' within which historic society and individual biography take place (1966: 114), providing order for history and collective memory, offering a frame of reference for individual actions (103) and shielding the individual from anomic experiences and thus ultimate terror (101).

Campbell's monomyth

The monomyth, a term Joseph Campbell borrows from James Joyce (J. Campbell, 2004: 28), is a narrative pattern found in a number of mythologies, conceived as part of Campbell's comparativist approach to mythology (Segal, 1987: 1). The monomyth is an archetypical journey taken by a male hero, involving trial, danger and struggle, but also conversely splendour (xxvi):

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (J. Campbell, 2004: 28)

This journey is oriented around three stages—Departure, Initiation and Return—which in turn comprise multiple rites of passage. Departure consists of 'the call of adventure', 'refusal of the call', 'supernatural aid', 'the crossing of the first threshold', 'the belly of the whale'; Initiation involves 'the road of trials', 'the meeting with the goddess', 'woman as temptress', 'atonement with the father', 'apotheosis', 'the ultimate boon', and Return contains 'refusal of the return', 'the magic flight', 'rescue from without', 'the crossing of the return threshold', 'master of two worlds' and 'freedom to live'. Not all monomythic narratives follow this pattern precisely. As Campbell himself notes,

> Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle (test motif, flight motif, abduction of the bride), others string a number of independent cycles into a single series (as in *The Odyssey*).[21] Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes. (2004: 228)

Each motif in the hero's journey is a rite of passage, the most significant of which are his meeting with the archetypal figures of the mother and the father ('the meeting with the goddess', 'woman as temptress', 'atonement with the father'). The father assumes two forms in the monomyth: the tyrant (the father's 'ogre aspect') and the mystagogue: a benevolent 'guide of souls' (J. Campbell, 2004: 8). The tyrant is the supreme opponent of the monomythic hero (typically depicted by Campbell as male), a wreaker of general havoc who strives to maintain the status quo through the exercise of sheer authority (311). The hero's 'initiation' via these rites of passage involves overcoming his Oedipus complex (6): putting aside the image of the ogre father through the guidance of the goddess-as-mother. Confronting the tyrant, the hero undergoes a paradigm shift in which he recognises the father in himself and himself in the father (149).

Some have thus contended that Campbell's monomyth, like the warrior ethic of fame and glory at work in many of the myths he cites, exalts men while relegating women to a 'subordinate and largely ancillary role' (Taylor, 1989: 100), to the 'realms of passivity and the non-cognitive' (Jobling, 2010: 191). Nevertheless I would assert the monomythic pattern can be adapted to accommodate female heroic figures, by structuring rites of passage according to the Electra complex as opposed to the Oedipus complex. Notably, Feminists Pearson and Pope have suggested that the Oedipal structure in the case of the female hero can be retained; her designated job in this instance is a departure "from the

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[21] The CRPG is another example of a tale that strings multiple independent cycles into a single series, in the form of sub- and side-quests.

role prescribed for her, slaying external dragons of patriarchal society, and socially induced internal dragons which inhibit her self-fulfilment. The treasure acquired is her own true self: vital and powerful' (cited in Jobling, 2010: 49).

As per Jungian theory, the archetypes present in Campbell's monomyth:

> are components of the hero's personality. The hero's relationship to these gods symbolizes not, as for Freud and Rank, a son's relationship to other persons—his parents—but the relationship of one side of a male's personality—his ego—to another side—his unconscious […] Archetypes are unconscious not because they have been repressed but because they have never been made conscious. For Jung and Campbell, myth originates and functions not, as for Freud and Rank, to satisfy neurotic urges that cannot be manifested openly but to express normal sides of the personality that have just not had a chance at realization. (Segal, 2004: 106)

The hero's discovery of a 'strange external world' is thus paralleled by the discovery of a 'strange internal one', within which he discovers 'his own ultimate nature […] his true identity […] a deeper side to his personality: his unconscious' (Segal, 1987: 5).[22] Campbell however sees the process of realising unconscious parts of the personality as having a distinctly Freudian—as opposed to Jungian—outcome, in the form of psychological maturation: the hero is thus purged of 'self-generated double monster—the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id)' (2004: 120).

Through this annihilation of the self, the hero's ego dies and he is reborn, attaining Nirvana: the 'Extinguishing of the Threefold Fire of Desire, Hostility, and Delusion' (150). The hero's emotional relationship with these parental images is adjusted; he is exorcised of 'infantile cathexes' (125) that might otherwise lead him towards egotistical

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[22] As Segal explains, Campbell 'psychologizes' the hero's subsequent return to his society, representing it as a process of integration of the 'enlightened ego with the everyday world of ego consciousness to form what Jung calls the "self"' (1987: 20).

behaviour, such as 'self-aggrandizement, personal preference, or resentment' (125–126).[23]

This newfound maturity represents the beginning of a new phase in the hero's 'initiation', leading to his acquisition of the necessary 'techniques, duties, and prerogatives' related to his vocation and the bestowal of 'symbols of office' by the mystagogue. This bestowal signals the hero's adoption of an 'eternal office', and his transcendence of his humanity as he comes to represent an impersonal cosmic force (J. Campbell, 2004: 126). It is in this condition that the hero at last makes his return to the community he first left in the course of undertaking his journey, bringing back with him a 'life-transmuting trophy' (179) (representing supreme knowledge) with the power to renew the world.

This structuring of the individual life into rites of passages, according to social constructionists Berger & Luckmann, conveys a sense of 'repeating a sequence that is given in the "nature of things," or in his [the individual's] own "nature." That is, he can reassure himself that he is living "correctly." The "correctness" of his life program is thus legitimated on the highest level of generality' (1966: 100).

Campbell's use of the term 'rites of passage' is just one example of how he grounds his works in modern psychological theory; as Bill Moyers notes in the introduction to *The Power of Myth*, Campbell's psychological interpretation and apparent confinement of 'the contemporary role of myth to either an ideological or a therapeutic function' has provoked some criticism (Campbell & Moyers, 1991: xx). Mawby has also observed that Campbell's

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[23] This struggle 'between a "higher" and a "lower" self, respectively equated with social identity and presocial, possibly anti-social animality', according to social constructionists Berger & Luckmann, is universal even for socialised individuals; the 'higher' self is in fact often 'called to assert itself over the "lower," sometimes in critical tests of strength' (1966: 183).

distinctly individualist take on mythology is in fact shaped by his own western, capitalist cultural outlook, thus contradicting his own view that religions should avoid the culturally specific (n.d.: 20).

While acknowledging the distinct presence of cultural bias in Campbell's work, I would assert that such is always (to some extent) inevitable, and that it by no means undermines the validity of Campbell's understanding of myth, or the universal applicability of the monomyth; his theories are after all founded upon a number of primary sources drawn from a variety of cultures. I would note however that Campbell's interpretation references a wider (Freudian) tendency among Western societies to deny the metaphysical; to reinterpret it according to a secular psychological framework, to rationalise by subjectifying and pathologising drama and form; to internalise the transcendental and the demonic as 'imagination' or 'unconscious', thus displacing these forces 'into the psychological and the biological, and most especially sexuality' (Nelson, 2001: 16, 43, 9).

While Campbell's reading of mythology does not strictly adhere to this tendency, its presence can certainly be felt in the way he structures monomythic rites of passage around the Oedipus complex. The development of psychology and the interiorising of spirituality within the individual (Jobling, 2010: 8) at any rate has not been to the total detriment or dismissal of spirituality; I would argue that it may have in fact *promoted* its survival in the face of secularity by rendering it in such a way as to be palatable to the buffered, secular self. The monomyth is just one example of this; that it has received so popular a reception seems to testify not only to the appeal of a psychological, individual-focused reading of mythology, but also to its value as an unconscious 'back door' to the spiritual (a point discussed in detail below).

While the mythical nature of the monomythic hero's trials may lead one to perceive these trials as being remote from normal humanity and everyday life, Campbell argues that as rites of passage they are universal in nature. The challenges of the monomythic hero's journey are after all about coping with circumstances presented to him by life, where the act of overcoming such challenges in fact represents overcoming challenging restrictions of consciousness (J. Campbell, 2004: 111). The key stages in the hero's journey are thus figurative; trials are crises of realisation, a paradigm shift in which one's conscious views are brought into alignment with reality, allowing the individual to achieve detachment (111–113), transcending the limitations of the ego and emerging with the wisdom and ability necessary to serve society (Campbell & Moyers, 1991: xiv).

The ultimate purpose of myth therefore is to teach the individual 'how to penetrate the labyrinth of life in such a way that its spiritual values come through' (Campbell & Moyers, 1991: 142–143). This is representative of myth's pedagogical function: to provide a general pattern for normal everyday human life (J. Campbell, 2004: 211), through an allegorical tale of the human spirit combining a 'physical journey with an inward spiritual one of self-discovery' (Nelson, 2001: 202). The hero's 'initiation'—his dying to self and subsequent rebirth, stripped of his 'private character' (ego) and dressed with the 'mantle of his vocation' (14)—also illustrates mythology's sociological function, in that it stresses the need for individuals to recognise and accept their identity as a member of a community, as well as their role within that community.

This function furthermore is prescriptive, encouraging individual action on the part of social good. Joseph Campbell holds that just as the monomyth has the power to change the

individual, the individual in turn has the capacity to change his society (see Clarissa Estés'

introduction to the 2005 edition of Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* [xxv]), a

notion supported by Berger & Luckmann's claims that as identity (and all subjective reality)

'stands in a dialectical relationship with society', identity is in turn capable of maintaining,

modifying and reshaping social structure (1966: 173).

The monomyth as an alternative spirituality

Campbell's monomyth arguably encourages a personal, relational, experiential approach to

the cycle, one which emphasises the 'epistemologically individualistic',[24] a 'direct interior

[…] experience of the divine' and an eclectic and bricolage approach (Partridge, 2004: 20–21)

to mythological narratives which involves appropriating a variety of cultural artefacts as

'texts' (Beaudoin, cited in Partridge, 2004: 120). This can be observed in the fact that the

monomyth demonstrates a trait observed also in New Age religion: a blurring of 'the

distinction between religion and psychology to an extent hardly found in other traditions'

such that 'personal growth' is construed as the equivalent of the salvation promised by

traditional religion (a trait that has its roots in the esoteric movement [Hanegraaf, cited in

Houtman & Aupers, 2010: 8-9]).

These elements also point to a definition of the monomyth as an alternative spirituality, one

which—as already noted—parallels the modern 'quest' for meaning but also reflects a basic

condition by which human beings make sense of themselves (Taylor, 1989: 47): as narrative.

That is, understanding who we are is dependent upon understanding *how we have become*

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[24] Although as observed, the monomyth—while distinguishing the individual (as hero)—also plays a sociological function, promoting recognition of the oneness of the individual with their community (Campbell, 2004: 355). This is an essentially Romantic notion, referred to by Abrams as 'natural supernaturalism' (cited in Nelson, 2001: 206).

who we are (incorporating a history of 'maturations and regressions, overcomings and defeats' [50]), as well as what we will become in the future (47), in terms of our replacement in relation to 'the good' (44).

Our orientation within this moral space thus comes to be tied to our orientation in physical space and our sense of temporality (Taylor, 1989: 48); life is experienced as a striving for what 'one is not yet' (48), and thus as story. These stories may be narratives of 'linear development, progress stories in history, or stories of continuous gain through individual lives and across generations, rags-to-riches stories, which have no ending point' (105). They may also be tied to meta-narratives: 'a greater pattern of history, as the realization of a good…or the building of a peaceful world, or the retrieval or continuance of our national culture' (97). Beyond framing the personal narrative within the historical, social or cultural, the individual can and does actively engage in its construction, looking 'upon their spiritual life as an arena they control' (Roof, 2001: 157), as is the case with spiritual bricolage and the consumer identity.

My definition of the monomyth (and by extension, its various manifestations within literature, film and videogames) as an alternative spirituality finds support in Nelson's claims of art and entertainment in the secular age assuming a role traditionally held by scripture and direct revelation by providing a moral framework and thus acting as an 'unconscious wellspring of religion', enabling a continued, albeit furtive, belief in the transcendent (2001: viii, vii, 9). It is important to note that in assuming this role, art and entertainment has not necessarily supplanted religion per se, but rather become another popular recourse for a moral framework and belief in the transcendent. Further credence for the notion of monomythic fiction as a form of alternative spirituality can be found in the fact that players of CRPGs 'play' with

monomythic values just as the modern spiritual bricoleur 'plays' with tradition, deciding for their own selves what to believe (Roof, 2001: 57; Wagner, 2012: 238); more on this later.

For Nelson, fantastic fiction—fiction which 'departs from consensus reality and opens on to worlds of supra-mundane possibility, typically but not always featuring elements of magic or the supernatural, and often located in secondary or alternate worlds' (Jobling, 2010: 5), and which usually fall into the horror, science fiction or fantasy genres—serves as a means of access to the spiritual. This is symbolically represented in the 'grotto' motif, which Nelson terms as the remaining 'physical point of connection to the transcendental in the Western imagination' in the wake of disenchantment and the rise of the buffered self (2001: 19, ix). The motif assumes multiple forms in fantastic fiction, for example that of a physical 'grotto, the Symmes Hole, the black hole of the cosmos, [or] the hole in our own head' (22), and acts as a 'mysterious loci of psychic or spiritual transformation' (10). This transformation arises from a 'violent confrontation and/or profound communication' with super- or anti-natural forces, referred to by Nelson as the 'grotesque' (8–9).

Parallels can be seen in Campbell's monomythic stage of the 'belly of the whale', with the grotesque serving as one representation of the tyrant aspect of the father archetype. The difference here lies in the fact that the grotto in the case of the CRPG exists as much on a narrative level as on a *meta* level: by consuming fantastic fiction such as the CRPG, the individual in a sense descends into a *symbolic* grotto, seeking the spiritual. They may also in the course of that search attain spiritual transformation, through the adoption of monomythic values. This notion of the grotto is very much in keeping with the cybershaman perception of 'computer technologies as a place, environment or more precisely as a space […] [which serve as an] alternative realm of spiritual character, where they are able to journey into'

(Martínková, 2008: 47). The imaginary worlds of fantastic fiction have thus become as much a site for the monomythic journey as for the implicit (and sometimes explicit) expression and explorations of contemporary spiritual emphases (Jobling, 2010: 2).[25]

Bittarello has argued that such worlds are yet another in a tradition of 'imaginary worlds', with precedents in literature, art and cinema (2008: 246). These imaginary worlds are described or visually represented, producing a mythic space 'where marvellous events take place' (252). They are located in an alternate time, plane of reality or universe with rules that differ from everyday life (250), and are inhabited 'by monstrous, divine, or prodigious creatures' (252).

Videogames—like cinema—are a unique precedent in the history of imaginary worlds, in that they are in themselves a virtual world, while making tangible imaginary worlds and facilitating the construction of a global, shared 'visual imaginary' (251). Pierre Bourdieu asserts that such imaginary worlds provide an escape from what he calls the habitus: 'our collective, cultural sense of place that is forged through the reproduction of history', which Roger Aden argues is confirmed by 'our daily experience of the routine and mundane' (both cited in Morehead, 2010: 183).

Such worlds according to Bittarello however serve a purpose beyond sheer escapism. Citing Wertheim, she claims that disenchantment (and more specifically the rise of scientific rationalism) brought about the 'homogenisation' of space, excising metaphysical space in favour of physical space, leading to a 'psychological crisis' for humanity (Bittarello, 2008: 254). It was this replacement of a dualistic worldview with a monistic one that resulted in the

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[25] This like the monomyth is rather similar to Paul Scrader's concept of 'transcendent films'; see Repphun, 2009.

increasing significance of imaginary worlds as a substitute, in particular those of cyberspace and videogames, which users/players conceive as non-physical space which nevertheless coincides with the material (Bittarello, 2008: 12). Our fascination with virtual spaces such as the CRPG may thus be understood as reflecting 'an individual and a collective need to confer meaning on an otherwise disenchanted world' (Hillis, cited in Wager, 2012: 4), a point I will explore in detail in Chapter 5.

Beyond facilitating imaginary worlds and acting as a substitute for metaphysical space, fantastic fiction can also be understood as a modern (surreptitious) embodiment of the spiritual in another sense. Just as some have attempted to assimilate the spiritual into a rationalistic framework, thus preserving it (as in Joseph Campbell's case, applying psychoanalytic logic to a spiritual journey), Western culture in general Nelson argues has opted to *relegate* all which that framework could not encompass into the 'sub-Zeitgeist' of popular culture (2001: 7), manifesting only in fantastic fiction, in its representation of the supernatural.

Both are examples of how modern nonbelievers allow themselves—if only unconsciously and for the course of the consumption of such fiction—to subscribe to 'a nonrational, supernatural, quasi-religious view of the universe'; that is, to *believe* (vii).[26] This imbuing of fantastic fiction with the spiritual tends to support a modern perception of art as having a distinct value and authority stemming from its 'ability to master and redeem human experience—precisely the task it inherited from religion' (9).

Fantastic fiction in this sense constitutes an attempt at 're-enchantment', a return to life in the

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[26] Maslow also acknowledges art as one source for 'peak experiences': 'transient moments of self-actualization' (1970: 48), which he identifies as being central to religion (19).

enchanted world through the evocation and/or revival of aspects of that life (the existence of magic and extra-human agencies, the porous self and a hierarchical cosmos governed by the Divine).[27] This desire as a movement is characterised by 'the neo-Romantic turn to the natural, the indigenous, and […] the occult' (Partridge, 2004: 112). Its origins can be traced back 'very broadly speaking, to Romanticism, mystical traditions, Western esotericism, Spiritualism, and the modern revival of interest in nature religion' (87).[28]

The Romantic ethic

Romanticism has been defined by Gauderfroy-Demombynes as 'a way of feeling, a state of mind in which *sensibilité* and imagination predominated over reason' (cited in C. Campbell, 2005: 181), one which Taylor claims 'affirmed the rights of the individual, of the imagination, and of feeling' as 'against the classical stress on rationalism, tradition, and formal harmony' (1989: 368). As a movement, Romanticism provided a 'theory of art extrapolating into a philosophy of life' (C. Campbell: 2005, 182), a 'theodicy of creativity' that transmuted the divine from a personal God to a supernatural force, present throughout the natural world as well as within the self, in the form of a 'unique and personalized spirit; that of his [the individual's] "genius"' (205, 182). By stressing a person's uniqueness or peculiarity, the Romantic ethic placed unprecedented importance upon the individual, promoting individualism (183).

Discovery of the divine thus became an epistemological or internal experience, via 'direct

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[27] Credit must go here to Max Weber for coining the term 're-enchantment', although his primary meaning differs somewhat from the one described here ('the return of magic to everyday life or the return to a value-driven rationality' [Repphun, 2009: 13]).

[28] In fact, the link can be traced even further back to the Puritan ethic, from which Colin Campbell argues the Romantic ethic ultimately descended, through a number of responses to post-Calvin Protestantism (2005).

observation of nature without' or 'introspective journeyings into nature within' (183). The Romantics furthermore saw art as a force that best characterised the divine, prizing imagination and creativity above all other qualities (C. Campbell, 2005: 183, 193). By emphasising the powers of the artist, they effectively cast the individual as being inherently virtuous and hence an opponent of society, compelled to deny social conventions so as to ratify his/her own inherent genius and passion via his/her artwork (205). This defiance of convention is echoed in Nietzsche's notion of a 'heroic dimension', which called for the recovery of self-expression and freedom from the repressive forces of civilisation (Taylor, 2007: 185, 338).[29]

In linking the expression of imagination in artistic form and the perception of beauty to the gaining of privileged insights (C. Campbell, 2005: 182), the Romantics equated the aesthetic with the ethical; the scenes conjured up by Romantic artists were thus seen to be glimpses of an ideal reality (185), one which could inspire a desire within viewers to bring the world into alignment with its perceived perfection (C. Campbell, 2005: 185–186), while instigating a transformation of the self. By serving a moral purpose (as opposed to hedonism in and of itself), art was seen as a potential source of enlightenment and moral renewal (190–191). Pleasure for pleasure's sake on the other hand drew strong criticism from the Romantics, who were particularly scathing about the idle pursuit of stimulation and excitement without any regard for noble purposes such as 'conveying truth or creating a moral sensibility' (207).

In advocating spiritual renewal through art, however, the Romantics had inadvertently stimulated and legitimated 'that form of autonomous, self-illusory hedonism which underlies modern consumer behaviour' (C. Campbell, 2005: 200). They did this by justifying the

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[29] This detachment of the individual from—if not rebellion towards—society as an ideal ultimately had its roots in religious scripture and Socratic thought (Taylor, 1987: 73).

practice of daydreaming, originally inherited from the Puritanism branch of Protestantism (220), through art. As a practice, daydreaming was tied up with longing and the rejection of reality, and 'together with the pursuit of originality in life and art […] enabled pleasure to be ranked above comfort, counteracting both traditionalistic and utilitarian restraints on desire' (200–201), without which the modern search for authenticity and the monomyth (as an alternative spirituality) would not be possible.

Suffice to say, the Romantics' search for a more immediate experience of the Divine marked the first formal attempt at re-enchantment, an attempt that was continued and has visibly intensified in the wake of the 'eclipse of transcendence', the shift to the buffered self and the rise of modern secular life, not to mention all of its related maladies. For while the buffered self in its capacity for disciplined self-control and benevolence bestowed upon humanity an unprecedented sense of power, satisfaction and self-assurance, it has also—according to Taylor—riddled it with a feeling that 'something may be occluded in the very closure which guarantees this safety' (2007: 303).

