

MYTH IN TRANSLATION:
THE LUDIC IMAGINATION IN CONTEMPORARY VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

Myth in Translation: The Ludic Imagination in Contemporary Video Games

by

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This dissertation treats the reception, performance, and mediation of myth in video games. Myths are included in video games as variants in relation to other myth-variants. This study does not focus on contemporary myths per se, but rather modernized forms of myths modified for a contemporary audience of players, users, and consumers who participate in video game culture. Different video games involve and invoke different mythologies. Thus, different theories about myths are drawn on to extrapolate meaningful applications in the world of each video game. Some case studies involve the creative uses of depth psychology, the hero pattern, otherworldly journeys, mythic-epic story structures, and/or explorations in specific mythological themes and motifs.

Pluralistic, folkloristic, and close cross-cultural comparison is exercised on a case-by-case basis—*pace* universal and wide-range comparativism—to effectively account for comparison *and* context. Case studies include single-player video games involving different sub-genres, online multiplayer video games, and a massively multiplayer online game that includes field work reports and analysis.

The descriptive process and meta-theory that I propose stem from the playfulness that myths presented in video games afford: first, *interpretatio ludi* is the general process of transposing mythological traditions and systems into dynamic and playable models, or the invention anew of mythological systems tailored to a particular video game world and

genre. Players virtually participate in myths as voyeurs, voyagers and (sometimes) builders. This raises important questions regarding artificial and emergent mythmaking occurring on the side of either player response, from the developers, or from instances of co-creation between both. I also present the “agonistic theory of myth” to account for the inherent and pervasive tendency of contestation between myth-variants, myths of divine conflict, and theories about myth(s).

A critical review of scholarship on myths and games is also included. This dissertation proposes that mythological studies and game studies can pursue significant collaborative research trajectories. The overall aim of this study is to develop a critical media-conscious approach to myths, and a myth-conscious approach to media.

Keywords: myth, video games, mythmaking, mythology, game studies, play, lore, virtual worlds, world-building.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

In memory of V. Walter Odajnyk (April 10, 1938 - May 22, 2013)

Scholar, Storyteller, and Mentor

Cura deum di sint et qui coluere colantur
—Ovid

A study of this kind could not have been achieved without the inspiration, support, and guidance of mentors, colleagues, friends, and family.

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The style used throughout this dissertation is in accordance with the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (3rd Edition, 2008), and *Pacifica Graduate Institute’s Dissertation Handbook* (2015-2016).

Chapter 1: Introduction

The culture that fails to take its mythographic task seriously stands in danger of finding itself overwhelmed by cheap stereotypes and specious pseudomyths.

—William Doty (*Mythography* 403)

Myths upgrade. This study investigates how the video game medium participates in the process of upgrading myths. By analyzing various platforms and video games, I will be addressing certain problematics that arise when we approach such artifacts as functional and active conduits of cultural and artificial myths. From this initial position, we may say that both myths and games interact within the fabric and network of contemporary culture. Such a framework reflects not only how these categories are immediately noticeable in our technology, but also how they have deep resonance in our histories and in the societies and traditions of our ancestors. This is not a statement of innocence. Myths are a form of discourse not to be taken lightly, since cultural values, self-image and world-image are presented through myths in highly concentrated forms. But it should not escape the student of myth that video games are products made for target audiences, and video game culture resides in a consumer market of affluence and growing influence. This puts a responsibility on the mythologist to serve as critic and not necessarily as celebrant of myth in the medium. For myths are *ambivalent in form*, but *ideologized in use* by those who deploy them and discuss them. Furthermore, the dual-structure of a game in general and video games in particular accentuate this ambivalence in a myth when applied to the ludic context; i.e., a game's morphology deconstructs the linearity of a mythic narrative by situating players in agonistic tensions and roles on both sides of the myth's *dramatis personae*. Of course, not all (video) games exploit such a

deconstruction, and can just as easily construct deterministic progressions on a fixed path. It thus follows that I propose a critical approach to examine myth's reception in video games, video game culture and how they relate to the larger fabric of the our modern society.

It is important to acknowledge openly that not all computer and video games were/are/will be *consciously* created to take on mythological themes and motifs on the level of text; not all video games wear their inherited myths on their sleeve, but nonetheless still retain residue at the level of *subtext*. Further, not all fictional worlds of video games essentialize myth-analysis or imply the complexity and authority that is “myth” proper. It has long been attested in the writings of Campbell and Lévi-Strauss that the (comparative) mythologist is prone to promiscuity with their genre distinctions and conflations—such paradigms are still unabashedly practiced to the mythologist's own detriment and misrepresentation of the categories, cultures (and culture areas) studied. On this point, I have attempted to exercise a prudence suggested by Frazer no less who once stated:

The zealous student of myth and ritual, more intent on explaining than on enjoying the lore of the people, is too apt to invade the garden of romance and with a sweep of his scythe to lay the flowers of fancy in the dust. He needs to be reminded occasionally that we must not look for a myth or a rite behind every tale, like a bull behind every hedge or a cranker in every rose. (“Introduction” Apollodorus's *Library* xxix)