This feeling manifests in nostalgia, the seeking out of the experiences that reproduce 'lost feeling' (38), and in a collective sense of anomie and alienation. These 'maladies of modernity' (to use Zijderveld's term [cited in Houtman & Aupers, 2010: 24]) are accompanied by a sense of meaninglessness, imposed by progress and the confining disciplines of civilisation which effectively deny transcendence, heroism and deep feeling, a development vehemently opposed by Nietzsche (Taylor, 2007: 717).

The rise of the modern network society, marked by 'the unpredictable power of flows [which] controls destinies, far beyond the political grasp of the nation state, let alone of the local

community or the individual person' (Castells, cited in Lyon, 2000: 38), in addition to the modern 'situation of structural uncertainty, characterised by the mobility, reversibility and exchangeability of all reference points' (Hervieu-Leger, cited in Lyon, 2000: 14), has created an experience of life as 'pastiche, ambiguity, polyvalence, and, of course, uncertainty' (Lyon, 2000: 39). The decline of 'Traditional religious outlooks, with their fixed points, transcendental anchors, and universal scope' (Lyon, 2000: 14), in combination with the vanishing influence of the church calendar and the practice of festivals and holy days as shaping forces in the concept of time in the West (121)[30] has only furthered this effect, leading to a general destabilisation of a widely shared conception of meaning and time.

Life in the postmodern West has consequently become as much a 'time of crisis' as a 'crisis of time' (Lyon, 2000: 122), with ordinary time subsequently imploding into an 'endless present', one in which memory is attenuated, anchors are loosened, meaning dissolved and uncertainty produced (133, 129). This endless present, when contrasted with the discontinuous, sequence-eliminating time of cyberspace, gives rise to a felt need 'to bridge the gap between ephemerality and eternity' (146). One response to this uncertainty has been a kind of search for certainty in the past, a cultural trend that Frederic Jameson refers to as 'nostalgia mode' (1998:10).

Amidst this 'fragility of meaning', a 'search for an over-arching significance' (Taylor, 2007: 309) has emerged. While humanity's quest for meaning is a timeless, transcending 'the restricted space of empirical existence in this world' (Berger, cited in Partridge, 2004: 39), it is one that arguably best characterises spiritual life in the modern age, as can be seen in the predominance of authenticity and consumerism. Campbell's monomyth as an alternative

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[30] A concept that was seen to be cyclical, defined by the rhythm of the seasons, textured as a movement between creation and Christ's return (Lyon, 2000: 121).

spirituality—what Lyon refers to as a 'nostalgic' form of religion (2000: 49), one which utilises mythology as its texts—perfectly embodies this search for meaning, self-knowledge and the transcendent, while offering something of an antidote to the uncertainties of the modern age. This antidote is an enchanted past, with mythology and fantastic fiction playing the function of 'grotto' and providing access to the supernatural and thus the spiritual.

The majority of fantastic fiction I would argue is a continuation of the mythological tradition in the form of 'mythopoeia'. A term first used by J.R.R. Tolkien as the title of a poem in 1931 (Tolkien, 1964) and derived from the Greek word *mythopoiein* (to make a myth) (Mythopoeia, 2012), mythopoeia is a narrative genre involving an invented mythology, or in some cases a *re-invented* mythology. That is, where mythology presents its fantastic stories as having literally taken place, imbuing them with symbolism, mythopoeia recreates the ancient stories, giving them a new form and transposing them into symbolic meaning through the values represented by the mythic hero (Slochower, 1973: 15). Mythopoeic works represent an attempt by the artist to renew 'the values of the past and present in their symbolic form' (15). The act of renewal takes place in the narrative through the hero rejecting the status quo—the stagnant, paralysing traditions of contemporary society—avoiding idolatry of or identification with that society and engaging instead in a 'transvaluation' of its current values (36).[31]

The hero's act of 'transvaluation' takes place over the course of a three-act structure concluding with an epilogue, one that reads as a simplified version of the monomyth: first act (communal harmony), second act (disturbance of this harmony, emergence of the hero, setting out on a quest) and third act (homecoming of the hero, establishment of a new harmony)

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[31] A Nietzschian concept by which 'The new highest good is not only erected as a standard by which other, ordinary goods are judged but often radically alters our view of their value, in some cases taking what was previously an ideal and branding it a temptation' (Taylor, 1989: 65).

(Slochower, 1973: 22). The rebellious aspect of the hero evokes Nietzsche's heroic dimension, as well as an individualised resistant response to what Weber calls the 'routinization of charisma' (2003: 246). While a methodological analysis of Slochower's mythopoeia in terms of the CRPG is possible, such a task is beyond the scope and intent of this study, of which Campbell's monomyth is the focus.

Slochower's account nevertheless provides an interesting perspective on the significance of mythopoeic works and the role they play in modern life. Of most interest is his assertion that the mythic hero and the symbolic values he represents are ideal alternative sources for identification in the wake of the loss of traditional forms and sources of identification (1979: 14), thus lending support to Campbell's notion that myth serves a pedagogical function. The fact that these values can only rise out of the crucible of conflict—that is, as a result of the hero's rebellion against his society, as per Nietzsche's heroic dimension—reflects a unique emphasis on the role of the individual, one without precedent in mythology and whose first beginnings can be seen in the Renaissance notion of the 'free' individual (26) and later in the Romantic emphasis on individualism.

Conclusion

The prevalence of the mythopoeic hero in fantastic fiction may in this context be read as much as a response to the uncertainties of modern life as a manifestation of modern individualism. We can see the latter at work in the monomyth, which—as an alternative spirituality—promotes a personal reading of the hero's journey, with the quest structure drawing interesting parallels not only to the ethic of authenticity but to the way in which humans inherently make sense of their lives, as narrative. With the rise of secularity in the

West, however, one form of narrative has acquired specific appeal: that of fantastic fiction. This appeal I have argued lies in the fact that it provides surreptitious access to the spiritual for the modern rational individual. Just how the individual is transformed by their experience within the 'grotto' is a question I will explore in successive chapters.

4. The CRPG: *SKYRIM* AND *MASS EFFECT*

Summary of argument

In this chapter, I will argue that the monomythic CRPG genre represents a unique fusion of wargaming with fantastic fiction, one that—through the monomythic narrative structure—encourages the socialisation of the individual through a distinct emphasis on his/her role within and obligation to society. Contrarily, it also promotes individualism as a principle, in the sense that player choice, agency and autonomy are given precedence within both gameplay and narrative. This fact, I will assert, owes as much to the modern consumer ethic as it does to the notion of authenticity.

Defining the CRPG

The discussion of videogames has in the past been structured along two apparently incompatible lines: ludology and narratology. Ludologists according to Frasca are concerned with game mechanics as opposed to story, which is the focus for narratologists (2000: 1), although Aarseth argues that there are no clear-cut distinctions between games and narratives, but rather considerable overlap (1997, cited in Frasca, 2003).[32] In an attempt to clarify the structural similarities and differences between games and narrative, Frasca adapts the classical terms 'paidia' and 'ludus'.[33] Videogames may be broadly classified as paidia: physical or mental activity without an immediate, discernable utility or objective beyond the sheer

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[32] There are interesting parallels here to digital culture—a convergence of technology and culture—and the scholarly discussion of the degree to which the former influences the latter (see Uzelac, 2010).

[33] These terms are used by Callois but in this case are based on definitions by Lalande (Frasca, 2003).

pleasure of experimentation (Lalande, cited in Frasca, 1999). Games with a goal and in which winning and losing rules can be identified come under the sub-classification of ludus: an activity governed by a rule-based system that specifies conditions for victory and defeat, gain and loss (Caillois, cited in Frasca, 1999).

Videogames in this sense may be defined as the sum of possibilities in terms of the player's actions throughout the course of the narrative (Frasca, 1999).[34] The primary difference between ludus and narrative here lies in the fact that where one is concerned with possibilities, the other is concerned with a set of 'chained actions'. A videogame is in this sense a fusion of real rules with a fictional world (Juul, 2005: 1), of the ludic with narrative.[35]

As rule-based systems, games specify a variety of quantifiable consequences and outcomes, with each outcome assigned its own value, either by game designers, players or convention (e.g. through a statement on the game box, included instructions, how certain actions are rated within the game world, the mechanics involved with in-game progression, or the game's setup) (44, 39). These elements are doors or boundaries that the player must cross in the process of being initiated into the 'new world' of the game, bearing strong resemblance to social rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960: 19–20).

The desirable (or valorised) outcome is usually positive, presenting something of a challenge, where a negative outcome is comparatively much easier to attain (Juul, 2005: 39). Attaining a valorised outcome thus requires greater ingenuity on the part of the player (54), in terms of

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[34] This definition is derived from Claude Bremond's 'Logique du recit', a continuation of the work of Vladimir Propp (Frasca, 1999).
[35] Bogost even goes so far as to suggest a 'flattened ontology' in which a game can be 'both and neither' (see Bogost, 2009).

how they address these challenges.[36] The sense of challenge and being able to influence the course and conclusion of the game cultivates a sense of emotional attachment in the player to this valorised outcome where s/he agrees to be happy in the case of victory, unhappy in the case of failure (36, 39).[37]

Challenges in videogames are structured according to two principles: emergence and progression. Emergence challenges arise as variations on several simple rules, whereas progression challenges are separate and presented as part of a series (Juul, 2005: 7). To solve progression challenges, the player must perform a set of predefined actions (8), while emergence games require the player to tailor strategies for each specific challenge (72) (creating what Juul calls an 'open landscape of possibilities' [73]).

Games that are more progression-based are commonly referred to as 'linear', whereas games that are more emergence-based are referred to as 'nonlinear'. CRPGs are generally progression games with emergent components such as *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*, in the sense that they implement a fixed main narrative as well as a nonlinear approach and an 'open-world' design in which players are free to roam wherever they wish and to approach objectives how they best see fit (Sefton, 2007).

As a genre, CRPGs are oriented around the act of role-playing, 'in which the player controls a character in a game world and develops him or her throughout the course of play' (Hindmarch, cited in Tresca, 2010: 8). These characters are usually configurable and improve with experience. The CRPG also traditionally emphasises narrative, fantasy or science fiction

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[36] There is some resemblance here to the Hacker Ethic, in terms of the drive to address 'faults' or 'issues' within the game world (see Levy, 2010).

[37] Juul's theory is derived from what he calls the 'classic game model' (see Juul, 2005: 160).

settings (Rollings & Adams, 2003: 347–355) and the quest as an overarching narrative (551). As a videogame genre it draws heavily from the adventure and strategy genres (Barton, 2008: 11), and this can best be observed in its emphasis on player choice, tactical combat and exploration.

The origins of the CRPG

While the origins of the modern CRPG are generally understood to lie in pen-and-paper based role-playing games such as Dungeons & Dragons (Adams & Rollings, 2003: 347), Tresca traces the origin of fantasy gaming back even further to the 2000-year-old Chinese wargame 'Go', charting its evolution through subsequent wargames, the most significant of which was the first fantasy wargame, the Hyboria campaign (adapted from Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian stories [Tresca, 2010: 48–50]), and the translation of the epic warfare of *The Lord of the Rings* into the medieval miniatures wargame Chainmail (Barton, 2008: 19).

Where wargames provided a structural basis for CRPG, the fantastic fiction of Robert E. Howard, Michael Moorcock, Fritz Leiber, H.P. Lovecraft, Jack Vance and J.R.R. Tolkien in turn served to inspire settings, content and narrative (Barton, 2008: 18; Tresca, 2010: 5). Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* was particularly influential; its depiction of a multi-species fellowship has been credited with founding fantasy tropes such as the basic template of the fantasy adventuring party and the role of race and class in the definition of the fantasy gaming hero (Tresca, 2010: 5, 23). This influence can also be seen in the sense that Tolkien's epic trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*—a momentous effort in world-building fiction—set a precedent in terms of 'spatial storytelling'. As a form of narrative, spatial storyelling provides an ideal environment for videogames (Jenkins, 2004).

Mass Effect **and** *Skyrim*

Take for example *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*, two critically and commercially successful 'open-world' CRPG franchises that strongly utilise spatial storytelling as part of the gameplay experience. Blending science fiction CRPG and third-person shooter genres, *Mass Effect* is set in a future in which the discovery of alien 'mass effect' technology has enabled faster-than-light space travel, bringing humankind into contact with extra-terrestrial civilisation. The story follows Commander Shepard, a human sent by the Council—an executive committee that comprises representatives from a number of member species—to recover a recently discovered 'beacon' in the human colony of Eden Prime, an artefact built by an extinct alien species known as the Protheans.

Upon his arrival, Shepard finds the colony under attack by the forces of an artificially intelligent machine race, the Geth, who are under the command of rogue Council agent ('Spectre') Saren. Shepard's attempt to recover the beacon results in its accidental activation, and s/he finds himself witnessing a vision of what could be impending destruction. When the Council refuses to credit this vision, the commander departs on a journey across the galaxy to investigate the activities of the Geth and Saren, who prove to be in the service of a far deadlier force: the Reapers, an ancient machine race intent on wiping out life across the galaxy.

Mass Effect 2[38] picks up after where *Mass Effect* leaves off. Following the Reaper Sovereign's unsuccessful assault on the Citadel—an ancient space station and hub for galactic culture,

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[38] Mass Effect 2 [Computer software]. (2010). Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts, Inc.

politics and economy—Commander Shepard's spacecraft is suddenly attacked and destroyed. Shepard dies, only to be revived by human terrorist organisation Cerberus. Cerberus' leader the Illusive Man recruits Shepard to investigate recent attacks on human colonies by a mysterious alien race, the Collectors. Assembling a squad of old friends and the galaxy's best fighters, scientists and 'biotics'—psychokinetics with the ability to manipulate dark energy for combat purposes—Shepard embarks on a suicide mission to the heart of the galaxy, to investigate a Collector base and rescue his/her kidnapped crew. The Reaper threat at last materialises in *Mass Effect 3*,[39] in the form of the Reapers descending upon Earth and a number of other alien home worlds. In the ensuing chaos, Commander Shepard must rally the forces of both Council and non-Council species to counter the Reapers and stave off total annihilation.

Where *Mass Effect* employs a science fiction setting, *Skyrim*'s is a fantasy 'sword-and-sorcery', 'hack and slash' CRPG, the latest in *The Elder Scrolls* series. *Skyrim* is set on the fantasy continent of Tamriel in the icy, mountainous province of Skyrim, home to Aryan warrior race the Nords. The assassination of the province's high king has plunged the province into a civil war, with one faction (the Stormcloaks) attempting to secede from the Empire. To complicate matters, the province is plagued by the return of dragons, a species previously thought to be extinct. As it turns out, the dragons are being revived by Alduin, the Nordic dragon-god, whose return it is prophesised will spell the end of the world.

The protagonist of *Skyrim*—a prisoner of unknown crime—proves to be one of the Dragonborn: a dragon hunter chosen by the gods to foil Alduin's plans and avert the approaching cataclysm. Shortly after escaping execution and defeating a dragon, s/he is

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[39] Mass Effect 3 [Computer software]. (2012). Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts, Inc.

summoned to the province's highest mountain, where s/he meets the ancient Greybeards, masters of the 'Way of the Voice': the ability to speak the dragon language in the form of potent 'shouts'. Here the player learns of Alduin's return and of their own destiny, and is enlisted to track down and defeat the dragon-god.

The monomyth in *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*

As monomythic CRPGs, both the *Mass Effect* series and *Skyrim* follow the departure-initiation-return pattern, with the protagonists constructed as destined saviours of eschatological import whose act of salvation takes the form of a physical deed. Commander Shepard for example is a Christological/messianic figure, committing a Prometheus-like theft of knowledge[40] by activating the Prothean beacon on Eden Prime and catching a glimpse of a grim cosmic destiny, which s/he alone can thwart. The hero of *Skyrim* likewise is the anointed of the gods, a Dragonborn blessed with 'the Voice' and thus the only mortal capable of defeating Alduin and saving the world from destruction.

The vision Shepard receives after making contact with the Prothean beacon is effectively his/her 'call to adventure', leading him/her over the 'threshold' of known experience into unfamiliar territories of space (the 'belly of the whale'). The commander's pursuit of Saren and investigation of the other remaining Prothean beacons takes place along a 'road of trials', with Shepard confronted at every turn with the disbelief of the Council, which initially refuses to credit Shepard's account of Saren turning rogue, let alone his/her claims of the Reaper's impending return. 'Supernatural aid' comes in the form of extra-terrestrials Liara T'Soni (a

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[40] In Plato's account of the classic tale, the fire stolen from the gods by Prometheus represents creative power, the 'source of all mechanical arts' (Raggio, 1958: 45); here I have referred to this fire as a revelation concerning the god-like Reapers' schemes for galactic life (see Mass Effect Wiki, 2012h).

Prothean researcher recruited to Commander Shepard's team, an augur who shares and interprets his beacon-visions) and Shiala (the acolyte of Saren's accomplice Matriarch Benezia, who provides the Cipher required to interpret these visions), as well as the Prothean computer intelligence Vigil (which elaborates upon the Reapers' schemes).

Similarly, the hero of *Skyrim* receives his/her 'call to adventure' following a triumphant battle with a dragon outside the settlement of Whiterun, quite literally in the form of a 'shout' by the Greybeards. This shout is a summons, drawing the hero over the 'threshold' to their temple High Hrothgar, where 'supernatural aid' is granted by the Greybeards and the head of their order, the friendly dragon Paarthurnax, in the form of tuition in the Way of the Voice and knowledge regarding the hero's prophesised role as Dragonborn. The 'belly of the whale' is the world of *Skyrim* itself, opened to the character from the instant a dragon attacks his/her captors, allowing him/her to escape the headsman's block. Yet the hero's journey along the 'road of trials' only officially begins *after* his/her induction by the Greybeard Arngeir, in which the Dragonborn is set a test: retrieve the fabled Horn of Jurgen Windcaller from a distant tomb.

Trials manifest in both *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim* in the form of direct challenges posed by enemies and non-player characters (NPCs), either in combat or in negotiating a quest. In *Mass Effect* for example guards will prevent the player from leaving Port Hanshan on the planet Noveria if Commander Shepard does not have a garage pass. Without the garage pass, the player won't be able to access the facility where Matriarch Benezia was last seen; if the player can't reach the facility, they won't be able to finish the 'Noveria: Geth Interest' quest (Mass

Effect Wiki, 2012h).[41] Similarly, the Aldermen in *Skyrim* will refuse to help the Dragonborn after his/her initial induction in the 'Way of the Voice' if s/he does not retrieve the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller first, thus completing the related quest (The Elder Scrolls Wiki, 2012c).

Trials also appear in the videogame in the form of obstructions and environmental hazards. In *Mass Effect*, these might take the form of a locked door to an underground bunker on the planet of Ilos, or hazards such as fires and EVA hazards. The external environment of the planet Noveria for example is a 'Level 1 Cold Hazard', and leaving the cover of Shepard's all-terrain Mako vehicle will set off a hazard timer; once that timer runs out, the commander will begin to take damage and eventually die (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012d). Similarly in *Skyrim*, in order to reach the Aldermen's temple, High Hrothgar) and meet the Aldermen's leader Paarthurnax, the player must use the 'Clear Skies' shout to remove deadly winds barring the path to the temple (The Elder Scrolls Wiki, 2012a).

In *Mass Effect*, what Joseph Campbell refers to as the 'supreme ordeal' (2004: 227)—the culmination of all the hero's trials—takes the form of the 'Race Against Time: Final Battle' quest (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012j). Having discovered Saren's intentions to locate the Conduit, a device by which the Reapers intend to make their return after hibernating for thousands of years in dark space, Shepard follows him to Ilos, the home planet of the extinct Protheans. Here the commander encounters a Prothean virtual intelligence, Vigil, who tells him/her of the Reaper's last appearance, the subsequent galactic genocide that took place and of the Citadel's secret purpose as a dormant 'mass relay' (instantaneous transit system) to and from

[41] While wikis are not normally accepted as appropriate references for the purposes of academic research, I have utilised them here for two reasons: first of all, they are the only comprehensive source of information about the games discussed (*Skyrim*, the *Mass Effect* series) and they are only used in reference to discussion of elements specific to the game (rules, events, characters, narrative etc.) which may be independently verified by playing the game itself.

dark space. By accessing a small mass relay on Ilos, Saren plans to invade the Citadel and hand control over to the Reaper Sovereign.

This quest proves to be not only the climax of the narrative but, as is the case with many 'boss fights' (a common CRPG fixture) a culmination of past challenges in the form of the most superior enemy or combat challenge to date; a testing of gameplay skills and abilities acquired by the player and by the hero during the course of the game. Returning to a besieged Citadel, a 'flight' back over the threshold to the 'known' world (where the 'flight' traditionally occurs in the monomyth after the 'supreme ordeal'), Commander Shepard must not only overcome Geth forces and fight Saren to the death, but choose to either to let the Council be destroyed, or to spare them, thus proving where his/her loyalties truly lie: to humanity or galactic civilisation respectively.

In *Skyrim*, the 'supreme ordeal' takes the form of multiple encounters with the dragons or magic-wielding Dragon Priests throughout the course of the game, and most significantly in two climactic battles with Alduin.[42] The first occurs on the summit of the Throat of the World; having obtained one of the powerful Elder Scrolls, the Dragonborn ventures back in time to find a means of defeating the dragon-god: the long since forgotten 'Dragonrend' shout. Using this shout, the player overpowers Alduin in the present, forcing him into flight. The second and final confrontation occurs shortly after, with the player tracking Alduin to the Nordic approximation of heaven, Sovngarde, where he is destroyed for good.

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[42] According to Kiessling, dragons in Western tradition come to be embodiments of evil as a result of multiple shifts in character and symbolic meaning over the centuries, largely the result of incorrect translations of the Old Testament (1970: 167). This depiction has doubtless made the dragon an appealing candidate for 'tyrant' in fantastic fiction such as *Skyrim*.

The 'meeting with the goddess' and 'atonement with the Father' also appear in both *Skyrim* and *Mass Effect*. The scientist Liara and Benezia's acolyte Shiala—powerful Asari 'biotics'— play the function of 'goddess' in *Mass Effect*, with Liara among a number of possible female and male romantic interests in both games. In *Skyrim*, Delphine, a member of the Blades— ancient protectors of the Dragonborn emperors—plays the 'goddess', guiding the player in the course of uncovering the Dragonborn prophecy and finding a means of defeating Alduin.

In *Mass Effect*, Alliance elite and failed Spectre-candidate Captain Anderson assumes the 'mystagogue' aspect of the father archetype, giving Shepard the guidance necessary to acquire 'techniques, duties, and prerogatives' related to his/her vocation (J. Campbell, 2004: 125). The Aldermen, their leader Paarthurnax and Blades archivist Esbern are the mystagogues of *Skyrim*, bestowing the 'symbols of office' (knowledge) necessary for the Dragonborn to truly realise his/her destiny. Alduin on the other hand plays the tyrant (the 'ogre aspect' of the father archetype): the archetypical dragon of the medieval myth, a wreaker of havoc, a 'hoarder of the general benefit' and an embodiment of greed (14) who must also be conquered in the course of the hero's father-atonement and apotheosis.

Spectre Saren and the Reapers (the Repear Harbinger in particular) play the roles of tyrant in *Mass Effect*; it is only after their defeat that Shepard truly earns his/her stripes as a Spectre (Campbell's 'mystagogue'), receiving the Council's official recognition where his/her predecessor Anderson (and the human race as a species) had previously failed. Shepard's subsequent apotheosis is figuratively represented in his/her disappearance amid the wreckage of the Citadel in *Mass Effect*. Shepard's 'return' takes the form of him/her emerging from the penultimate battle, battered but intact, having mastered 'two worlds' and attained the 'freedom to live'.

The Dragonborn's apotheosis occurs first figuratively on the headsman's block at the beginning of the game and then literally in the form of the hero crossing into Sovngarde to battle Alduin, before returning triumphant to the world of the living ('the crossing of the return threshold') as 'master of two worlds' with the 'freedom to live'. The 'boon' that the Dragonborn brings back within him/her is the salvation of Tamriel from certain destruction, signalling a 'return to order'. In *Mass Effect*, the 'boon' is Shepard's salvation of the Citadel and/or the Council and the galaxy from the Reapers; humanity is also granted a seat on the Council and a 'return to order' is suggested—or rather, what appears to be a *new* order, which recognizes the cost of complacency in the face of danger, is created.

The monomyth in gameplay

The monomythic pattern is employed not only in narrative but also in gameplay. For just as the story and its characters are structured according to the monomyth's rites of passage, the game itself is parcelled up into a series of miniature monomythic cycles in the form of player exploration, and sub- and side-quests. For example, the player will often by accident or as part of a quest stumble upon a previously unexplored area, crossing 'over the threshold' of the known into the unknown (the 'belly of the whale'): the gloomy dungeon, the heights of a mountain, a misty marsh (*Skyrim*), the mysterious reaches of space or the monolith-ridden surface of an alien planet (*Mass Effect*). Here they will encounter opposition (the 'road of trials') usually in the form of natural hazards (for example, frigid conditions in *Mass Effect*, spike traps in *Skyrim*) and enemies (in *Mass Effect*, the robotic Geth; in *Skyrim*, the dragons, Dragon Priests and the Draugr).

Progress deeper into this unknown region and mastery of enemies along the way typically concludes in a climactic battle with a superior 'boss' character (the 'supreme ordeal'). Having conquered the 'boss' character and removed the threat posed by this 'tyrant' (thus 'atoning' with the father), the player's avatar gains experience points (literalised 'knowledge', sometimes referred to as 'xp').[43] Experience points are the staple of the CRPG hero; given enough, the player can increase their character's 'level', improving their character's strengths, skills and abilities (a literalised form of 'apotheosis'). After conquering a boss, a player can also collect the treasure they were guarding ('loot', a literal form of boon[44]) and/or complete the terms of a quest (e.g. slay a troublesome bandit leader).

In *Skyrim*, boss characters feature heavily in the form of dragons or Dragon Priests. Dragons appear and attack at random throughout the course of the Dragonborn's adventures. Both they and the Dragon Priests may also be found guarding Word-Walls, inscribed with words in the dragon tongue which may be learned by the player and used as shouts (another form of literalised boon which gives the player special abilities, such as the ability to slow time). Following the player's victory in the 'belly of the whale' and along the 'road of trials', s/he can make a 'return' over the threshold, back into the safe confines of civil society: a 'hub' area such as a town or city. Here a player may report back to the individual who first set the quest, informing them that a foe or threat has been disposed of,[45] return a recovered item, deliver news or a revelation etc.

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[43] The term 'avatar' most notably has its origins in the Sanskrit word *Avatara*, which in Hinduism refers to the physical manifestation of an immortal being (Waggoner, 2009: 8).
[44] Where Joseph Campbell frames the 'boon' as something won during the course of the hero's journey with the power to 'restore' the world (2004: 228), I would argue that this boon in the case of CRPGs takes on both a symbolic form (the hero's salvation of his society) and a literal form (money, treasure, equipment etc.).
[45] The promise of peace and an end to tyranny brought by the killing of the 'tyrant' being a more traditional form of boon won by the hero.

The hub area is also a place of commerce where the player can trade loot with merchants in return for currency, which can be spent on improved equipment (weapons, armour, tools), skill augmentations or additional training (*Skyrim*). There are usually an abundance of items in a game to be collected as 'loot' in the course of dungeon-crawling, and a player may carry around a limited number of items at a time due to the limited weight/space allowances of their character's inventory. Not all items are of immediate utility to the player, and trading these items is often a lucrative business. Money is required for augmenting an avatar whose abilities ultimately determine a player's effectiveness in combat and success within the narrative; as a result players typically enact a cycle of exploration, battle, acquisition, sales and augmentation (Tresca terms this the 'kill/loot/sell/repeat cycle' [2010: 119]).

It is in this sense then that the CRPG's inherent emphasis on exploration, combat, treasure hunting and avatar customisation fuels the monomythic pattern gameplay experience, in turn advancing the monomythic narrative, to which development of the player's avatar is tied.

The 'levelling' mechanic in the CRPG

In keeping with the CRPG's emphasis on customisation, the heroes of both *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim* are player-generated characters.[46] Character advancement through 'levelling' is a key element of the CRPG, with levelling representing the monomythic heroes' apotheosis in the form of gradual physical transcendence.[47] A character's level represents their status in terms

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[46] In both *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*, the player can choose their character's appearance, gender, first name, abilities, and race.

[47] I should note here that advancement in the CRPG does not always involve levelling, but can also take the form of acquiring superior equipment or skills, or building relations with a 'romantic interest' NPC (of which there are multiple options in both *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*).

of how many experience points they have and how developed their abilities are, and therefore how well equipped they are to deal with challenges—combat or otherwise.[48]

In *Mass Effect*, the player can choose Shepard's base 'class': Soldier, Engineer, Adept, Sentinel, Infiltrator or Vanguard as well as his/her specialisation class (Shock Trooper, Commando, Operative, Medic, Bastion or Nemesis). Each class offers a different style of play in combat; each has unique strengths and weaknesses, as well special abilities referred to in the game as 'talents' (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012b). The effectiveness of a character's talents depends on how many points have been invested in them. A base set of points is offered when customising the character at the beginning of both *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*, and more points are accumulated in the course of 'levelling'; thus when a character 'levels' in *Mass Effect* they are presented with an array of options for enhancing their avatar's present statistics or skills. Levelling up wins the player points that can be spent on talents related to combat, weapons, armour, tech, biotic and health, or character interaction (such as 'Charm' and 'Intimidate').

Skyrim is more free form by comparison, with one's skills determined according to the frequency of their use (The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages, 2012e). Skills in *Skyrim* enable the player to perform certain actions within the game, and as in the case of *Mass Effect*, emphasise different styles of play. They come under three main categories: the Warrior, the Mage and the Thief; Warrior skills focus on a combat-related abilities, while Mage skills in comparison are concerned with magic-related abilities, and Thief skills are oriented around theft and the persuasion of NPCs (The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages, 2012e).

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[48] The videogame's presentation of spirituality and its structuring of the path to spiritual apotheosis has precedents in the real world, such as scientology (see Martin, 1989 and Wikileaks, 2008), or freemasonry (see United Grand Lodge of England, 2005).

The more a player uses a skill in *Skyrim*, the more the skill's experience points, the skill's individual level, the character's overall experience points and thus their overall level improve. Accumulating enough experience points results in a levelling up of a specific skill level and/or the character's overall level. When levelling up, the player is given the option to increase one of three stats: health, 'magicka' and stamina (The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages, 2012d).[49] Players also receive a point to be spent unlocking a 'perk', which enhances a character's existing skills in some way. The mechanic of levelling and avatar development in general is intertwined with narrative advancement, in the sense that the latter cannot be achieved until related quests have been completed.

The 'quest' as a rite of passage

In some cases, quests in the CRPG may prove too difficult to complete. This difficulty is relative to the avatar's current level; difficulty in most cases is an indicator that the player needs to increase that level, further developing their avatar's skills and abilities. This difficulty (also referred to as a 'grind') most often takes the form of superior enemies obstructing a player's progress; obstructions that can only be removed once the player's avatar has reached an adequate level. In order to level, a player will complete a number of simpler quests or defeat a series of weaker foes—what is referred to as 'farming', a process that involves 'high-level player predation of low-level monsters' in order to gain experience points and level up. This nevertheless reflects a meritocratic design native to the CRPG, by

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[49] Health refers to a character's total amount of hit points, which in turn refers to the total damage the player's character can take before dying. Magicka refers to the total amount of magic points that can be used at one time, determining how many spells the player can use before those points are depleted. Stamina refers to the total amount of stamina points used when a character sprints or uses a weapon (The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages, 2012b).

which the right amount of effort (and skill) on the part of the player ultimately guarantees their success.

To give one example, 'The World-Eater's Eyrie' quest in Act III of *Skyrim* is a gauntlet through an area ridden with dragons, powerful undead Draugr and a Dragon Priest. These forces combined pose a formidable threat to the player. Lower-levelled characters will be attacked and killed almost immediately upon entering this area, whereas a higher-levelled character adequately fitted out with superior equipment will fare better, conquering his/her enemies and proceeding into the ancient Nordic tomb and inter-dimensional portal beyond. If the player hopes to overcome this challenge, s/he will ensure first that s/he has levelled enough by 'farming', participating in quests and increasing their character's experience points, skills and overall level, as well as equipping their avatar with the best equipment available.

The quest in the CRPG usually takes three forms: main quest, sub-quest and side-quest. Each quest has its own objective and rewards, be it plot advancement, experience, currency, items (with some utility to the player, or which may be exchanged with merchants for currency), or—as in *Skyrim*—free training in a specific skill and certain favours, such as the right to help yourself to some of a NPC's belongings. The main quest (or mission) in *Mass Effect* involves the search for Prothean beacons and the investigation of Saren's plans, and is broken down into a number of incremental, sequential sub-quests. For example, following Shepard's visit to Eden Prime to recover the Prothean beacon, the player is set three simultaneous sub-quests, each of which involves exploring the planets Feros, Noveria and Virmire, and investigating Saren's plans and the activity of his Geth allies.

Similarly, the main quest in *Skyrim*—an investigation of recent dragon attacks and the Dragonborn's purpose, as well as the conquering Alduin and saving the world—has a three-act structure, which comprises a number of sub-quests. Act II for example comprises quests which involve convincing Blades member Delphine of the hero's status as Dragonborn ('A Blade in the Dark'), infiltrating an embassy in search of further information about the dragons ('Diplomatic Immunity'), searching for Blades archivist Esbern, who has gone into hiding ('A Cornered Rat'), and so on.

In the course of fulfilling these sub-quests, the player may acquire side-quests (also known as 'assignments'). Side-quests are not obligatory and are usually acquired through the discovery of significant items or locations, by observing NPC actions or interactions, or by directly conversing with NPCs (Adams, 2010: 548). They also serve to broaden the game and narrative experience providing further opportunities for character or narrative advancement.

Cooperation and association with NPCs and 'henchmen'

Beyond the development of an avatar's skill and level, character (and narrative) advancement can also take the form of achieving a desired standing with NPC factions or organisations, as well as with NPCs (particularly those associated with/facilitating quests), and the recruitment and interaction with 'henchmen' (squad members in *Mass Effect*; followers in *Skyrim*). Henchmen are computer-controlled NPCs allied to the player's cause (Tresca, 2010: 158) which the player can actively recruit, bringing one (*Skyrim)* or two (*Mass Effect*) along on their adventures.

Each henchman possesses 'a diverse skill set and specific strengths and weaknesses; success in these games [thus] means effective team management' (Barton, 2008: 4), and as in the case of *Mass Effect*, success is difficult (if not impossible) without the help and effective management of one's squad; this is taken to a new level in *Mass Effect 2*, with the survival of Shepard and his squad in the final quest (and therefore the success of the narrative) dependent upon having certain teammates recruited to Shepard's cause and their loyalty obtained. Many of these teammates not only play a role out in the battlefield, but can help to install vital enhancements on Shepard's spacecraft the *SSV Normandy* which will protect both craft and crew in the final confrontation with the Collectors (see Mass Effect Wiki, 2012e).

Morality in the CRPG

In *Mass Effect*, advancement also takes the form of a desired morality via the Paragon/Renegade scores, which represent Commander Shepard's moral alignment. This moral alignment does not sit on a sliding scale with 'good' (Paragon) on one end and 'bad' (Renegade) on the other; rather they are two separate tallies. Renegade actions increase an avatar's Renegade score; Paragon actions improve the Paragon score. Each score enables specific NPC interaction options and provide a number of additional gameplay and narrative benefits and options (see Mass Effect Wiki, 2012f).

Paragon points are earned through heroic and compassionate deeds, while Renegade points are earned through apathetic and ruthless acts (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012f), in terms of how quests are carried out or completed, the style of dialogue the player employs, and so on. These points in turn increase the effectiveness of the 'Charm' and 'Intimidate' dialogue options, which are aligned with Paragon and Renegade scores respectively.

To give an example of this mechanic in action in *Mass Effect*: while wandering through the Presidium area of the Citadel, Commander Shepard is approached by a man named Samesh who requests his help with obtaining his colonist wife's remains from the Citadel Security Service (C-Sec) for cremation and burial on Earth. His wife was killed by the Geth during the siege of Eden Prime, and C-Sec are holding on to her body for testing purposes, to assist in the development of improved Alliance defences. The player can use the Charm or Intimidate dialogue options on Samesh to convince him to surrender his wife's body to science, or to persuade a C-Sec representative to uphold Alliance principles and return the body to Samesh. While the player gains experience points for completing this quest, s/he is also awarded Paragon/Renegade points for using the Charm or Intimidate skills respectively (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012a).

Skyrim by comparison does not employ a morality system; the game steers clear of anything that might restrict freedoms inherent to the nonlinear, 'open-world' experience. The murder of innocents and theft for example incur only a bounty, and—supposing the player refuses to pay fines—the wrath of town guards. If there are no witnesses however, a player can walk away from such deeds without repercussion. This not to imply that *Skyrim* is bereft of moral decision-making, however. Rather, the game is filled with a number of such opportunities, some of which are of an ordinary everyday sort, and others which take the form of complex ethical quandaries.

In one instance, my avatar Esildor was presented with the choice to defend a Dark Elf woman against xenophobic slander by brawling with a drunken Nord. On another occasion, he was approached by a woman on the run from men whom she called 'assassins'. Upon confronting

these men, Esildor was told that that the woman was in fact a fugitive from the law. I was left with the decision to either dispatch the woman's pursuers, or hand her over, in the promise that she would be dealt with fairly. In other situations, the player's actions can have broad-sweeping consequences for the game world. For example, when the Dragonborn is called upon to help set the terms of a truce between the Imperial Legion and the Stormcloaks during the latter half of the game, the outcome of this meeting has a tangible impact upon the fate of several towns in terms of which will be occupied by either faction (The Elder Scrolls Wiki, 2012b).

Players face similar decisions in *Mass Effect*. Having located Saren's secret base on the planet Virmire, it is discovered that Saren has found a cure to an engineered virus that almost completely wiped out the warlike Krogan. Krogan squad member Wrex Urdnot, believing Commander Shepard may destroy this cure, becomes enraged. The player may deal with him in either one of two fashions: persuade Wrex of Shepard's good intentions, or shoot him (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012m).

Later during the same mission, Shepard must send a squad member to set up a nuclear bomb that will destroy Saren's base, a clearly risky—and, as it turns out, suicidal—task. The player must choose between Ashley Williams and Kaidan Alenko, characters who also happen to serve as potential romantic interests for the male and female Shepards respectively (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012l; Mass Effect Wiki, 2012k). This fact undoubtedly bears a strong influence upon whom the players chooses to send.

Choice and exploration as key principles

Choice and exploration—as opposed to a specific morality or ideology—are actively encouraged by CRPG design. Players for example are not penalised or rewarded by choosing either morality, but are in fact encouraged to pursue their own chosen path. This can be observed in other aspects of both *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*, in the form of countless dialogue, narrative and physical exploration options. In both games players may explore a variety of physical spaces as they choose fit. They are free to decline or accept side-quests, read or overlook embedded narrative (*Skyrim*'s books and *Mass Effect*'s Codex), explore or skip over branching dialogue options, investigate or avoid plot, history, back-story, conversation, and recruit, romance or reject potential love interests and NPCs.

Players may engage in any number of aspects of the CRPG's spatial narrative, or even avoid the main quest altogether if they desire, participating instead in a range of other activities (Skyrim in particular features a surprising variety; see The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages, 2012c). Whatever the player's decision, like most CRPGs, *Skyrim* and the *Mass Effect* series respond to player choice and reward depth of engagement with richer narrative, improved gameplay knowledge and competency, better equipment, more experience, additional skills, easier challenges and desirable quest and plot conclusions.

Freedom of choice effectively 'makes' the CRPG, and the genre's emphasis on individualism and individual autonomy, agency, choice and exploration plays a significant role not merely in the gaming experience, but also in values of what Taylor calls 'expressivism' and authenticity that it promotes. This freedom, as we will see in Chapter 7, is also a fundamental component of the CRPG's capacity for persuasion.

Conclusion

While the CRPG's rule-based system actively promotes player decision-making and exploration, enabling a certain freedom of choice, it nevertheless bears some constraints in the form of the monomythic narrative cycle, which the player must follow if s/he hopes to complete the game. There is therefore a visible tension between the notion of individualism and the individual-as-member-of-society, tensions central to mythopoeic fiction, and which, in the case of the CRPG, may be extrapolated as a tension between the 'rational' and the 'spiritual', a point which I shall explore further in the following chapter.

5. THE CRPG AS A RATIONALIST'S SPIRITUALITY

Summary of argument

In this chapter I will argue that the CRPG as a genre represents a unique fusion of the spiritual with the material, in the syncretism of fantastic fictional worlds with rational rules. The spiritual is visible first and foremost in a number of aesthetic themes—ruins, the sublime, deep time and dark genesis—that appear in modern literary fiction (looking at the works of Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft in particular) and later in videogames such as *Skyrim* and *Mass Effect*.

These themes are evocative of the 'enchanted' age and represent a desire for re-enchantment—a return to life in an enchanted world, one in which human beings are 'porous' and embedded in a cosmos, living alongside extra-human agencies—thus fulfilling Nelson's proposition that fantastic fiction is a surreptitious means of access to the spiritual in the modern secular West. Another manifestation of the spiritual is the monomythic cycle, which calls for the hero to devote his/herself to a higher cause (the community), securing the salvation of this community through his/her own apotheosis and through mutual association and cooperation with others.

The material (or rational) can best be observed in the fact that the mythic hero in modern fantastic fiction is to a large extent detached from their society and its values; he/she is 'buffered', empowered by logic. The game world arguably reflects this, rendering the spiritual monomythic journey as a series of logical, quantifiable rites of passages or quests which may be resolved through physical action and which in turn earn the hero material rewards. The

hero's freedom and therefore his/her choices are nevertheless limited by the choices made by the game designer, thus signalling a return to Providential Deism as a worldview within the CRPG. This syncretism I will argue represents a yearning to reconcile the two in what I term the 'rationalist's spirituality'. This spirituality promotes a number of monomythic values that are realised in the course of play via the player's idealised self, the 'projective identity'.

The enchanted world as expressed in artistic themes

Art in the 19th century as Taylor notes was marked by a renewed interest in a number of aesthetic themes: ruins, the sublime, deep time and the dark genesis of humanity (2007: 335). These themes first originated, it is argued, as a reaction against the 'narrow' reigning sense of morality as *constituting* spirituality. They did not represent a break with that sense as such, but rather an interest in 'inner, individual experience, in personalized meaning' as an alternative means of accessing the spiritual, one which could ultimately be synthesised with the reigning order (409, 407). This interest was 'informed by a humanism which is inspired by the Romantic critique of the modern disciplined, instrumental agent' and characterised by 'a nostalgia for older rituals, and societies in which these rituals were central […] [integrating] us through our desire and fulfilment with nature and the cosmos' (510, 614).[50]

This nostalgia was arguably a response to the decline of the enchanted world, in which religious scripture had previously provided a framework 'which effectively [entrenched] the fixity of the cosmos in its short time scale' from Creation to the present (Taylor, 2007: 325), setting 'an outer limit to any sense of unfathomable, bewildering depths in physical reality' (324). Disenchantment, the emergence of the buffered self and the rise of scientific thinking

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[50] The concept of the 'Dionysian', as advocated by Nietzsche, Bataille, Deleuze, Foucault and others (Taylor, 2007: 613).

from the early 17th century to the early 19th century had in turn enabled Western societies to overcome their horror of the wilderness, of the 'abyss of time' and 'eternal silences of alien vastness' (337), allowing them to renounce their perception of the cosmos as limited, fixed—shaped by an antecedent plan—in favour of one that was unfathomable: vast in space and time (325).

In the wake of this new perception, the wilderness in particular came to play an important part in humanity's moral imagination, offering an alternative to the shallowness and narrow anthropocentric limitations of Providential Deism and later exclusive humanism (Taylor, 2007: 338). It was seen to provide a kind of reprieve from contemporary moralism, with Condillac, Herder and Rousseau asserting that proximity to the wilderness could evoke a sense of 'deep time', tapping humanity's sense of 'kinship and filiation' with nature, arising from our 'dark genesis' therein. This bond allowed the individual to access his inner 'well-springs of sympathy' (Condillac, cited in Taylor, 2007: 335). Ruins were also seen as evoking this 'deep time' (334).

The power of 'the dark side of creation, the very terror of wilderness, or vast unmeasurable distances and powers' (Taylor, 2007: 338) in turn came to be seen as something of a replacement for 'higher' time that had been lost during disenchantment (what Taylor refers to as 'God's eternity'). These elements in sum represented sublime forces, and their significance lay in their ability to inspire awe in the individual by instilling within them a sense of their finitude and conversely their inherent greatness. While the sublime most often took the form of 'the gigantic, the immeasurable, the inhuman' (347), for example 'An immense expanse of space', it could also assume the shape of

> what we call monsters [...] They represent powers too vast for the normal forms of life to contain them [...] By a monster I mean some horrendous presence or apparition that explodes all of your standards for harmony, order, and ethical conduct [...] [taking the form of] prodigious energy, force, and power. (Campbell & Moyers, 1991: 222)

As a theme, the sublime emerged as a response to the rise of the rational self and the total erasure of 'mysterious incalculable forces' in the modern disenchanted world (Houtman & Auper, 2010: 1). Together with the other aesthetic themes I have outlined, it has been the staple of fantastic fictions since, expressing a continued, widespread and unconscious desire for re-enchantment.

'Enchanted' themes in the works of Robert E. Howard and Lovecraft

Take for example the works of Robert E. Howard—most specifically the Conan short stories—and H.P. Lovecraft, both of which I have cited here as sources for the CRPG. Robert E. Howard's essay *The Hyborian Age* (which in some cases serves as a preface to modern publications of the Conan stories [Howard, 2003; Howard, 2006]) is a strong example of the use of 'enchanted' themes in fantastic fiction. It explores the origins and evolution of humanity—its dark genesis—the peak and flux of countless sentient species, civilisations, reigns, migrations, clashes and cataclysms in the mythical prehistoric world of Hyboria.

The overall impression is one of deep time: a continent wreathed in the mists of history, its landscape populated with the ruins of bygone civilisations. Deep time is also echoed in the underlying theme of Conan, that of 'Barbarism vs. Civilisation'. According to Louinet, civilisation is

> not the final phase of human development; it may be an 'inevitable consequence' of that development, but it is a transitory state: civilizations are bound to wither and decay, eventually

to be swept over by conquering hordes of savages or barbarians who will themselves, after a time, become civilized. (Louinet, cited in Howard, 2003: 12–13)

The cyclical rise, decay and fall of civilisations is representative of Howard's essentially Romantic view of barbarism as the 'natural state of mankind', with the hero Conan fulfilling the function of the archetypical 'noble savage': the perfect embodiment of Nietzsche's heroic dimension ('He lives for the moment, savoring each instant, not caring about the past, nor about the future. Yesterday a kozak, today a king, tomorrow a thief' [Louinet, cited in Howard, 2003: 13]).

The Conan short stories in general are populated with sublime settings and figures, most typically nefarious figures of supreme physical force or magical powers. Take for example the wizard Yara and his extra-terrestrial prisoner, the 'trans-cosmic being' Yag-Kosha, both of whom reside in a mysterious, sinister tower ('The Tower of the Elephant' [1933]), the sorcerer Natokk whom Conan confronts before the ruins of a Stygian temple ('Black Colossus' [1933]), the mysterious city of Xuthall, haunted by the monstrous Thog ('The Slithering Shadow' [1933]) and the ancient demon Khosatral Khel, ruler of a fortress occupied by gigantic pythons and the undead ('The Devil in Iron' [1933]) (Howard, 2006). These elements together present a very convincing case that the *Conan* short stories harbour a desire for re-enchantment, one arguably confirmed by their enduring popularity, as well as that of the Conan character (take for example the multiple film and comic adaptions of the franchise).[51]

The presence of such themes can best be observed in the works of H.P. Lovecraft in the form of its latent philosophy: 'cosmicism', a kind of deeply pessimistic cosmic nihilism emerging

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[51] In a scholarly appraisal of Howard's works, Don Herron accredits the author with creating 'one of the great mythic figures in modern popular culture, the Dark Barbarian' (1984: 149).

from Lovecraft's 'Copernican conception of the vastness, strangeness, and infinite eerie possibilities of the new universe of science' (Leiber, 1987: 17). The Cthulhu Mythos, with its cosmic pantheon of 'Great Old Ones' and 'Outer Gods', powerful cosmic deities and rulers of earth in some ancient era—at best hostile to humanity, at worst indifferent (8)—the traces of whose civilisation often remain as sole testament, is representative of Lovecraft's guiding philosophy, as well of enchanted themes: sublime forces, ruins, deep time and humanity's dark origins.

Among a number of examples of such themes in Lovecraft's works, the short story 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928) is most exemplary. 'Cthulhu' is the story of one man's attempt to trace the events leading up to his professor grand-uncle's sudden death under suspicious circumstances. In the course of his investigation, the protagonist learns of his grand-uncle's terrifying dreams of 'great Cyclopean cities of titan blocks and sky-flung monoliths' (Lovecraft, 1984: 79); dreams which, as it turns out, are a premonition of the resurrection of such a city from the depths of the sea and the return of a Great Old One, the monstrous 'dead' god Cthulhu (84).

'Enchanted' themes in the CRPG

These enchanted themes not only serve as a common fixture in literary fantastic fiction—predecessors of the CRPG—they are a key feature of the CRPG experience too. *Skyrim*, which like numerous other fantastic mythopoeic works takes its cues from the momentous world-building efforts of J.R.R. Tolkien,[52] presents a game world that practically *breathes*

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[52] Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in particular has been cited as being "the single most important influence on virtual worlds from fiction" (Boellstorff, cited in Morehead, 2010: 184), and this debt extends even further back to Old English and Norse mythology upon

history. Indeed, echoes of *The Hyborian Age* can be heard in an information booklet that comes packaged with the *Skyrim* game (Pocket Guide to the Empire, 3rd Edition):

> Looking at virtually any vista in Skyrim, one is looking at the remains of a battlefield. The great Aedric cataclysms that brought Tamriel into existence in primeval times seems to have spent most of their fury in this northern land. Vast majestic mountain ranges form the spiny twisted backbone of the province and one can hear echoes of the early Nedic people's battle cries whistling in the winds of the valleys. Tradition has it that the first humans came to Tamriel from the continent of Atmora in ancient days. It was a not a single invasion but a series of them over hundreds of years, creating many different Nedic cultures, the new-arrived Atmorans always clashing with the generations that had already established themselves. (The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages, 2012a)

Skyrim in consequence is covered with the ruins of countless forts, towers, temples, cities, crypts, barrows, shrines, altars and prisons. The most pervasive of such 'dungeons' in *Skyrim* prove to be crypts, inhabited by the undead Draugr—wrathful warriors of ages past—and the subterranean cavern-cities of the Dwemer, a vanished race of advanced mechanical prowess, long since replaced by the Falmer, goblin-like beings believed to have descended from Skyrim's original Elven population. Part of the joy of the *Skyrim* experience is not only the ability to wander, but the chance that one might stumble upon such ruins, and the prospects undiscovered territory holds in terms of enemies to battle, quests to acquire or fulfil, and treasure to find. As quests and quest items are scattered across the map (more often than not within such locations as crypts), gameplay is thus deeply tied to the theme of ruins, whose very presence evokes deep time.

When scouring the debris of an old fort, using a powerful Elder Scroll to venture back in time to observe the original defeat of Alduin by mortals, or entering the Hall of Valor in Sovngarde, it is difficult to distinguish figments of past eras from the present. Where in 'real world' history, humanities' numerous social, cultural and technological developments can be

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which Tolkien largely drew in developing his own Middle-earth mythology (see Evans, 2000).

discerned for example in the visible difference between modern artefacts and primitive relics

of the past, little appears to have changed in Skyrim, for all the uncounted time that has

passed. Indeed, while some of the ancient weapons and armour discovered during the course

of one's adventures may have been dulled by the ages, they prove just as sophisticated as

equipment crafted in the modern age (the exception here being the superior weaponry, steam-

powered cities and automaton spiders of the vanished Dwemer people, and the inferior

weaponry of the Forsworn, who have regressed to a primitive tribal state).

Time in *Skyrim* consequently appears both conflated and rendered incomprehensibly vast, in

the sense that it knows no boundaries. History has been forgotten or become mired in

obscurity or myth, surviving in some cases only in the form of in-game lore (the numerous

books available for reading within the world of *Skyrim*). And it is in this obscure past that

humanity's dark genesis is said to lie, in the primordial Mythic Era. The Mythic Era

symbolises one of the 'higher' times universal to all pre-modern societies, the 'time of

origins': a remote period in the past in which order was first established and the world first

formed (Taylor, 2007: 47). The in-game book *A Children's Anuad* gives an account of the

genesis of Nirn—the world of *Skyrim*—and of the appearance of human beings and the other

races, as descendants of an alien race (the Ehlnofey) said to have arrived on Nirn aboard a

fragment of their own world (The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages, 2012b).[53]

Lastly, the sublime can be witnessed in *Skyrim* in the natural world itself, with humankind

living an enchanted existence in which it is once more porous; vulnerable to both natural and

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[53] We can see something of a precedent of this not only in Howard's *The Hyborian Age* but also in Tolkien's posthumously published *Silmarillion*, which—in the tradition of creation myths—'describes the cosmogonic phase and the Golden Age of Arda (the Earth), long before the "awakening" of humankind, when elves and other beings ruled and shaped the world' (Bittarello, 2008: 249).

unnatural forces. Take for example the weather. Storms frequently descend on the mountainous province; thunder rumbles, rain patters and snow swirls, blinding the Dragonborn and veiling his or her path. Great efforts have been taken to capture the sublime majesty, power and mystery of nature in *Skyrim*'s environments; take for example the immense mountains which are visible from great distances and can even be scaled, or the vast array of hauntingly beautiful environments: craggy peaks, ghostly alder-tree forests, hot springs, meadowy steppes, sweeping tundras, misty marshes and spider-webbed catacombs.

This absence of a membrane between human and nature is best observed at night: stars fill the sky, the red behemoth of the moon Masser appears, and the aurora borealis flickers in the distance, revealing humanity's existence within a literal cosmos. The true extent of humanity's vulnerability however is best demonstrated in its relationship to the hostile, inhuman inhabitants of Skyrim, sublime forces in Joseph Campbell's sense of the term: woolly mammoths, bears, sabretooth lions, trolls, ice-wraiths, giant spiders, Draugr, dragons and Dragon Priests.

Enchanted themes are likewise present in *Mass Effect*, with the vast, mysterious expanse of space standing in for the sublime wilderness of *Skyrim*, just as extra-terrestrials serve as a replacement for mythical beings. This exchange is by no means coincidental, and can in fact be observed in most fantastic fiction. According to Purkiss, this is reflective of human nature, which

> seems to abhor a blank space on a map. Where there are no human habitations, no towns, where villages dwindle into farms and farms into woods, mapping stops. Then the imagination rushes to fill the woods with something other than blank darkness: nymphs, satyrs, elves, gnomes, pixies, fairies. Now that we have mapped every inch of our own planet, our remaining blank spaces lie among the stars. Unable, like our forebears, to tolerate space uninhabited, we have made with our minds a new legion of bright and shining beings to fill gaps left by our ignorances. (cited in Partridge, 2006: 169)

What Purkiss is describing is not so much a shift in humanity's imaginative fixations than in the shape they take: the replacing of the fairy by the alien, of one Other by another.[54] This in turn can be observed in the evolution of science fiction out of the fantasy genre, in what Disch describes as the result of a desire to rationalise (and therefore legitimise) the fantastic: 'Hence, the authenticating "science" in the compound "science fiction," with its implicit guarantee that this dream might come true, as against the surreal or supernatural events of fantasy and fable. Rocket ships are SF and magic carpets are fantasy' (1998: 3).

In *Skyrim*, the Other takes the form of both friend and foe. First there are the monstrous, mythical creatures described above, which roam the province and attack the player on sight. Then there are the civilised non-human inhabitants of Tamriel, which the player may encounter in the course of their journey but may also play as (by choosing any of these races when creating their character): the elves (High Elf, Wood Elf, Dark Elf), the zoomorphic Argonian and Khajit and the humanoid Orcs.

In *Mass Effect*, the Other are extra-terrestrials: the blue-skinned, asexual Asari; the avian Turians; the amphibious, chatterbox Salarians; the ill-tempered, reptilian Krogans; the gypsies of space, the Quarians, and so on. The depiction of the Other in *Mass Effect* is not as an inherently evil, hostile or oppositional force; rather, members of each species invariably take the role of both hostile and friendly NPCs.

Whatever the form—mythical beast or humanoid alien—these figments of the Other are modern manifestations of the extra-human agencies once believed to populate the enchanted

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[54] This form of the Other in science fiction takes myriad forms; see Disch, 1998: 10.

world, other intelligences in which 'meaning' is self-contained, existing beyond and in some cases *before* human comprehension. Other expressions of these agencies can be found in the re-emergence of the porous self and humanity's vulnerability to supernatural powers: magic (*Skyrim)*, biotics, mind-control and telepathy (*Mass Effect*—e.g. the mind-controlling Thorian on Feros and the Reaper's 'indoctrination' technique), or powerful artefacts such as enchanted equipment, the Standing Stones (which give the player-character special skills or abilities) and Word-Walls (*Skyrim*), and the Prothean beacon (*Mass Effect*).

These agencies in their totality also represent the 'fabulous forces' encountered during the course of the monomythic hero's journey, with mythical beings and aliens forming an angel/demon dualism: the 'benign supernatural' and the 'demonic grotesque' (Nelson, 2001: xi). The revival of such agencies is part and parcel with attempts to recreate a sense of life within a 'cosmos'. Just as the Other has been transformed from fairy into alien, the unknown has ceased to take the form of earthly wilderness, becoming instead the cosmic wilderness of science fiction. In *Mass Effect*, human beings are represented as newcomers to the universe, brushing shoulders with extra-terrestrials whose civilisations long precede their own. A sense of deep time emerges from the prevalence of Prothean ruins on planets central to the narrative in *Mass Effect*: Eden Prime, Feros, Therum and Illos. According to one telling discussion of the Protheans, the name may be derived from:

> the Greek words 'protero', meaning 'earlier' or 'former'; 'proto', meaning 'primary' or 'first'; and 'protean', referring to that which is changeable or adaptable. Another possibility is that the name derives from the words 'proto' or 'protero' and 'theos', meaning 'God'. Depending on how the words 'proto' or its derivative 'protero' are interpreted, the word 'Prothean' could mean 'someone who existed before Gods' or 'the first or former God'. (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012i)

The Prothean AI Vigil's account of the Reapers and their ancient cycle of destruction, sweeping in from the vast obscurity of dark space to harvest resources, technology and

intelligent races to extinction before retreating again to hibernate, only furthers the impression of deep time. As the Reaper Sovereign tells Commander Shepard during an encounter in *Mass Effect*: 'The pattern has repeated itself more times than you can fathom. Organic civilisations rise, evolve, advance, then at the apex of their glory, they are extinguished.' To which it adds, rather ominously: 'We have no beginning. We have no end. We are infinite. Millions of years after your civilization has been eradicated and forgotten, we will endure.'

Sovereign's proclamations entrench a sense of the timeless existence of the Reapers and their grim cycle—of deep time. In *Mass Effect*, the Reapers have not only preceded humanity and the other extra-terrestrials by uncounted aeons; they have also manipulated their development as well as the development of those species that came before them via mass relay technology (to quote Sovereign: 'By using it your society develops along the paths we desire'). This implies a dark genesis for all intelligent life, most specifically for the human race, which has long dwelt on the fringes of wider galactic activity, in the 'wilderness' of space outside the hub of galactic civilisation and thus far beyond the view of the Reapers and their destructive cycle.

Referred to by the Geth as the 'Old Machines', the Reapers are the very epitome of the sublime as 'monster'. Keeping rank with them are the Reaper's Geth forces, brainwashed ('indoctrinated') warriors of various species, and their lieutenant Saren, who with the aid of Reaper cybernetic upgrades achieves something like immortality, reviving only minutes after dying near the conclusion of *Mass Effect*. The sublime also takes the form of a sense of space as immeasurable and unknown, one that emerges when using the Galaxy Map to navigate the galaxy, or when roving across the surface of planets in the Mako vehicle, be it along the

ruined Prothean Skyway of Feros, the icy slopes of Noveria or the volcanic or wind-blasted

terrain of uncharted worlds.

This enduring interest in the enchanted world (via these themes) provides further

confirmation of my earlier assertion that fantastic fiction such as the CRPG represents a

desire for re-enchantment, for escaping the 'iron cage of bureaucratic rationality into a world

of gods and spirits' (Weber, cited in Lyon, 2000: 9), and perhaps also of lingering 'fears of

darkness, and the powers of evil' as Ivan Illich suggests (cited in Taylor, 2007: 741)—or

rather, the *desire* to fear the darkness and the powers of evil once again, by assuming a porous

existence within the world of the game. Fantastic fiction therefore acts as an 'unconscious

wellspring of religion' and belief in the transcendent (Nelson, 2001: 9) through its recreation

of the enchanted world, its application of the monomythic narrative (which, as noted, evokes

the mystical and cosmological, through its origins in mythology) and its re-embedding of the

individual within a cosmos and society.

The 'buffered' self and social embedding in the CRPG

This re-embedding as a process has not been total; as observed by Slochower, mythopoeia

emerging from the Renaissance onwards is marked by pronounced differences in the degree

to which the hero is embedded within his society or community, with the post-Renaissance

mythopoeic hero exercising a greater degree of freedom unknown to the pre-Renaissance

mythic and mythopoeic hero (1973: 23). Where early mythopoeic stories involve the hero's

rebellion against established tradition, the post-Renaissance 'free' hero has no associations

with 'community, family, state, church or God' (154), and stands alone, bereft of the guidance

of others and of tradition. His journey as a result is exploratory and in some cases interior,

with unlimited possibilities taking the place of 'absolute truths and values' (154).

The emergence of the 'free' hero Slochower attributes to a number of factors: the shift from tribalism to a society centred on class hierarchies, the new sense of self that emerged out of the Renaissance (Taylor's 'buffered self') and the cultural individuation and acceptance of the Nietzschian concept of 'rebel as hero' (1973: 35). This concept was made possible by what Taylor calls the 'Great Disembedding', a process that involved the removal of individuals from former social existences and the investing of unprecedented primacy in the individual. The Great Disembedding was both the result of developments noted in Chapter 2 as well as the buffered self and the emergence of the modern moral order, which served to undermine the traditional embedding force: religion (Taylor, 2007: 148, 157). As a result, the monomythic hero increasingly came to stand alone and apart from the fictional society of the narrative, with his violation of society's perceived natural or sacred orders through an act of challenge and revolt serving as a catalyst for the emergence of a new social order (24, 35).

Thus while the mythopoeic hero might be disembedded from his/her society, his/her destiny and duty remain tied up with that of his/her community, in the sense that the salvation of that community (and the revival of its values) depend upon his/her actions. Take for example the protagonist of *Mass Effect*, Commander Shepard. Shepard is depicted as something of a stubborn but noble underdog, his/her claims of the impending Reaper threat rejected by a complacent, incredulous Council. Only by going above and beyond the call of duty, sometimes even countermanding explicit Council orders, can s/he hope to thwart the impending galactic apocalypse. The Dragonborn hero of *Skyrim* is also construed from the outset as a heroic rebel, beginning his/her story as a criminal and rising from such ignominious beginnings to save the world from destruction.

The mythopoeic hero's detachment from society and social values can be observed in the CRPG in the 'free form' approach taken by *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*. That is, the player is encouraged to use whatever means, take whatever actions and adhere to whichever value system or morality s/he desires in the course of following the monomythic pattern. S/he may approach the main quest at their own pace, using a play style of their choice (via character class and skill options) and taking actions that have specific moral alignments. Shepard for example can use an impartial, Paragon or Renegade approach when presented with various choices in combat, quests or conversation. He can also take on morally dubious side-quests. The Dragonborn likewise can dabble in side-quests offered by the devious Thieves Guild and Dark Brotherhood.

The monomythic narrative pattern nevertheless at some point exerts its hold; the CRPG's hero's calling after all strongly references his/her society and his/her role within it, and in order to finish a game, or at least attain a 'valorised' ending, i.e. a thwarting of eschatological destruction, the hero must to some extent answer that calling. The hero's role is thus grounded in the recognition and acceptance of his/her oneness with the community: a 'superindividual' with the power to enhance, enrich, support and magnify the individual (J. Campbell, 2004: 355). This manifests in the design of the CRPG, which designates the hero as one who is fundamentally dependent upon others for personal development, success in his/her quests and his/her decreed eschatological role.

This can be observed in the need to cooperate with NPCs for quest and narrative success, for example by accomplishing side-quests appointed by NPCs and by relying on henchman-based teamwork (the follower system in *Skyrim* and the squad system in *Mass Effect*), with

henchman aid and advice a key force in determining the hero's success. *Mass Effect 2* is a particularly telling example of this principle; one of the main goals of the game is to recruit an assortment of humans and aliens and to win their favour through 'loyalty' missions. An ill-equipped team and the player's failure to recruit enough squad members or to win their individual loyalty will otherwise spell death, disaster or total failure for Shepard and his team when it comes to the game's final mission (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012e).[55]

It has been argued that in the case of the Internet that 'the number of means of recognizing another person declines', and as a result 'commitment to co-operative or collective projects become one-dimensional, or, at best, self-referential' (Holmes, cited in Lyon, 2000: 70). McGillion has expressed the following concerns:

> If religion becomes detached from real places, real people, and a real sense of shared time and cultural memory, then how can there ever be a significant measure of collective conscience and collective effervescence? (Dawson, 2005: 19)[56]

Such concerns and criticisms have been applied to videogames as well, with many commentators accusing the medium of being inherently solipsistic, hedonistic and escapist (see Murray, 1998: 21–22). These criticisms in the case of the CRPG (and the monomyth as an alternative spirituality) however are patently reductionist, if not untrue. The case as I have shown is in fact quite the contrary, with CRPG gameplay and narrative constructed as a collective project beyond the scope of the self, embedding the individual hero within a team, society and an enchanted cosmos. Single-player CRPGs such as *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*

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[55] Similarly in *Mass Effect 3*, the player's success in the final mission depends upon his or her acquisition of 'war assets' (that is, a number of human and extra-terrestrial fleets and allies) through the fulfilment of various quests, in which Shepard must assist and protect individuals as well as entire societies (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012n).

[56] While the question of what constitutes 'real' of course is a complex one best left untouched here, we can safely assume that Dawson refers here to the physical world (that is, beyond the 'virtual'), where collective and religious practice has traditionally taken place.

admittedly provide little margin for collective conscience or effervescence,[57] and yet the monomythic narrative brings to the table an undeniable element of the spiritual, as can best be witnessed in the game's drive for self-transcendence (apotheosis), and the dedication of the individual to the service of his/her community.

A 'Providential Deistic' game world

The monomythic narrative in this sense reflects humanity's 'search for an over-arching significance', a search to which the game world strives to provide a simplified, tangible answer, as demonstrated firstly in the re-instatement of the Divine. God assumes a new face in the videogame: that of the transcendent game designer, maker-of-rules and world-builder (see Detweiler, 2010: 11). It is a kind of Providential Deism in the sense that this designer is responsible for establishing an order, an order which the player must learn and obey out of concern of the rewards or punishments his actions may attract (Taylor, 2007: 649).

Where traditionally this reward/punishment structure related to what awaited the individual *beyond* the grave (heaven, hell or purgatory), in the context of the videogame it relates specifically to the individual's gameplay experience, with a 'game over' constituting what amounts to hell (failure), and a successful completion of the monomythic pattern earning the player its virtual counterpart.

The appeal of Providential Deism undoubtedly lies in the fact that it straddles the space between theism and exclusive humanism, one in which God remains but the buffered self determines the course of society and individual life. Open-world CRPGs like *Skyrim* and

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[57] I would be remiss to note that while *Mass Effect* is primarily a single-player franchise, multiplayer gameplay was introduced in *Mass Effect 3*.

Mass Effect emulate a sense of heightened agency, autonomy and moral freedom[58] native to Providential Deism, emerging from the diminished presence of the Divine in day-to-day life. This can be observed in the complex moral/ethic decisions confronted by players of both games, decisions that must be solved according to one's conscience as opposed to some heavenly decree. This freedom manifests also in open-world design and narrative, in the disappearance of heroic journeys with 'definite, fixed' objectives or assured homecomings, as in Renaissance and post-Renaissance mythopoeic works (Slochower, 1973: 23).

Nevertheless, while offering a degree of freedom that might otherwise be absent in what Taylor calls a 'Theistic construal', that freedom still has its limitations: gameplay is governed by general rules ('laws') which precede the gameplay experience and are dictated by a designer (or 'Designer'). As rules are more often than not hidden from the player, chances are that they will use the 'game world to make inferences about […] [these] rules' (Juul, 2005: 146), in terms of how this world responds to their actions (consequence). Failure to obey those laws (for example, 'thou shalt not attack friendly NPCs unless attacked first', or 'thou shalt not fight superior enemies without having first adequately "levelled" one's avatar') will result in negative feedback. NPCs may turn upon the player, attacking his/her avatar, which may consequently die, forcing the player to load an earlier save game and lose all subsequent progress.

These rules thus provide a point of reference in terms of the game's key goals. That is, if a player is to succeed, s/he must appreciate the game as a design space; must know what 'patterns or combinations of elements' are allowed by the internal design grammar of this space (the rules) and be familiar with how they determine situated action within the game by

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[58] As per Gee's 'Discovery' and 'Multiple Routes' principles (2003: 138, 195, 209).

the player with regards to their goals (Gee, 2003: 40). Gamers' success within the game world therefore depends upon their ability to proactively 'attend to, reflect on, critique, and manipulate [the] design grammars [of the domain] at a metalevel' (41).[59] The fact that a player's actions are shaped according to design grammars created by a game designer furthermore renders the video game a *co-creative* experience, and this presence of 'the well-ordered hand of a programmer at work, guiding the unfolding of our quest and directing us about what we should do' may—according to Rachel Wagner—act as a source of 'some kind of existential comfort' (2004: 13).

Rites of passage as a 'spiritual' structure

The evocation of the spiritual in the video game can also be observed in the episodic structure of the CRPG's main quest. The parcelling up of the quest into a series of sub-quests or 'trials' is not exclusively a means of simplifying the main quest, but also of structuring the hero's journey into rites of passage; a series of paradigm-shifting stages in the hero's development. Such rites of passage exist in both a narrative and gameplay sense. Key junctures such as the mythic confrontation of the tyrant in a boss fight and subsequent apotheosis, have a tangible impact on avatar development; the player's mastery of their enemies in combat results in the acquisition of experience and abilities, leading to a levelling up of their character.

These rites help to inculcate in the hero (and player) a sense of the significance of the task they have undertaken as well as the importance of self-sacrifice and dedication to a greater cause. Through this knowledge, both the monomythic hero of the game and the player come

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[59] As per Gee's 'Active, Critical Learning', 'Design' and 'Metalevel Thinking about Semiotic Domains' principles (2003: 49–50).

into possession of the 'techniques, duties, and prerogatives' and 'symbols of office' necessary to their initiation as 'mystagogue' (J. Campbell, 2004: 125).

The hero's role in averting an eschatological disaster and saving his/her society is identified as the focus of the main quest from the outset. The player in participating in the game is obliged to not merely recognise their avatar's role and their place in a wider community, but also an inherent obligation to that community. The player must also act upon it, for to do otherwise is to deny the main quest and the monomythic narrative, which not only structures the overall gameplay experience but also limits or shapes it, in terms of what the player can and cannot do, but also in terms of how gameplay and narrative progression are constructed. For example, many RPG players will find that they cannot attack or kill civilian NPCs (not without just cause, at any rate). They may also be required to complete specific sub-quests and the related rite of passages before they are able to progress to the next area in a game, or to a new stage in the narrative.

On the other hand, the acceptance by the player (and the game world 'society') of the hero's role as mystagogue is not *ipso facto*, but must be realised during the course of the game through gameplay and narrative decisions, by both the avatar, their society and the player. The role of mystagogue after all can only be attained once the hero has advanced enough through the game and overcome challenges necessary to proving his/her merit. It is at such a point that the hero finds themselves standing on the verge of destiny: the cusp of the 'supreme trial'. In *Skyrim*, this moment can be witnessed when the Dragonborn, having proven his/her authority and ability, holds council with the Aldermen, the Blades, the Stormcloaks and the Imperial Legion, negotiating a truce. Commander Shepard of *Mass Effect* by contrast is only accepted as mystagogue by his/her society *after* s/he has defeated Saren and saved the Citadel

from the peril posed by the Reapers.

Rites of passage can be observed in narrative and in avatar development, and also in the player's own journey, *their* 'initiation' into gameplay and narrative. After all, to complete a game a player must have some belief in his/her gameplay skills, particularly the ability to master the design space,[60] as represented by the 'success' of his/her avatar in fulfilling gameplay objectives. For a player to truly enjoy a CRPG and to continue playing, they must become invested and have belief in their projective identity: their idealistic projection of the self (more on this below). In the CRPG, these various forms of initiation are *interwoven* so that the narrative rites of passage can only be completed once the monomythic hero and the player have been sufficiently 'initiated'.

On another point, the parcelling up of the main quest into quantifiable, clear-cut stages (sub-quests) provides a clear, step-by-step path to success (Walker, cited in Tresca, 2010: 148). It is also, I would argue, reflective of a desire for more ready access to the spiritual. Take for instance the transparent rendering of rites of passage and of the means by which the hero and player can complete these rites. These means are established first and foremost in the videogame's 'rules': conventions that are shared across the CRPG genre, in one modified form or another.

A player who has played other CRPGs tends to acquire a basic understanding of genre-specific rules, which s/he brings with him when s/he plays other CRPGs. And even supposing s/he has not played other CRPGs, game rules are usually listed in manuals packaged with the game, or are conveyed via on-screen instruction and in-game tutorials. There is also the fact

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[60] As per Gee's 'Ongoing Learning', 'Regime of Competence' and 'Incremental Learning' principles (2003: 71, 137).

that failing to follow these rules has consequences that help to educate the player in them. For example, in *Skyrim* (and multiple other RPGs), falling from great heights will kill an avatar. Death thus serves as a discouragement against the player testing their avatar's mortality in such a manner.

Information crucial to gameplay is also usually communicated through representative systems such as the heads-up display (HUD) and menus: character skills and statistics screens (which allow the player to monitor and shape their avatar's development), a journal which records the hero's progress within main, sub- and side-quests (and lists which have or haven't been accepted, completed or foiled), an inventory providing a visual representation of the items the player's avatar is currently carrying and using, and a map which lists their avatar's location and the surrounding regions. These features appear in many CRPGs, including *Skyrim* and *Mass Effect*.

The CRPG as a 'rationalist's spirituality'

This structuring, simplification and conversion of the embodied experience into quantifiable facts and structures within the game world offers something of a reprieve from the complexities and uncertainties of modern life, in which individual purpose, role and destiny are no longer pre-determined (as was the case in a Theistic construal), but shaped by the individual themselves. We can see something similar at work in Western (especially Christian) traditions, wherein 'the notion of a fixed trajectory of history (and thus also of storytelling) is especially important, revealing to believers God's own storytelling and giving credence to the idea that God is in charge of history's unfolding' (Wagner, 2012: 33).

The millenialist interpretation of history as a narrative is a particularly interesting example of this (see Gutierrez, 2005: 47–50). The videogame nevertheless seems to reflect a wider development in the human relationship with the virtual, whereby users are seen to be turning 'to an online existence to exert control over facets of their changing or ambiguous lives offline' (Dawson, 2005: 33). Yet this act of turning to the virtual is also reflective Wagner argues of an inherent desire for 'the real, a hunger for order, cosmos, structure, and control' (2004: 232), one which manifests in the timeless human activity of 'world-building': 'the imagining of a world in which we are in control, in which things make sense, in which what we do has profound meaning, and in which we can enact our ideal selves: activities that have long been viewed as forms of the religious imagination' (2).[61]

The CRPG thus does not completely reject the freedoms inherent to modern life and exclusive humanism; individual choice may be shaped and guided by a 'Designer', but the principle of authenticity is promoted in the freedom, choice, agency and autonomy inherent to the CRPG (one usually unparalleled by other videogame genres). These elements are constructed as an essential aspect of the gameplay experience and narrative success. That is, a player who does not explore a CRPG world during the course of a game will miss countless opportunities to obtain and pursue side-quests, gain valuable experience, increase their level and find better equipment, thus improving his/her chances of success.

Another aspect of modern life that expresses itself in the CRPG is how such games reward individual action. The hero's successful passage through gameplay and narrative rites as noted earlier are primarily rewarded in three ways: loot (such as equipment, the mystagogue's

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[61] Sanes notes precedents in the creation of other games, narrative, art and 'similar fantasy-saturated celebrations' (n.d.)

'symbols of office'), experience points (allowing for the customisation and enhancement of the player's character) and the fulfilment of quests, without which desirable plot developments, narrative conclusions and the realisation of the player's projective identity through monomythic values would not be possible.

The cycle of action-reward reflects something of authenticity's 'higher selfishness', in so far as while rewards are constructed as being necessary for advancement in the game world, they also embody the spirit of what Taylor calls 'expressivism'[62] and in some sense materialism and the consumer ethic's emphasis on 'choice'. These together have their roots in the Romantic affirmation of 'the rights of the individual, of the imagination, and of feeling' (Taylor, 1989: 368), in the espousing and expressing of 'the inner élan, the voice or impulse' (364–264),

The CRPG's structured nature, for all its ties to the spiritual, is nevertheless clearly informed by the modern buffered self—the disciplined, self-empowered, instrumental agent—whose ability as an 'active, constructive, shaping' force is carried over into the world of the game, as seen in its the heightened interactivity and responsiveness to player choice and action. One of the fundamental themes of the CRPG is that the hero's destiny and the destiny of their society can and *must* be changed, and that this duty naturally falls to the hero. The notion of the individual being able to shape the course of the world around him/her has its origins in the 'Platonic-Aristotelian idea that the world around us was the realization of Forms, the theory of ontic logos' (Taylor, 2007: 367), Forms which human beings (like God) can impose upon the world. Yet once again, the player's imposition of Forms necessitates that those very same Forms are already in existence; such Forms in turn stipulate the existence of a Designer God.

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[62] Expressivism as a concept directly parallels Lyon's notion of the 'expressive self' (2000: 93).

The CRPG hence represents a unique fusion of the spiritual and the rational; of materialist gameplay framework with spiritual narrative, presenting virtual worlds in which the individual is 'porous' but also rationally empowered, having a degree of autonomy and agency native to the buffered self. Earlier it was suggested that fantastic fiction such as the CRPG represents a desire to escape the 'iron cage of bureaucratic rationality into a world of gods and spirits' (Lyon, 2000: 9). In light of my recent discussion however, I would like to modify this statement by indicating that perhaps the CRPG is concerned less with sheer escapism and more with a desire to reconcile the boundaries, safety and certainty of the cage with the spiritual re-enchantment captured by fantastic fiction.[63]

This is not to imply that players play CRPGs with the conscious goal of experiencing such a syncretism. Games are after all 'primarily autotelic; that is, they are mostly used for their own sake rather than for an external purpose' (Juul, 2005: 32). The combination of spiritual content with rationalist structure we can deduce is likely the product of the buffered self's inability to accept fantasy for fantasy's sake (and by extension spirituality for spirituality's sake). Fantasy, rather, must have a rational basis before belief can be 'suspended', or indulged. The game's rule-based system in this case provides 'structure for the playacting and make believe' without which 'the game would seem hopelessly arbitrary and probably not much fun to play' (Barton, 2008: 25). The iron cage in this case facilitates the escape (Lyon, 2000: 9).

This 'rationalist's spirituality' perfectly embodies Lyon's 'Jesus in Disneyland' paradigm: the

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[63] In the words of Colin Campbell: 'modern individuals inhabit not just an "iron cage" of economic necessity, but a castle of romantic dreams, striving through their conduct to turn the one into the other' (2005: 227).

conflation of an 'artificial, simulated, virtual, fantasy' world with ancient, pre-modern

religion (Disney and Christianity, as per Lyon's example) in a shared metanarrative (2000: 1).

Play here serves to bridge the gap between the key dualisms of human existence, as

represented in the CRPG: 'gnosis and episteme, nous and logos, Platonism and

Aristotelianism, idealism and materialism, pre-modern and modern' (Nelson, 2001: 28),

dualisms which Nelson regards as complementary despite the common conception that

suggests otherwise.

By grounding fantasy and the spiritual within the logical materialist structure of the game, the

CRPG provides a clear path for the development of a player's character (Tresca, 2010: 45),

facilitates meritocratic progression, offers a clear and comforting delineation of good-evil as

dualism, and constructs as enemy 'an evil that favors only violence to perpetrate its ethos'

(the monomythic 'tyrant').[64] Just as Lyon's Disneyland serves on one hand as a 'controlled

release into a fantasy world of childhood', the CRPG portrays 'as normal a world in which

good and evil are seldom ambiguous, in which right triumphs' (Lyon, 2000: 10), with the

good-evil dualisms and 'combat mythologies' of this world providing something like an

answer to 'the perennial problems of evil and suffering' (Partridge, 2006: 299).[65]

Projective identity and realising values in the game world

'Theory of Mind' is a term used by cognitive psychologists to refer to the natural and

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[64] Features that Fine observes are distinct to American culture (cited in Tresca, 2010: 13)
(although meritocratic progression arguably is more specific to the Protestant work ethic).
These features Kitchen notes are inherently at odds with the 'frivolity' of play (2010: 119), a
point which finds support in the writings of Colin Campbell (2005). The CRPG I would
suggest negotiates such an alternative, seeking a middle ground between these two disparate
elements.
[65] Where Lyon describes Disneyland as a distraction *from* these problems (2000).

unconscious way in which human beings imagine 'correctly, incorrectly, approximately, self-servingly, bizarrely—other people's thoughts, desires, and intentions around the clock' (Zunshine, 2006: 18). This skill Zunshine asserts is fundamental to constructing, navigating and surviving within one's social environment (6). The novel (and fiction in general, it might be argued) offers an 'imaginary approximation' of and thus a natural substitute for social interaction (10), cultivating an intellectual and emotional involvement that may explain something of its appeal.

In the case of the CRPG, a further degree of involvement can be found in the unprecedented degree of character interactivity it offers. This takes the form of the projective identity, arising from the interaction of the player's primary 'real world' identity with their virtual identity (the hero persona). Described by Gee as a 'project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become (within the limitations of [their] capacities)' (2003: 199, 55), the projective identity is a manifestation of authenticity and what Castells calls the modern 'project identity' (cited in Lyon, 2000: 90) (in which consumption is seen as aiding in the construction of that identity).

In the CRPG, the projective identity arises from player values and desires, in combination with what the monomythic game has taught the player about what their character 'should or might be and become' (Gee, 2003: 58),[66] as expressed in player choice and action within the gameworld (regarding his/her character, moral alignment, quests and NPC relationships).[67] The negotiation of a projective identity requires a degree of player investment; to succeed in

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[66] Gee's 'Identity Principle' (see 2003: 58).
[67] The notion of a projective identity I would argue has a precedent in the historical—albeit paradoxical—link between human simulacra (in this case the videogame avatar) and the soul, a link that Nelson argues endures into the 20th century, 'both in avant-garde theatre and in popular entertainments (comics, films, and cybergames)' (2001: 20).

perpetuating the projective identity—to transcend the 'limitations both of the virtual identity and the learner's own real-world identity' (Gee, 2003: 66)—the player must employ critical thinking, as well a degree of reflectiveness and interiority of thought higher than might be encouraged or required by activity in other virtual environments, such as browsing the Internet. Success also depends upon the player learning and mastering the embodied rationalism of the CRPG's design space, one which bears the marks of re-enchantment (life in a cosmos, the existence of the Divine and extra-human entities) and subscribes to the meta-logic of the monomyth.

Amid this unique synthesis of the materialist and the spiritual, the projective identity consequently comes to be characterised by a number of values. Firstly, there is authenticity, as represented by the player's right to choose (where choice is a fundamental feature of the CRPG, and that right often serves to generate a form of avatar-based expressivism). Secondly, there is the player's search for a personal, epistemological meaning (as embodied by the quest). Thirdly, there is the monomythic notion of the hero (or individual) striving for betterment of self through service to the collective. Be it the knight-errant, the lone gunslinger or the righteous underdog, this hero is just another manifestation of the romanticised 'agonistic warrior-life of archaic times' whose chief virtue is seen to be loyalty: 'surrender of the self to a person, cause or idea without arguing the reasons for this surrender or doubting the lasting nature of it' (Huizinga, 1955: 134),[68] with society in this case serving as the subject of his or her dedication. The CRPG also promotes a sense that the hero's endeavours depend upon associating and cooperating with others. In the words of Gygax:

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[68] The chief subjects of this hero's loyalties—justice, righteousness and meritocracy—are represented in the videogame's rules and rewards system, according to Gee's 'Achievement Principle' (2003: 67).

> There is a message contained in the true role-playing game. It is the message of the difficulty in surviving alone, and the folly of trying to profit from the loss of others. The inability of any lone individual to successfully cope with every challenge is evident in RPGs and reflects life […] the role-playing game brings the heroic into better perspective by demonstrating a course of progress which requires the association and cooperation of like-minded individuals. (cited in Tresca, 2010: 68)

A related value to emerge from this spirit is the importance of preserving one's fellows against suffering and evil[69] through the actions of the monomythic hero. Simultaneously and contrarily, there is also an enduring sense of the individual's obligation to recover self-expression and freedom from the repressive forces of society and to challenge the complacency of that very society: Nietzsche's heroic dimension, which is in turn linked to notion of the monomythic hero as an individualised resistive response to what Weber calls the 'routinization of charisma' (1979: 246).

Yet this heroic dimension does not suggest—as is the case with modern conceptions of individualism—that the individual has the capacity to neutralise, if not exist independently of the 'webs of interlocution' with others, webs by which s/he was formed (Taylor, 1989: 36). Rather, in its emphasis on cooperation and association with others, it acknowledges—if not embraces—the individual's dependence on interlocution as a fact (38).[70]

Videogames as a form of consumption

These values in sum represent an idealism that is fundamentally Romantic in expression. As in the case of Romanticism's modern manifestation, consumerism, this idealism is accompanied by an element of hedonism. Consumerism is a form of authenticity in which

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[69] The product of contemporary moral philosophy, which is concerned with 'the respect for the life, integrity, and well-being, and even flourishing, of others' (Taylor, 1989: 4).
[70] Taylor argues that the individual's social and intellectual dependence on language renders such interlocution inescapable (1989: 36).

identity is constructed through the pleasurable consumption of symbolic objects that represent an ideal (Lyon, 2000: 12). The videogame's focus on the individual experience and pleasurable consumption as a form of entertainment is similar in this regard. Like Lyon's Disneyland, a player can escape into the artificial world of the videogame, seeking compensation for the 'flatness' of ordinary time in the 'play and the pleasure principle'; in the 'controlled release' from 'the humdrum of everyday reality' (Lyon, 2000: 11, 10)[71] into a state of heightened excitement facilitated by the CRPG as a medium of entertainment.[72]

While the CRPG may hypothetically be consumed for pleasure and the purposes of constructing an identity, with the game experience and 'heroic' actions by the player's avatar serving as a source of identification, the single-player CRPG differs from consumerism and multiplayer games (such as the MMORPG) in one key respect: it is entirely individual in focus. One does not play with other sentient, flesh-and-blood humans who can recognise and respond to the player's achievements in meaningful or intelligent ways. Nor does one exhibit one's successes and spoils beyond the game world. With the minor exception of token 'achievements' or 'trophies' won during the course of some games (displayed as part of the Xbox Live or PlayStation Network services respectively), there is otherwise no means for socially significant mutual display. While opportunities for expressivism may be rife within the game, opportunities for expressivism outside are by comparison limited.

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[71] This escape does not involve, like Disneyland, a complete evasion of 'the tensions and the conflicts, the violence and the degradation that characterize the real world' (Lyon, 2000: 10), but rather the construction of such as a form of entertainment.

[72] Another way to frame this discussion is according to the computer-related dichotomy of online/offline, where online represents the world of daily life, of 'Darwinian pressures with a vengeance' and survival, and offline represents those periods when such pressures are removed, allowing other things such as play, the 'luxury of luxuries' to occur (Bellah, 2011: xx, xxi). I would argue that the Protestant work ethic is closely aligned with the 'online' aspect of life, while the Romantic ethic is aligned with the 'offline'. The value of the 'offline' as posited by Bellah may lie in the fact that 'religion, along with science and art, may be the result of that capacity to go offline' (xxii); that is, it plays an essential function in human life.

Nevertheless, the consumption of a CRPG in some respects mirrors the identity-formation processes of consumerism, in that it facilitates the conception of an idealised self (the projective identity) that is shaped in conjunction with monomythic values. The application of a monomythic narrative pattern defines the game experience as one that is ultimately outward in focus and critical in nature. As Gee notes, videogames as designed spaces actively encourage active, critical thinking about the player's own views:

> Learning is set up in such a way that learners come to think consciously and reflectively about some of their cultural models regarding the world, without denigration of their identities, abilities, or social affiliations, and juxtapose them to new models that may conflict with or otherwise relate to them in various ways. (2003: 211)[73]

A player during the course of his/her play may thus find his/her existing 'taken-for-granted' perspectives transformed (Gee, 2004: 146). For example, a player's victory in the *Mass Effect* games depends not only upon the support of their squad, but also a careful selection of squad members for specific missions, in terms of how their skills complement the player character's own, and the specific kinds of combat and environmental challenges that the squad will face during those missions. The implied message of this mechanic is that cooperation and teamwork are not merely preferable but *essential* to individual and collective success. Gameplay is structured according to this message, offering positive and negative feedback in the form of winning and failing challenges respectively. Those who do not abide by this model will find their existing perspectives challenged.

The CRPG model of the world is one wherein individual and collective success depends solely upon the efforts and abilities of the enterprising individual as opposed to the

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[73] Gee's 'Cultural Models About the World Principle' (see 2003: 211).

cooperation of the collective. Failing to adopt this model—failing to utilise henchmen or assist NPCs—results in failure, lack of advancement or missed opportunities and rewards. Gameplay mechanics will encourage the player in turn to demonstrate, if not adopt, those models advocated by the monomythic CRPG.[74]

Conclusion

The CRPG experience need not be predicated solely upon consumption for the purposes of pleasure and identity construction. By virtue of its monomythic structure, it avoids the modern trend of 'sacralisation of the self', offering more than what Woolley terms 'self-absorbed solipsism' (cited in Lyon: 2002, 69). Certainly, the CRPG may facilitate a 'purely personal drama of salvation and redemption' in the form of an introspective exploration of the self (C. Campbell, 2005: 182–183), yet this kind of experience has a precedent in the novel (C. Campbell, 2005: 92, 134; Tresca, 2010: 29), a medium which I might observe has more than proven itself of being capable of transcendent aspirations. The CRPG's capacity in this regard is best evidenced in its unique syncretism of fictional worlds with rules: the spiritual with the material, its rationalising of the means to achieve individual success (apotheosis) and its framing of that success as a key step in securing collective salvation and narrative closure.

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[74] The ability of design spaces to alter perspectives can be interpreted as another form of monomythic initiation and boon, in that it aims to make the player recognise, accept and actualise the CRPG's timeless lessons, both within the game world and in the 'real world' as well.

6. THE CRPG AS EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

Summary of argument

In the chapter I will argue that the CRPG is a form of external symbolic media not unlike a book or film, and thus a kind of 'container' within which monomythic knowledge, values and insights can be transcribed and passed on to the player. It is also an arena for embodied action and practice of such values. Player investment is critical to the transference of such practice into the 'real world', and that investment takes the form of the player's idealised projective identity. This identity is created through his/her performance of the role of the monomythic CRPG hero, with the game serving as a contest for—and representation of—monomythic values.

Embodied action in the CRPG

Where conceptual knowledge is conveyed via symbols, in particular those of a linguistic nature (von Glasersfeld, 1995: 76), the principal vehicle of the processes of socialisation has consequently come to be language (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 123). Language enables the converting of shared experiences into 'objects' so as to make them part of the 'collective stock of knowledge', an 'objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience' (52).

When language is redescribed into symbolic artefacts—transformed into external symbolic media such as books, films or videogames (Clark, 1998: 210)—rendering interior experiences into a consumable format, 'a kind of multi-generational learning […] which greatly expands

the horizons of individual learning' (211) is made possible. External symbolic media are in this sense a kind of highly sophisticated 'scaffolding', offering structures that are independent of the mind and which support and enrich cognition, enabling an individual mind to prescribe 'possible actions and interventions' (Clark, 1998: 50) with regards to an agent's environment and its contents.

The knowledge, values and insights contained within the CRPG are monomythic in nature, prescribing possible actions within the game world. Those actions and interventions can hypothetically be prescribed outside the game too; a player can actively adopt monomythic lessons in their day-to-day life. Videogames have an advantage here over language and other external symbolic media. Not only can they '"make present" a variety of objects that are spatially, temporally and socially absent from the "here and now"' thus actualising an entire world at any given moment (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 175), they can also generate an artificial, simulated environment within which monomythic knowledge can be practiced via embodied experience (gameplay).[75]

This virtual environment encourages the use of physical 'scaffolding' by the player's avatar to aid with cognition and problem solving. Consider for example a wall in a videogame, placed in such a way as to block the player's path. This wall is too tall to be climbed and too wide to be circumvented. Nearby however the player may find a box; should s/he get his/her avatar to drag this box over to the wall and climb atop it, they will find themselves suddenly able to scale the wall and continue along their intended path.

This principle can be observed in *Mass Effect* in gameplay mechanics. As noted at the end of

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[75] Gee's 'Situated Meaning Principle' (see 2003: 209).

the previous chapter, certain challenges within the game can only be overcome with the aid of squad members. Certain enemies have biotic shields (barriers) that are naturally resistant to biotic attacks, and until these shields have been depleted, a player who has opted to play as a biotic (the Adept or Vanguard class) will have great difficulty inflicting damage upon their enemy and defeating them, due to the fact that a biotic's strength tends to lie in biotics, as opposed to tech or weapons skills (Bioware, 2012). A biotic player who takes a tech- or weapons-skilled squad member on a mission however will not only have more firepower at their disposal, but also the assistance of allies better equipped to destroy biotic shields and enemy biotics. Squad members in this context are a form of 'scaffolding', aiding player cognition in terms of combat strategy. The monomythic value of association and cooperation is thus entrenched in the game's design; embodied strategic combat consequently becomes the embodied practice of monomythic values such as cooperation and association with others in the name of a higher cause.

That the CRPG serves as a medium for the transference of monomythic knowledge, values and insights as well their practice, strongly reflects the outlook of situated cognition theorists, who argue that there are indeed no clear boundaries between perception, cognition and action, that the 'flow of reason and the informational transformations it involves seem to criss-cross brain and world', with mind, body, and world emerging through continual dialogue 'as equal partners in the construction of robust, flexible behaviors' (Clark, 1998: 69, 45). Thinking is 'embodied' and human perception 'action-oriented'—skewed towards recognising affordances, details and features within the world that have some utility to humans with regards to their needs and interests (25), such as scaffolding.[76]

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[76] This notion is supported by radical constructivist theory; von Glasersvelt holds that 'knowledge does not constitute a 'picture' of the world… it comprises action schemes, concepts, and thoughts, and it distinguishes the ones that are considered advantageous from

Both 'real' and virtual worlds are accordingly viewed by the individual agent as an arena within which actions are capable of transforming problems faced by the mind (Clark, 1998: 66).[77] While simulations are notorious for being oversimplified, failing to factor in the contributions of environments and the physical bodies of individual agents and consequently providing an impoverished version of the 'real world' (96), I would argue that the CRPG is an exception. As an interactive design space, it replicates 'real world' relationships between agents, knowledge and environments in the sense that the player is encouraged to view these elements as affordances (what can and can't be done with them). Cognition is heavily tangled up with action, as is the case in 'real life'; embodied experiences within the complex semiotic domain of the videogame are grounded in the principle of *efficio cognosio* (learning by doing), which encourages meditation in the process of learning and mastering gameplay (Gee, 2003: 26).

In the CRPG, learning and mastering gameplay ('natural structure') is tied up with learning and mastering of the monomyth's symbolic values ('artifactual structure'; that is, learning through exposure to symbols [Hutchins & Hazelhurst, cited in Clark, 1998: 189]). Successful mastery of the design space—necessary for character, quest and narrative progression— requires that the player follow the monomythic narrative pattern. A competent player is therefore a competent hero in the monomythic sense. The player as a result comes to find

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those that are not' (1995: 114). Piaget similarly asserts that 'all knowledge is tied to action, and knowing an object or an event is to use it by assimilating it to an action scheme' (cited in von Glasersvelt, 1995: 56).

[77] Constructivist Chris Dede notes that virtual worlds are particularly advantageous in this context, as they encourage fluidity of identity and positive dishibition, and induce a playful 'desire for mastery' through mimesis (1995: 8, 6). By positive dishibition, Dede refers to the fact that virtual worlds provide a psychosocial moratorium in which 'real-world consequences are lowered' (Gee, 2003: 62), making them an ideal environment for embodied learning, thinking and action.

themselves not only learning and practising monomythic values within the game, but also thinking 'consciously and reflectively about some of their cultural models regarding [learning and] the world', juxtaposing them with 'new models that may conflict with or otherwise relate to them in various ways' (Gee, 2003: 211).[78]

By taking embodied action within the videogame's designed space, advancing through the monomythic narrative and its various rites of passage, a player in turn 'learns not only about the domain but about themselves and their current and potential capacities' (Gee, 2003: 67) in relation to monomythic values. The transformative potential of the videogame in this sense reflects an observation made by Joseph Campbell during an exchange with journalist Bill Moyers:

> MOYERS: How is consciousness transformed?
> CAMPBELL: Either by the trials themselves or by illuminating revelations.
> (Campbell & Moyers, 1991: 126)

In the case of the CRPG, both trials and illuminating revelations are offered. Yet the CRPG gamer's reflection on and manipulation of the game-as-design-space during the course of his/her adventures may involve more than the transformation of consciousness. The monomythic CRPG as an arena for embodied action facilitates practice and preparation for activities that can very well be enacted in 'real life', 'activities' referring here not to CRPG mechanics such as strategic combat, but rather to the abstract values of the monomythic narrative, such as the conquering of the self in service to society. Games are in this sense what Gee calls 'action-and-goal-directed preparation for, and simulations of, embodied experience' (2007: 147).

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[78] Gee's 'Cultural Models about Learning' and 'Cultural Models about the World' principles (2003: 166-167).

While the transference of such values into a general principle for life alone might not seem so farfetched an idea, the actualisation of these values as deeds within the 'real world' by comparison may seem like something of a stretch. Let us consider however the degree of interactivity and involvement offered by the CRPG, one unparalleled by any other external symbolic media, firstly in its capacity for embodied action and secondly in the mutual construction of narrative (through both the game designer's choices and how the player causes these choices to unfold through his actions, these actions in themselves, when they were done and in what order, as well as the player's 'imaginative projection' about characters, plot and the game world [Gee, 2003: 82]).

The first and last may be true of books and films for example, but the second and third points are not; videogame narratives are 'embodied in the player's own choices and actions in a way they cannot be in books and movies' (Gee, 2003: 82). Player investment in narrative and narrative outcome as a result is high, especially when one considers how the outcome of the game experience is as much about the striving for a valorised outcome as it is the construction and maintenance of an ideal self via the projective identity: a 'project in the making' which Gee suggests may help 'speak to, and possibly transform, the player's hopes, values, and fears' (200).

Play in the CRPG as performance, contest and ritual

One may dismiss games as mere 'recreation' outright, and yet to do so is to overlook the possibility that role-playing in the virtual world as an activity may indeed have 'real life' significance. It is widely held by sociologists for example that life is itself performative: one

sustained act by individuals (and teams) before an audience. This act can be conscious, semi-conscious or unconscious in nature, and may be received by the audience with varying degrees of cynicism or sincerity. The immediate goal of this performance is to create or reaffirm a certain impression about the individual for others, the ultimate goal is social recognition (Goffman, 1973).

This recognition is not automatic, but dependent upon two factors. The first is the individual's ability to produce and sustain a performance (Goffman, 1973: 75). How the actor's performance is received is in turn less the product of the expression given than it is the expression *given off*, and the maintenance of this expression is dependent upon the strict division of 'front' (deeds, personal characteristics, appearance, manner) from 'back'. The 'back' is a place where the act may be safely dropped, where 'illusions and impressions are openly constructed' (112) and where one's 'true' feelings, impulses and energies which might otherwise undermine the impression the individual strives to create are unmasked (111) (for example, one's bedroom).

The second determining factor where social recognition is concerned is whether the performance incorporates, exemplifies and reaffirms the 'officially accredited values' of the performer's society (Goffman, 1973: 35). Generally speaking, the individual as actor is motivated not by 'the moral issue of realizing these standards, but by the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized'. That is, it is the obligation or desire to appear socialised and moral which compels the actor to sustain a value-affirming performance (251).[79] Where in the 'real world' this regard is said to exert a strong

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[79] Admittedly, this is a rather cynical account, in that it frames morally conventional behaviour as being exclusively a product of the desire to 'keep up appearances', failing to

influence in shaping the individual agent's behaviour, in the CRPG it is how the game-as-system responds to the player's actions that shapes such behaviour. A player's attendance to or digression from rules—in particular those springing from monomythic values such as association and cooperation with others, and dedication of self to the greater good—will either draw positive feedback or negative feedback respectively.

An immediate manifestation of that feedback is the virtual equivalent of the 'real life' audience or society: NPCs. NPCs may cooperate with the player's avatar and assist him/her; if given adequate cause, they may also turn hostile and attack him/her. Unsanctioned behaviour within the CRPG can lead to foiled quests and the loss of rewards such as experience points and loot, hampering avatar development and gameplay and narrative progression. There is also the possibility of a 'game over', or a less valorised ending to that narrative.[80] A game's affirmation of 'monomythic' behaviour on the other hand manifests in successful quests, experience points, loot and the attainment of valorised outcomes. The player's desire I would conclude is not so much social recognition as it is achieving success where gameplay, narrative and a player's projective identity are concerned.

Where in 'real life' a role must be created and maintained by performance, the hero role is one assigned by game designers to the player as a default,[81] the authority of which must—as in 'real life'—be affirmed through deeds that reflect monomythic values (for example,

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take into account the moral character and values of the individual agent which may in fact have a basis in principle, as opposed to how s/he wishes to be regarded by others.

[80] *Mass Effect 2* for example has multiple endings, each which vary in degrees of success and triumph (in terms of whether Shepard and all his/her crew and squad members survive). These endings are determined according to whether the player has recruited and won the loyalty of sufficient squad members and adequately researched augmentative technology for both his/her spacecraft and crew (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012e).

[81] Certain components of the hero's 'front'—the kinds of deeds that are required in the course of the player's performance—are also predetermined. The performer's main 'real-world' identity serves here as a 'back'.

finishing the main quest and securing the salvation of the hero's society). And just as it is in 'real life', where the player's performance may arise first as an illusion aimed at upholding social rules and socially prescribed behaviour, there is arguably potential for the player's view of his/her fostered monomythic performance (and its discrepancy from 'reality', or—rather—believability) to shift from one of cynicism to sincere belief, from a desire to simply sustain an impression to actually realising the role and its implicit values *beyond* the game's 'stage'.

This point finds some support in social constructionist theory, which argues that the practice and subsequent internalisation of a role makes the institutional order it represents objectively real, just as it also makes the social world *subjectively* real for the individual (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 91). According to Wagner, performance theorist Richard Schechner's discussion of the terms 'make belief' and 'make-believe' further support this notion:

> For Schechner, 'make believe' is an imaginative act that retains the boundaries between real and play, and is denoted by merely 'pretending to believe.' By contrast, 'make belief' involves an intentional blurring of these boundaries in that performers are 'enacting the effects they want the receivers of their performances to accept "for real"' (2002, 35). That is, they are performing desire through a commitment to belief […] I argue that practitioners of religious persuasions can also be seen as engaging in a sort of make-belief in their performance of rituals, prayers, statements of creeds, and worship, convincing not only those watching but themselves as well that performance of belief is the same thing as belief. Of course, those who devote themselves to *Lost* or *Twilight* or *Star Wars* are also performing make-belief as evident in their engagement in ceremony, costuming, or video game play. (2012: 213–214)

A player's conviction in his/her performance I will suggest depends on the credibility of the game, firstly as a 'stage' for the practice of monomythic values. I will frame this discussion according to Zunshine's own discussion of fiction as a metarepresentation, 'a representation of a representation', comprised of two parts: the content of a representation (in this case the experience of the game) and its source, a 'tag' (2006: 47) (the game itself). That tag I argue allows the player to 'assign differently weighed truth-values to representations originating

from different sources' (47), thus making that tag (the game itself) responsible for how its content (the experience) is received, determining what degree of credibility it is given, as well as the 'boundaries within which each representation remains useful' (Cosmides & Tooby, cited in Zunshine, 2006: 52). That is, whether the content of the game—its monomythic values—are seen by the player as having utility beyond the game itself.

A videogame may present itself as nothing more than meaningless escapism, and the player may treat it as such. Should a game present itself in a symbolic light however (as in the fashion of mythology, according to Campbell) and render this symbolism transparent to the player, treating the hero's monomythic role with the necessary gravity, players may receive the game experience as more than recreation and engage with its symbolic meaning. The game as a stage must also be credible in a second sense: the world must be cohesive both in presentation and mechanics.

For play to take place, 'a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course' (Huizinga, 1955: 10) is required. Symbolic immersion can only occur when the virtual environment is 'comprehensive and realistic enough to induce the willing suspension of disbelief' (Dede, 1995: 6). Game worlds of inferior design and poor/illogical mechanics undermine role immersion on the part of the player, giving them cause to dismiss the videogame outright. A CRPG that is not sufficiently receptive and responsive to player choice and action also undermines the very nature of the genre as well as a player's ability to identify with his/her projective identity.

The second factor shaping a player's belief and investment in his/her CRPG experience is the subscribed terms of their performance according to the game's narrative, and by extension the

credibility and emotional effect of the narrative, of the plight of his/her society and of depicted moral/ethic dilemmas. Unless these factors are successfully attended to, the broader meaning and significance of the monomythic narrative would arguably not be perceived by the player or—worse—might be simply dismissed as being 'just another trope'.[82]

Suffice to say, when these factors work in accord to generate a believable experience, the player's performance in the virtual realm becomes—as in a performance in the 'real world'— a kind of exploration, an inventorying and realization of self, and not merely as a performed character (Goffman, 1973: 76), but of a player's idealised self (the projective identity). As noted by Huizinga, all play takes place within a 'magic circle', a 'temporary world within the ordinary world'; a stage, for example (1955: 10). Offering a well-constructed, credible stage—sealing the 'magic circle' as it were—I would argue is key to securing a player's investment in their role and performance and also in the identity play it entails.

Beyond the performative aspect of play in the CRPG, there is also the experience of the game as a contest both *for* something and as a representation *of* something, in this case the monomythic quest and the player's assumption and fulfilment of the role of the monomythic hero respectively (Huizinga, 1955: 13). This contest arises from what Huizinga calls the 'antithetical and agonistic basis of civilization' (75), as represented by the dualistic universe of the CRPG and taking the form of narrative and gameplay rites of passage—tests to the player's 'prowess: his courage, tenacity, resources and, last but not least, his spiritual powers—his "fairness"' (11). Fairness in this context is measured by the player's ability to

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[82] Of course by utilising the monomythic pattern the videogame like other mediums succumbs to some greater or lesser extent to the formulaic. Art nevertheless, unlike pure entertainment, strives to 'reshapes the formulaic to conform more closely to the world of experience' (Murray, 1998: 279), and it is only through such a reshaping that the CRPG can ever hope to inspire, move and educate players—a point I will explore in further detail in Chapter 7.

follow and master the rules of monomythic gameplay and narrative; by the symbolic

limitation and mastery of the self: 'the ability not to confuse its own tendencies with the

ultimate and highest goal' (211), which is a key lesson of the monomythic narrative.

The goal of the CRPG-as-contest is not just the salvation of the hero's society and the

resulting 'honour, esteem, prestige' (Huizinga, 1955: 50). As in the case of the CRPG-as-

performance, the player's action in response to gameplay challenges involves the realisation

and actualisation of symbolic values through action. It may be argued therefore that this

actualisation constitutes a ritual in its own right,[83] a sacred performance representing a cosmic

happening (25) in what Campbell calls the 'Cosmogonic Cycle' (2004: 240-241).

That performance serves as a form of identification through 'the mystic repetition or re-

presentation of the event' (Huizinga, 1955: 15), and the continuation of a mytho-spiritual

tradition aiding in the maintenance of this cycle and its inherent order (16).[84] The victory of

the monomythic hero hence has wider significance, in that it brings the player to a realisation

of monomythic values, of the triumph of good over evil and the salvation of the player (the

force behind this triumph) (56).

The transformative role of ritual in this sense has been widely acknowledged by scholars.

Rappaport for example lists performance alongside formality as 'the second sine qua non of

ritual' (cited in Wagner, 2012: 64). Durkheim in an analysis of ritual has described the

experience using the Greek term *ekstasis* ('being out of one's self'), noting that the

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[83] There are notable parallels here to the cybershaman practice of creating rituals within the
computer/cyberspace environment (see Martínková, 2008: 48).

[84] This view emerges from myth-ritualist theory, and was pioneered by Biblicist and Arabist
William Robertson Smith (Segal, 2004: 61) and further developed by Malinowski (1948) and
Eliade (1963) (see Segal, 2004: 49).

decorations worn by ritual participants serve as a material front for an interior transformation (cited in Bellah, 2011: 18).[85] In the case of the videogame I would argue it is the avatar that serves as the ritual decoration, a kind of 'mask' as it were. Rappaport agrees on this point, asserting that serious ritual performance has the 'capacity to transform not only the role but the personality of the participant, as in rites of passage', necessitating at the least a solidarity with fellow participants (in this case the social collective represented within the monomythic CRPG), if not a commitment to future action (cited in Bellah, 2011: 145).

Ritual action in cyberspace and the virtual worlds of videogames nevertheless are 'constantly faced with the evidence of its own quality as constructed, as arbitrary, and as artificial, a game played with no material stakes or consequence' (O'Leary, cited in Dawson, 2005: 21). This is the product according to Dawson of the heightened degree of reflexivity such mediums encourage, long seen to be characteristic of rational thought (2005: 26). We can see this reflexivity at work in the videogame in the player's negotiation of a projective identity. For commentators like O'Leary, this reflexivity is antithetical to traditional religious ritual practice, in that it serves to undermine its inherent 'mystery' and 'otherness' (Dawson, 2005: 22).

Besides the question of reflexivity, the fact that many virtual experiences of the sacred do not involve physical ritual or contact with an external transcendent power, has given rise to criticisms of such experiences as 'inauthentic'. Yet for practitioners of neo-paganism for example, authenticity is not an issue—the online simulacrum of 'real' ritual has in fact proven sufficient: 'In true postmodernist manner the "appearance" can stand in for the reality, if it

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[85] Geertz has identified the symbolic forms of ritual as a means for the unification of the 'world as lived and the world as imagined': '[It is] out of the context of concrete acts of religious observance that religious conviction emerges on the human plane […] In these plastic dramas men attain their faith as they portray it' (cited in Bellah, 2011: xvi).

generates the desired experience (whatever that may actually be)' (Dawson, 2005: 29). This in turn seems to suggest a shift in definition of what constitutes an 'authentic' experience (34); heightened reflexivity may very well serve as 'a new means of legitimating religious practice or even inducing "authentic" religious experience', with the experience of reflexivity itself perhaps becoming sacralised in the process (26).[86]

Conclusion

One may conclude that the CRPG's emphasis on monomythic structure and the way it acknowledges and rewards behaviour that upholds its implicit values, plays not only a socialising function—it also serves to *sacralise* the player's lived experience. That is, by structuring the gameplay according to the monomyth, imbuing each event with special significance and propelling the player to actualise anew or recreate cosmic events represented within the CRPG (such as the battle between good and evil), the game encourages the player to see situations, events and actions outside of the game as being imbued with similar significance, thus re-enchanting his/her life.

Together with the player's projective identity (as expressed by his/her performance within the game world) the CRPG presents a unique opportunity to convey monomythic knowledge, values and insights, as well as to encourage their adoption and practice as well, both within the game world and without.

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[86] Wade Clark Roof has even gone so far as to assert that this reflexivity may be reflecting and building upon a broader 'reflexive spirituality' emerging from modern social conditions (Dawson, 2005: 28), one which may ultimately be attributed to an evolution in humanity's symbolic understanding and experience of the sacred (Bellah; Dawson; Lambert; Roof, cited in Dawson, 2005: 33).

7. THE CRPG AS PERSUASIVE EXPERIENCE

Summary of argument

In this chapter I will argue that while videogames have the potential to fulfil the functions traditionally played by mythology, that potential rests in the hands of game designers. Even so, the videogame as a text is polysemic in meaning and a monomythic interpretation is not fixed. Yet unlike other texts the videogame employs procedural rhetoric: persuasion through a series of actions and the manipulation of symbols within the game world. The full potential of procedural rhetoric in the CRPG however has not yet been tapped. Most CRPGs do not attempt to teach the individual how to utilise monomythic values in the context of everyday moral/ethical dilemmas, and many contain rule systems that allow players to break the spirit (but not the letter) of the monomythic 'law' through unethical behaviour, while still paying lip service to the monomyth's broader goals.

Such freedoms serve to undermine the hero's image and the values s/he represents, as opposed to simply allowing the player to challenge the system through choices that run contrary to the narrative pattern and bear persuasive consequences. The formulaic way in which the monomythic narrative is often told and in which the monomythic hero is represented (as a figure of exceptional battle prowess) can also work against the persuasive experience, subverting player engagement and encouraging an outright dismissal of a monomythic game's intended significance. Should these issues be overcome, the medium will achieve its potential to facilitate more than hedonistic daydreaming: namely, the conception of better worlds and selves, in keeping with monomythic values.

Making implicit monomythic themes explicit

Scholar Heidi Campbell has made the observation that religious communities actively negotiate and shape the functionality and symbolic qualities (and therefore meaning) of technology according to their own needs, desires and ideology (2010), identifying communal discourses as playing a key role, establishing foundational rules for individual engagement as well as identifying a path for future use of other technologies by that community (2010: 134).[87] In the case of the CRPG I would argue we are dealing less with technology (that is, videogames and the devices that facilitate them: computers and consoles) than with a specific *genre* of game, and less with a community of belief than a community based on a shared *interest*.

This community does not have a unified set of values, priorities, ideology, history, tradition or even an existential meta-narrative as such;[88] community solidarity is simply the product of player's participation in gameplay and game-related activities. The CRPG community therefore lacks organisation, is non-hierarchical in composition and is loosely comprised of a geographically, socially and culturally disparate assortment of game designers, critics, commentators, academics, players and fans united in their interest in the CRPG genre or a specific CRPG game. Their involvement may range from playing a single CRPG game or a series of games, to active discussion of the game within an academic or professional context or in game-related online forums and in person with other players, to creating fan art, machinima (the use of videogame graphics rendering engines to produce cinematic works)

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[87] Heidi Campbell differentiates between three different types of discourse: 'prescriptive', 'officializing' and 'validation' (see 2010: 156–157).

[88] I would also note that the CRPG does not generally lend itself to sociality and interaction to the extent a MMORPG might, simply by the very nature of it being a single-player experience.

and cosplay (performance art which involves adopting the costumes and accessories of a videogame character), to actual games themselves.

For all this community's non-hierarchical nature, is must be said that game designers do occupy a position of some seniority as producers of key communal texts. Their games are the CRPG community's equivalent of a religious community's 'sacred text' (I would hasten to point out that while the game does not play the same function as a sacred text—'providing guidance for daily life and faith-based cultural practices' [H. Campbell, 2010: 16]—it does serve as the source for that community and the practices by which its existence is facilitated). This of course is the source of game designer's authority.

Unlike leaders in those religious communities surveyed by Heidi Campbell, game designers occupy a unique position as both authors and (to some extent) interpreters of communal texts. Their creative vision renders them natural leaders of videogame communities. This is not to imply that they are by any means untouchable or infallible—quite the contrary. They and their works are subject to intense communal scrutiny and judgement, with paying consumers ultimately having the final say where interpretation of the game-as-text is concerned, with some even going so far as to claim 'ownership' of a game or franchise (as can be seen in the case of the reaction by fans to *Mass Effect 3's* ending; for a summary of the affair see Formato, 2012).

While this thesis has identified a monomythic interpretation of the narrative and the ludic components of the CRPG, it is clear that this interpretation is not necessarily intentional on the part of designers. That is, the monomythic structure serves a strictly functional role; its goal is not necessarily to fulfil functions traditionally served by mythology, or to promote

monomythic values, but rather to offer compelling narrative and gameplay. Likewise a player will not come to such a reading by default, unless these themes are rendered transparent and accessible to the player.

Signposting of such themes however can be problematic. For example, CRPGs by convention often assign the player an eschatological goal: save the world. The implied message is one of individual responsibility to society. To state this message outright would be to undermine if not compromise the game's artistic vision and the gameplay experience by revealing ulterior, ideological motives. That is, motives which go beyond producing an enjoyable gameplay experience (the game designer's main prerogative, at least so far as the players are concerned) such as conveying an ideological message.

Thus what is essential is that such signposting bring the message to the player's attention without emphasising the act itself, or ulterior motives on the part of the designer. As authors of the game-as-text, emphasising a monomythic reading is a duty that best falls to game designers. Yet the function of the videogame traditionally has been conceived (and perceived) as being, first and foremost, entertainment. As to whether the CRPG should also be identified as modern mythology, consequently inheriting its traditional functions, is a matter for the CRPG community to determine. It is this community after all that sets 'guidelines on the production, interpretation, and interaction with these texts' (Campbell, 2010: 16), and which decides which games it will consume. The latter is a key determinant where the market and the kind of products it produces is concerned.

And as evinced by concessions made by *Mass Effect* developer BioWare to fans angered by the videogame series' conclusion—a free 'extended cut' of *Mass Effect 3*[89]—developers are indeed willing to listen to their customers. Should players demand that the current CRPG formula utilise both the structure *and* the essence of the monomythic cycle, developers may very well comply. Videogame communities as already noted however lack the organisation, consensus and initiative required to drive such a shift. What is required then are daring designers with the talent to produce an engaging game but also infuse it with the monomythic spirit, encouraging what Morgan calls a 'sacred gaze' by establishing a set of rules that contextualise the world according to a specific system of belief (in this case, that of the monomyth) (Wagner, 2012: 215).

Procedural rhetoric in the CRPG

Where many alternative spiritualities have some demonstrable 'ontic component', this does not in fact appear to be the case with the monomythic CRPG. Even as it might serve as a medium for the exploration of monomythic values, no 'real world' moral or social demand is made of players. Foregrounding of monomythic values alone cannot make the player consciously and critically engage with these values, and such engagement I would argue is necessary for the adoption and practice of such values outside of the game world. And while monomythic values may comprise the dominant encoding meanings (the underlying message of the CRPG) the videogame as a text is polysemic in meaning and must be decoded and interpreted (Partridge, 2004: 125). Readers as a result may engage either critically or uncritically with the text's contents, rejecting its message outright or entering into a

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[89] Promising 'additional cinematic sequences and epilogue scenes', giving 'fans seeking further clarity to the ending of *Mass Effect 3* deeper insights into how their personal journey concludes' (EA Investor Relations, 2012a).

relationship of negotiation (125).

Where the videogame differs from other texts however is in its 'potential for telling stories about whole systems […] [through a] virtual world full of interrelated entities, a world we can enter, manipulate, and observe in process' (Murray, 1998: 280). The procedural nature of the game world has in turn enabled a process of persuasive communication, what Bogost calls 'procedural rhetoric'. Procedural rhetoric is concerned with the representation and communication of a certain point of view (Bogost, 2007: 135), where the ultimate goal is to support or challenge the player's understanding of 'the way things in the world do or should work' (60). It is one means by which monomythic CRPGs can prescribe an ontic component.

To understand the potential of procedural rhetoric to shape player opinion and knowledge, one must look to radical constructivist theory. Where knowledge is most conventionally posited as 'the representation of a world outside and independent of the knower' (von Glasersfeld, 1995: 113) it is actually 'built up by the cognizing subject; the function of cognition is adaptive and serves the organization of the experiential world, not the discovery of ontological reality' (18). That is to say, individuals shape their experience into a structured world (57), and it is here that the persuasive potential of procedural rhetoric can have most influence. Humans after all 'develop attitudes towards their experience because they like certain parts of it and dislike others' (Piaget, cited in von Glasersfeld, 1995: 113). Their actions are consequently goal-directed, oriented towards repeating experiences on the basis of having 'liked' them (von Glasersfeld, 1995: 113), or—as I will suggest—on the basis of having been *persuaded* of liking and agreeing with the ideology that informs them.

Procedural rhetoric makes arguments with rule-based computational systems such as the

videogame (Bogost, 2007: 23), invoking 'interpretations of processes in the material world' (18). These arguments make claims 'about how part of the system it represents does, should, or could function' (36), while allowing 'the user to mount procedural objections through configurations of the system itself' (37) (for example, undermining that system by disobeying its rules). The ability to engage in direct engagement and criticism of that system is part and parcel with the process of persuasion (260).[90]

Procedural rhetoric usually takes the form of the Aristotelian enthymeme: a 'technique in which a proposition in a syllogism is omitted; the listener (in the case of oratory) is expected to fill in the missing proposition and complete the claim' (Bogost, 2007: 56). The overarching enthymeme in the context of the CRPG is the eschatological threat faced by the hero and his/her society at the hands of the tyrant: the tyrant threatens the hero's society/world with destruction. This destruction can be averted if the tyrant is defeated. The missing proposition is the hero who responds to the 'call to adventure', overcomes the 'supreme ordeal' and attains the boon; that is, addresses the plight of their society, destroys the tyrant and secures the salvation of the collective.

Persuasion according to Bogost depends upon 'the player's ability to see and understand the simulation author's implicit or explicit claims about the logic of the situation represented' (2007: 346). These claims in the case of the monomythic CRPG are not usually foregrounded, and often employ tropes that are so well-worm and familiar as to discourage any critical engagement (take for example the overly simplified good-evil dualism). However, when the player *does* identify an author's claims—the essential lessons of the monomythic narrative—

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[90] Procedural rhetoric looks at the way 'processes come together to create meaning', providing an alternative to the 'abstraction-poor behaviorist approach and the subject-poor constructivist approach' (Bogost, 2007: 262).

the 'disparity between the simulation and the player's understanding of the source system it models creates a crisis in the player', encouraging an interrogation of the rules in which these systems are grounded, fuelling critical engagement and analysis (Bogost, 2007: 346). The player will be driven to perform a kind of mental synthesis, 'filling the gap between subjectivity and game processes', providing the missing proposition in the syllogism via action with the game world (56).

The freedoms inherent to the CRPG mean that a player may in fact choose not to supply the missing proposition, leaving the enthymeme incomplete. S/he need not fulfil the main quest or save the hero's society, and may chose instead to occupy her or himself with any number of side-quests and activities, or to quit the game altogether. An incomplete enthymeme however means an unfinished game; a player who does not complete the game will not see the spoils of their efforts, such as a valorised narrative outcome or the valorised apotheosis of their avatar within the monomythic cycle. They will also not experience the sense of personal success that comes from contemplating and realising the idealised self-image.[91]

CRPG freedom vs. procedural rhetoric

The presence of procedural rhetoric in the CRPG I would argue is more incidental than intentional. The application of the narrative pattern (supposing it is a conscious act to begin with) is a decision more immediately driven by the fact that is is successful, as opposed to a desire to persuade players of monomythic values. It is perhaps for this reason that any attempt by the CRPG at persuading players of such values both within and outside of the game world

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[91] One might argue nevertheless that this is unlikely on the grounds that an unfinished game is antithetical to the very nature of the experience; the player plays after all with the ultimate intention of 'winning'. An unfinished game is therefore tantamount to failure.

are often incomplete, with the game failing to posit a specific value system for everyday life and neglecting to deal with genuine moral/ethical dilemmas.

It may be argued that to do so might undermine the CRPG's hallowed emphasis on choice and freedom and by extension much of the genre's appeal. Yet for procedural rhetoric to work, freedom and choice are essential. Players must have the ability to undermine or mount an argument *against* the CRPG's overarching message (that monomythic values are the key to individual and social success), challenging the system. And it is when that system fails to push back, permitting actions that run counter to the rhetoric of the monomythic narrative, that this rhetoric turns to farce. CRPGs that give players the latitude to challenge without consequence are often games where heroes can commit devious (or to be more specific, unheroic) deeds while still fulfilling their heroic destiny, achieving a valorised outcome.

Achieving this outcome positively reinforces such behaviour, affirming the notion that unheroic behaviour by monomythic heroes is perfectly acceptable; that a player can use any number of murderous, devious or selfish means to fulfil their quest, thus attaining apotheosis without the requisite transcendence of ego. This contradiction undermines the sanctity of the player's image of the monomythic hero and the credibility of their projective identity, in turn affecting the player's ability to relate to the monomythic hero and to assimilate the values s/he inherently stands for.

That players themselves do not sense or feel an aversion to actions that openly contradict these values may be attributed to the fact that virtual realms do not have the same kinds of consequences and responsibilities that 'real life' does (Dagger, cited in Tresca, 2010: 176). This is the result of the artificiality of play; killing an NPC obviously has none of the weight

of killing a real human being. A lack of player inhibition in this regard may also be put down to the game designer's failure to use procedural rhetoric in such a way as to dissuade players against behaviour that contradicts monomythic values and the image of the monomythic hero as virtuous. The CRPG's emphasis on freedom and choice by its very nature creates 'social contexts in which, very often, behaviours take place that would be strictly forbidden in society at large', something Salen and Zimmerman term 'forbidden play' (2004: 77).

Gameplay linearity or narrative didactics nonetheless hardly seem the solution. After all, for procedural rhetoric to be effective in the first place, some degree of freedom must exist for the player to independently 'oppose, question, or otherwise internalize' the claims of the represented value system, by considering the processes it includes and excludes, the rules it enforces and how 'those rules correlate, correspond, or conflict with an existing morality outside the game' (Bogost, 2007: 297)[92]. Play within moral boundaries is thus integral to the experience; by 'sharing control of the moral world with the player and allowing the player to practice or experiment with moral choices, [game] designers create a sandbox' where procedural rhetoric can be challenged, and 'where the player can practice living with values' (Simkins, cited in Wagner, 2012: 171).

One means of persuading players against unheroic actions might be rules that effectively identify a moral framework within the game, offering a 'frame or horizon within which […] [the player] can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to

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[92] In the words of Newgren:

> evil must be available as an option in order for someone to be able to choose to do good. A true hero is tempted, but is able to overcome that temptation […] Great games leave choices open to the participant. Rather than taking direction from textbooks and spelling out ideas in a literal fashion, games that capitalize on the strength of the medium allow the gamer to experience ethical dilemmas and draw one's own conclusions. (2010: 114)

be done, or what I endorse or oppose' (Taylor, 1989: 2). Rules prevent and encourage certain actions on the part of the player by specifying restrictions and affordances (Juul, 2005: 58), adding meaning to those actions that *are* allowed (58).[93] I have already mentioned the bounty system of *Skyrim*, by which a player's crimes can be easily dismissed, upon the payment of a lump sum to the appropriate authority.

This I would argue serves as a rather poor argument *for* behaviour that conforms to monomythic values. For rules to have weight, they must have believable, significant consequences that visibly affect the CRPG hero's image, role and quests,[94] especially where unheroic conduct committed by a player is concerned. For without such consequences, it would require a particularly conscientious player to critically engage with the underlying logic of the game's monomythic system, let alone the intended rhetorical persuasion. Rather, the ability to slay the innocent willy-nilly in games such as *Skyrim* only implies that it is in fact a *perfectly acceptable* action for the player to commit, so long as they get away with it. However dubious his/her actions, the CRPG hero can maintain his/her status, so long as s/he fulfils the main quest in a satisfactory manner. That status, it seems, is as immutable and problematic as the logic governing such amoral game worlds.

Unfortunately, this 'ends justify the means' approach informs the design of a number of other CRPGs, including *Mass Effect*. Take for instance the Paragon/Renegade system, according to which Renegade actions are not punished but in fact *rewarded* (in the form of an increased Renegade score and thus ability to use Intimidate). Another example can be seen in a key

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[93] Players furthermore accept these rules because without them there would be no game (Juul, 2005: 37)—they have what Bernard Suits calls a 'lusory attitude' (cited in Salen & Zimmerman, 2004: 574).

[94] And which also, I would suggest, utilise the videogame's affective capacity to shape the player's experience of the world. For instance, what better persuasion *against* the slaughter of innocents could there be than witnessing the grieving spouses and children of the slain?

decision towards the end of *Mass Effect*. The player is given the choice to save the Citadel Council from certain destruction, yet choosing to ignore their plight does not incur any penalty or negative feedback. The game rather frames the decision as a tactical rather than an ethical decision (Commander Shepard frames his responses to the dilemma in terms of priorities—either to the Council or to humanity). That leaving the Council to die is—according to monomythic values—an unheroic action, is entirely overlooked by the game narrative.

A similar sense of moral ambiguity can be witnessed in *Skyrim*, when the player is presented with the choice of supporting one of two factions in a civil war. This choice does not affect the plot in any meaningful way; there are no moral implications for supporting either faction, or for allowing certain towns to fall under their control as part of the terms of a truce later in the narrative. In another case, the player may be given a quest that involves killing the matron of an orphanage. Not only do her charges not seem to mind the player's violent intrusion— quite the contrary, some seem *delighted* by the matron's death—a player who decides to follow through with the quest will not even receive a bounty for their crime.[95] The game in such cases fails to respond to the player's choice in a way that references monomythic values.

One can only assume that designers do not indeed believe that the 'ends justify the means', and that the resulting procedural rhetoric is purely an accident. In order to rectify such flawed rhetoric, videogame designers would need to explicitly problematise player choices that do not reflect the values of the monomythic narrative, using consequences which do not undermine the freedom inherent to the genre and which also allow players to critically engage

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[95] That this is a Dark Brotherhood (assassin) quest appears to make the player immune to the scrutiny and long arm of the law.

with this very same logic.[96]

Morality systems and procedural rhetoric

Part of the problem here is that instead of attempting to inculcate a specific morality within the player, videogame designers have instead attempted to create sophisticated morality *systems* in which the player has the freedom to choose whether they want to be 'good', 'bad' or 'neutral'. Consequence takes the place of the penalty, and these consequences are often less about karma than they are about expressivism (how certain acts serve to construct the hero's identity). They are in essence a reward for the player having made a choice. One example of this is the popular CRPG franchise *Fable*,[97] which promotes itself as a series in which the player's every action contributes towards building either a positively or negatively aligned character, as is reflected in their appearance and social reputation (Hayse, 2010: 38).[98]

The moral decisions presented to players in *Fable* however hardly constitute genuine moral/ethical dilemmas; more often than not they boil down to whether the player will let specific NPCs live or die (thus confining their choice to mindless mercy or mindless ruthlessness).[99] What's more, the morality system is undermined by the fact that moral behaviour is quantified and so trivialised: 'a player could simply donate to the appropriate evil or good deity to reverse the consequences of ethical choices made in other parts of the game' (Tresca, 2010: 151).

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[96] Designers are undoubtedly aware that directly penalising the player serves to discourage players from fully embracing and experimenting with the open-world design, limiting or degrading their overall experience of the game.

[97] Fable [Computer software]. (2004). Redmond, WA: Microsoft Studios.

[98] These actions also serve to determine the fate of individuals and the fictional nation of Albion (as in *Fable III*).

[99] Take for example the 'Find the Bandit Seeress' quest in *Fable*; see Fable Wiki, 2012a for more details.

Similarly shallow moral mechanics such as the Paragon/Renegade system of *Mass Effect*

merely encourage a pragmatic rather than self-reflexive approach. Rather than behave in an

upright manner because of some innate desire to do so or because it seems like the right thing

to do (while holding perhaps a vague expectation of reward for their upright behaviour

somewhere down the track), a player will simply act in manner that promises to improve

either their Paragon or Renegade score or cosmetic details such as appearance,[100] the various

associated morality alignment benefits, as well as improved NPC relationships[101] and

narrative.

This design effectively promotes player expressivism through moral alignment, rewarding the

player for choosing and building his/her moral identity via options that have been

predetermined by a designer, as opposed to encouraging the player to take a moral stand out

of the desire to be moral, let alone encouraging him/her to critically engage with the game

system. Not only do such systems fail to represent the difficulties surrounding moral/ethical

decision-making, they discourage the negotiation of legitimate solutions by making players

choose one predetermined moral path over another, as in *Mass Effect* with the

Paragon/Renegade system: intimidate or persuade a player into obeying you (as in the quest

involving Samesh), kill or don't kill an NPC (as in the incident with Wrex on Virmire).

Morality in this case is reduced to a simple, perfunctory decision. On what basis then can

players critically engage with the systems depicted, and with their own decisions and the

[100] A high Renegade score in *Mass Effect 2* transforms Commander Shepard's appearance, giving him a rather menacing look, marked by two glowing red eyes. A high Paragon score on the other hand will cause the numerous scars on the commander's face resulting from his revival at the hands of Cerberus to disappear (Mass Effect Wiki, 2012c).
[101] Being sympathetic or indifferent/cruel to an NPC for example will earn Paragon and Renegade points in certain instances. It may also affect Shepard's romantic relationship with that character (see Mass Effect Wiki, 2012k).

consequences they might bear?

Applying the scholarly distinction of 'explicit curriculum' and 'implicit curriculum' in his discussion of *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*,[102] Hayse (2010) identifies a useful means by which game designers can appropriately render the themes and values of the monomythic CRPG more transparent. Explicit curriculum he indicates 'consists of publicly identified educational aims, objectives, and content', while 'the implicit or hidden curriculum consists of value-laden rules, processes, and procedures that subtly shape an educational environment' (35). An effective 'educational' experience is one where both curriculums are utilised.

Ultima IV for example employs a 'virtue' system that keeps record of the player's ongoing behaviour and response to ethical choices. Once all virtues are at a score of one hundred points each, the player attains Avatarhood (a literalised 'apotheosis'). Each action the player takes earns or reduces virtue points; these consequences however are not explicitly listed or quantified. Which choice constitutes 'right' or 'wrong' is something the player himself/herself must find out. The game's 'complicated matrix of ethical dilemmas' serves here as the explicit curriculum, whereas the implicit curriculum is the 'hidden rules and programmed equations' that 'govern game play [sic]' (Hayse, 2010: 35). Through careful study of the game world, of the actions and consequences of navigating this matrix, the player comes to understand these rules and in doing so masters the game.

This virtue system serves as a 'moral economy', one much like the Paragon/Renegade scores of *Mass Effect*, the key difference here being that any player who takes the time to read the *Mass Effect* game manual for example will be able to identify from the outset which kind of

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[102] Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar [Computer software]. (1985). Japan: Pony Canyon.

dialogue options and actions will affect which scores. Options of both alignment are also usually located in the same position in the game's 'dialogue' wheel, or coloured blue or red to signify which options utilise the 'Persuade' or 'Intimidate' skills (and which are Paragon- or Renegade-aligned and hence likely to increase the respective scores). Knowing outright that a certain action will trigger valorised or non-valorised results however gives them no cause for taking an exploratory approach to moral decision-making within the game world. As Hayes notes:

> Players discover quite easily—perhaps too easily—what they should or shouldn't do in order to fix problems, make friends, exploit resources, and win the game. Wrong turns and bad choices weigh very little in such games. Players quickly detect them, returning to the last saved game in order to try again. In contrast, Garriott's [the designer of *Ultima IV*] decision to largely conceal the moral economy sets *Ultima IV* apart from other video games. Although players come to understand the importance of virtue early in the game, the means of practicing virtue remain ambiguous. As game play progresses, Garriott's curriculum of virtue gradually moves from the implicit to the explicit, from mystery to clarity. This gradual movement can be described as 'unfolding revelation'. (2010: 38)

Overly transparent systems encourage players to view the game's rules on purely functional terms, rather than embracing the monomythic spirit driving it. As a consequence 'even the most exquisite moral economy quickly degenerates into a mere rule system to exploit', whereas games that employ unfolding revelation effectively 'transform the game play experience of a moral economy from statistical manipulation into poetic spirituality' (Hayse, 2010: 42), cultivating a sense of uncertainty, anticipation and mystery for players and promoting exploration, investigation and experimentation.[103]

In *Ultima IV*, players have the freedom to investigate, question and challenge the system through their various interactions in the game world (for example, by choosing to battle

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[103] There are interesting parallels here to the medieval concept of the sacred quest, whereby 'Only through searching, groping, and fumbling for the Good could the Good finally be identified and known' (MacIntyre, cited in Hayse, 2010: 40).

certain enemies or allowing their enemies to flee a battle unscathed). In encouraging critical reflection, the game employs procedural rhetoric. Through trial and error, players are persuaded step-by-step towards an understanding of the significance and complexity of the notion of virtue, and of how and when to practise justice, honor, compassion etc., but also of the need for 'ongoing ethical self-assessment' in the pursuit of virtue (Hayse, 2010: 39). *Ultima IV* thus presents an example of how procedural rhetoric can be most successfully employed to facilitate critical engagement with genuine moral/ethical dilemmas and the negotiation of solutions, in conjunction with monomythic values.

Towards a new vision of the monomythic CRPG

The extraction and distillation of the monomyth into a narrative framework sans spiritual resonance poses yet another challenge to successful procedural rhetoric in the CRPG, as does the ubiquity of the monomythic narrative structure in popular culture. This ubiquity has led inevitably to a crystallisation of monomythic motifs into tropes such as the eschatological narrative and the hero as destined saviour. Such tropes by virtue of being overly familiar I would argue discourages players from critically engaging with the monomyth and its lessons, as well as the the problems faced by the fictional hero and his/her society and the methods used to address those problems. The player as a result remains firmly grounded in the realm of escapist abstraction.

The fact that success in the CRPG is traditionally determined by an avatar's combat abilities, with the 'boss battle' serving here as the penultimate challenge, makes it next to impossible for a player to critically engage with the notion of the much romanticised hero-as-warrior, or hero-as-monster-slayer. This form of the hero archetype Joseph Campbell argues is the

product of a prehistoric existence in which human beings were still shaping their 'world out of a dangerous, unshaped wilderness' (Campbell & Moyers, 1991: 166).[104]

This archetype has since evolved in conjunction with the development of human culture, both in the form taken by the hero and the actions s/he performs, with the hero's great deed in many cases ceasing to be a physical act and becoming instead a deed transposed into symbolic meaning, as in the case of mythopoeia (Slochower, 1973: 15). So why then does the CRPG hero still primarily take the form of the monster-slayer of pre-modern society?[105] Why, furthermore, must the hero's great deed be physical, and not spiritual? Why the Dragonborn, and not Dante or Faust? Why must the hero's struggles be an external journey and not an internal journey? As Juul observes:

> Video games […] less commonly address the more complex interactions between humans such as friendships, love, and deceit. We can suggest many reasons why this is so—we can blame unimaginative game designers; we can blame a conservative game audience; we can blame a risk-averse game industry; and finally we can look at game design and see that the game form lends itself more easily to some things than to others […] (2005: 24)

The inherent nature of the medium is also pertinent here in another way. Daft and Lengel's media richness theory identifies a number of factors which constitute the terms on which a media's 'richness' is measured: 'the medium's ability to provide instant feedback; the capacity to transmit multiple cues such as body language, expression, and inflection; the use of natural language; and the personal focus of the medium' (Tresca, 2010: 6). Videogames trump the novel in the first three criteria for media richness: as a medium the former offers a highly visual, tactile, interactive, first-person experience.

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[104] The attraction to the warrior-hero and father-slayer archetype according to Freudian theory represents an inability on the part of neurotic adult males to overcome their Oedipus complex (see Segal, 2004: 93).

[105] I would be remiss if I did note here one popular exception: the science-fiction action game *Deus Ex*, which avoids the hero-as-warrior cliché, providing alternate paths and styles of play, and encouraging and even rewarding the use of stealth over combat (Gee, 2003: 158)

This experience provides the kind of feedback merited by the intense concentration and involvement that gameplay inherently necessitates, making it arguably well suited to the mechanics of dungeon-crawling, monster-slaying and treasure-hunting. In emphasising what Barton calls 'roll-playing' ('finding the best equipment, fighting monsters, gaining levels, and rising in rank' [2008: 46]) at the expense of *role*-playing has only fuelled the notion of the CRPG hero as an individual distinguished by his strength as opposed to virtue (437).

A literary medium such as a book on the other hand is a third person-experience which encourages an inherently more personal focus, and is better geared towards offering a highly complex, emotionally rewarding metaphysical or spiritual experience (take for example Raskolnikov's interior struggles in *Crime and Punishment*). The CRPG's inability to provide such an experience can be put down to the current limitations of the medium, a medium that by most standards is still very much in its infancy. Videogames as a form of entertainment also stand in a different league to literature; their role first and foremost is to provide entertainment, and to satisfy the tastes of the market. Gameplay therefore takes precedence over narrative.[106]

This is not to imply that videogames are inherently incapable of providing experiences similar to those of literature. Nor does it suggest that they cannot facilitate the exploration of complex moral/ethical issues and the internal life of the individual. The videogame has after all already made forays into this territory, *Ultima IV* being one example of a CRPG that defies

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[106] As Juul notes when addressing the question 'Why are video games fun?': 'One idea states that the all-important quality factor of a game is its gameplay, the pure interactivity of the game. In other words, that the quality of a game hinges on its rules, on the game-as-rules rather than on the game-as-fiction' (Juul, 2005: 23).

convention, forgoing sheer dungeon-crawling in favour of 'a quest for spiritual fulfilment' (Barton, 2008: 183).

We can be confident therefore that as more innovations are made and creative risks taken, the medium, the experience it offers and the way players engage with it will continue to evolve. In the words of Barton however, 'craft trumps innovation' (349), and as one will see from any casual survey of the games presently on offer, the efforts of game designers in general have concentrated less on innovation with narrative than crafting appealing aesthetics and gameplay.

Idealism in the videogame

Part of the appeal of videogames as already noted lies in their ability to aid in 'the construction of day-dreams' (C. Campbell, 2005: 92)—a key feature of hedonism. These daydreams substitute 'illusory for real stimuli […] creating and manipulating illusions and hence the emotive dimension of consciousness' by constructing an ideal environment for the pleasure-seeker (203), offering consolation, respite and escape (Detweiler, 2010: 2) and facilitating the player's contemplation of an idealised self-image and promoting the belief that s/he indeed possesses the qualities represented therein (C. Campbell, 2005: 214). This can be observed in the tangible sense of progress, self-improvement and empowerment a videogame bestows upon players, through avatar development and other advances made within the design space, the narrative and the player's game-related skills and knowledge. The videogame in this sense is an expression of a modern hedonistic culture oriented around pleasurable consumption.

While hedonism can be labelled as 'self-interested', 'it also constitutes "idealism" in the sense of being activity aimed at fulfilling an ideal' (C. Campbell, 2005: 213). We can see this at work in the game world, with 'conduct undertaken for petty or self-seeking ends' (that is, the improvement of the player's avatar) ultimately serving a greater, 'idealistic or altruistic' cause (210), such as the salvation of society. The 'self-illusory pleasure-seeker' who indulges in daydreaming via videogames may thus find that in following and fulfilling the monomythic cycle, the hedonic impulse becomes a genuine desire to adopt and practise ideals represented within that cycle not merely within the game, but also *without* it, the gamer's pattern of behaviour leading 'unwittingly in the direction of an idealistic commitment' (86, 212).

Conclusion

This process is by no means automatic. Not all players will necessarily perceive the underlying monomythic ideals, let alone critically engage with them or adopt them outside of the game world. Before the CRPG can fulfil its potential as modern mythology, thus fulfilling the sociological and pedagogical functions played by myths past, three things are required. Firstly, an avoidance of tropes. Secondly, the representation of—and ability to negotiate solutions to—genuine moral/ethical dilemma. And thirdly, a harnessing of procedural rhetoric that critically engages and persuades the player of the monomyth's fundamental lessons without detracting from the essential gameplay experience, granting players the freedom necessary to challenge the game system while preserving the sanctity of the monomythic hero's image.

8. CONCLUSION

In harnessing Joseph Campbell's monomythic narrative structure, the CRPG has inherited an orientation that distinctly reflects that of alternative spiritualities and the principle of authenticity. Despite its focus on individual experience as a source of meaning and fulfilment, and on self-betterment, it also identifies a greater cause beyond the self: society. The unique fusion of the fantastic narrative with gameplay built on a rationalistic framework furthermore reflects not merely an attempt to access the transcendent through the fantastic, but also a desire to *structure* that experience according to materialist principles. It is here that one strikes upon a fascinating paradox: while the CRPG facilitates escapism, there is something distinctly *work-like* in the processes entailed by the videogame experience (for example, 'levelling' one's avatar).

Contrary though it might seem, escapist pleasure and virtual labour meld well. A logical system of labour and advancement rationalises the spiritual and exonerates the player's conscience for using the fantastic fiction as a surreptitious means of access to the spiritual. The development of an avatar via a numerical levelling system and the parcelling up of the individual's journey to apotheosis into quests emphasises measurable, practical means for the attainment of transcendence, a means that seems otherwise lacking in our age of uncertainty. The monomythic CRPG provides something of a recourse in another sense, in the form of an environment where a player may safely practise and realise monomythic values via their idealised self: the projective identity.

The practice of these values can be viewed in turn as the practice of a timeless ritual,

confirming the triumph of the good over the bad as well as challenging and renewing contemporary social values. Practice of such values however does not amount to persuasion of their usefulness. Nor does it guarantee that they will even be used. The videogame as a medium nevertheless has an advantage here, in its procedural structure and thus capacity for persuasion. While the monomythic CRPG by nature employs procedural rhetoric, designers however are not dressing the narrative in a symbolic form that reflects the conditions of contemporary life, instead trotting out familiar eschatological plots and tired old tropes that have attained such ubiquity in popular culture as to discourage critical engagement.

The absence of genuine contemporary moral/ethical dilemmas is another issue, as best represented by game designers' use of morality systems that may be construed as a form of expressivism, and by the reliance on overly clear-cut or hopelessly ambiguous notions of morality. The perennial problems of suffering and evil however are not so easily addressed outside of the fictional abstract. What is required then is a more transparent rendering of the hero's continued role and significance, not only in the popular imagination but also to day-to-day life. It falls to the designers to throw off abstraction for escapism's sake and depict moral/ethical dilemmas and situations that mirror those faced by the player *outside* the virtual world, using the game experience as a forum for the negotiation and practice of plausible solutions.

Innovation however is risky. Let us try to imagine for an instant an alternative model of CRPG gameplay, one not oriented around combat, but rather trials that genuinely represent those universally faced by human beings throughout time.[107] How would this work, exactly? And more importantly, would it be fun? Enjoyable gameplay is crucial to the game. Would

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[107] And not merely universal in the sense that they are rooted in the Freudian logic i.e. the Oedipus complex.

utilising moral/ethical dilemmas detract from this enjoyment, render the escapist element of the game void? I would argue the opposite: if implemented well enough, attempts to accurately represent the conflicts of 'real life' would enrich the gameplay experience and increase a player's sense of involvement. Perhaps the feeling among designers is that for a game to strive to be more than 'good' entertainment would undermine the very nature of the medium and do players a disservice. By going against the grain, designers may face commercial failure. Thus inertia triumphs.

The other issue at hand is the absence of videogames that are designed in such a fashion as to draw an eye towards identifying, interpreting and critiquing the rules that drive our world as a system (Bogost, 2007: 77). This factor is critical to players attempting to 'address the logic that guides […] [a situation] and begin to make movements to improve it' (345). Indeed, it is only when games encourage players to raise a critical eye to these systems that the medium fulfils its potential for disrupting and changing 'fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change' (10). Yet by doing so, the game has the potential to substantiate the Romantic proposition that individuals can 'be morally improved through the provision of cultural products that yielded pleasure' and a more perfect, ideal world be envisioned and brought into being (C. Campbell, 2005: 216).

Admittedly, videogames still 'struggle for acceptance as a cultural form' and are 'considered inconsequential because they are perceived to serve no cultural or social function save distraction at best, moral baseness at worst' (Bogost, 2007: 9), views which admittedly arise from the medium's relative immaturity. Such denouncements are however by no means new; Bogost reminds us that 'Comics, television, and even film [also] once endured popular and critical scorn' (9). Nevertheless, addressing the points I have outlined here would go a long

way to not only renewing the functions traditionally played by mythology, but also achieving widespread cultural acceptance, legitimating the videogame as a medium that can stand shoulder to shoulder with other more established mediums. Once again, that decision of whether CRPGs fulfil this capacity rests ultimately with the game designer.

In the words of Harvey, 'Fantasy does not necessarily misdirect people away from consciousness raising, it need not be an opiate, but can be the much needed catalyst for change' (cited in Partridge, 2005: 139). The CRPG has the capacity to facilitate the imagining, seeking out and implementation of better selves (Gee, 2004: 203). Its ties to the monomythic narrative are an opportunity to elevate 'the aspirations and imaginings of all people for better and more just worlds' (205), through the individual adoption of the values represented in the monomythic CRPG. Procedural rhetoric may just be the missing piece of the puzzle that can help with the translation of these values into action, bringing the monomythic CRPG one step closer towards addressing the ontic component historically fundamental to religious faiths, and in some cases alternative spiritualities as well.

Yet how does one mobilise the modern, secular consumer? The answer it seems may very well lie in CRPG's unique blend of the persuasive, the spiritual and the rational, and by its capacity as a form of embodied action, performance, contest and ritual. While CRPGs have thus far succeeded in utilising the monomythic pattern, it remains to be seen as to whether players are yet so persuaded by the values of the monomyth as to apply them in everyday life. There is still no consensus furthermore on whether videogames may be classified as art in a traditional sense, let alone whether they have the inspirational, reformative powers that the Romantics associated with good art. This too has worked against any serious or thorough consideration of the medium's spiritual potential. Indeed this Romantic notion in today's

secular, rational world—particularly in the context of the much-overlooked (and sometimes maligned) videogame—seems at best hopelessly idealistic.

Yet as, as argued in this essay, idealism lies at the heart of the mass modern phenomenon that is consumerism. And as history has shown, it has also served as the driving force for both individual and social transformation. Just as videogames may illuminate the path of the monomythic hero to apotheosis, we cannot discount the potential for them to also illuminate the path of the player, or to encourage the adoption and practice of monomythic values in the world beyond that of the game.

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