A key issue of this study has been whether or not translating myth into the ludic environment of a video game is even possible, attainable or demonstrative. As Puhvel

states: “The trouble is precisely that myth does not ‘travel’ very well and, when it does travel, frequently moves from its specific historical and geographical fulcrum into the international realm of legend, folktale, fairy tale, and other debased forms of originally mythical narrative” (3). I stand in basic agreement with Marie-Laure Ryan’s assessment that a certain “epistemologically responsible distinction” is advisable in the assessment of fiction and lore in virtual worlds (and, I would add, video game worlds) (*Avatars* 58). On the other hand, community-minded and socially maintained worlds like *EVE Online* have been able to bring about what Rossignol has called “semifictional history” built by players engaged with in-world player-driven events within a science-fictional mythos (123). To go beyond the simulation of mythic motifs and themes, and bring about the weight, demands and consequences of a myth require what Wertheim refers to as a “network of responsibility”: “without the continued support of a community, *any* world (that is, any space of being) will begin to fall apart. If cyberspace teaches us anything, it is that worlds we conceive (the spaces we ‘inhabit’) are communal projects requiring communal responsibility” (304). The lessons of “cyberspace”—that exotic word and idea speculated upon in the 1990s—still apply to the virtual and game worlds we maintain through participation. It suggests that the more socially interlaced we are with our fictional worlds we play in, the more complex the network grows and, if maintained and intensified over a certain duration of time, the seemingly distant metaphoric realities of myth become habitable again through the notional metonymic contiguities of cyberspace.

My selection of video games tend to be those that either engage with the mythic directly, or whose creators have made concerted efforts to convey lore-driven worlds, traditional myths, storyworlds, and storytelling practices, utilizing the affordances of the

video game medium—that is, to play with form as much as with content. Case studies clearly do not stop at our present selection of games and can easily be expanded. Deeper and closer analysis can be performed with each individual game title, genre and history. This study is but a prolegomena.

The myths and mythologies cited and selected for analysis are mainly derived from Eurasian and ancient Near East sources. When the category of “myth” and other folk-narrative genres are applied to traditions outside of these regions (and their descendents), the analyst must make some effort to keep apparent native and analytical categories while also noting appropriation of Western genres to native categories (and vice versa): cultural interaction is never one-way, but mutual. It would be too simplistic to stop there, however, since a privileging (and privileged) status can dictate which category prevails. Such a body of diverse traditions that constitute Eurasia have established and maintained a certain hegemonic hold on popular (mythological) imaginaries. Since the video game’s early history to today, the main markets to profit and propagate their approaches to game design and storytelling have been the U.S. and Japan. Therefore, I have tended to situate and focus my research into these two markets for some sense of two distinct and internalized video gaming traditions that have demonstrable historical and cultural impact; each has a unique diachrony. For example, each has a long-standing, well developed, and identifiable flavor of role-playing video games: conventionally differentiated as CRPGs and JRPGs (Donovan 161). Nonetheless, the very term “mythology,” as deployed by major studios and developers of both industries, and the modern scholar-comparative mythologist alike, exposes a metanarrative of “Greekness” made apparent by Marcel Detienne:

To speak of mythology is always to speak Greek, or, since Greece, without her knowledge, but at risk of being designated for perpetual residence in that place where the delusions of modern man about mythology redouble the phantoms and fictions produced by the first ‘mythologists.’ (*Creation of Mythology* 123)

When one assumes that “mythology” or “myth” is a *given* genre or mode of thought, it implies and imposes pan-human assertions. The cautious ethnographer, field researcher, and folklorist tends to limit the definition of “myth” as a genre among other oral folk narratives, focusing on pre-human era, primordial and creative times of gods and divine beings as formative events that shape the present world of humans (Dundes *Sacred Narratives*). For instance, Ruth Finnegan in her survey of oral literature and folk-narratives of Africa has argued that Eurocentric genres simply do not translate as some would be lead to believe (*Oral Literature in Africa* 352). On the contrary, the matter is far more complex and a source of great confusion when the analyst/theorist attempts to formulate general theories of myth without considering the risk of generating a “persistent and distorting application of a false preconception, namely that ‘myth’ is a closed category with the same characteristics in different cultures” (Kirk 28). The problematic of effective cross-cultural and intercultural research becomes apparent when the analyst instead critically questions these base assumptions and culturally relative projections.¹ Consider, for instance, the following passage from two cultural anthropologists who argument against uniformity:

¹ See Geoffrey Lloyd’s “Mythology: Reflections from a Chinese Perspective” in *From Myth to Reason?: Studies in the Development of Greek Thought* for an insightful essay on problems in cross-cultural

It is thus inadmissible to posit a unilineal genealogy for the origin and development of myth. By acknowledging man's propensity to seek and order metaphysical systems that give a rationale for a way of life, and his flair for expressing the unrealized wish, we focus again on the creative process in human societies. Whether it emerges in newly devised symbols or in the incorporation of borrowed ones, it attests to man's receptivity everywhere to the symbolization of the Unknown according to the pattern of the known. As a consequence, we hold that comparison on a cross-cultural basis must be cast in terms of processes rather than in those of form. (Herskovits and Herskovits 83)

It remains to be thoroughly and cogently explored whether any traditional lore imported into the hegemony of "invented mythology," itself undergoes a translation into the Greek concept of "mythology"; that is, as a body of intricately connected traditional stories and lore invented, studied, theorized, collected or classified.

It should also be acknowledged that the sense of competition (*agôn*) is just as Greek as is mythology (Burkert, *Greek Religion* 105-107). When Plato formulated the philosophical treatment of myths and invented mythology (that is, coined the then-neologism), he did so in direct competition with the hegemony of Homer, Hesiod and the sophists. Detienne also adds Plato's contemporary, the poet Pindar, as another key player:

Given that it was Greece that provided the rest of the world with the category of 'mythology', we should point out that in the home of Plato and Pindar two types of mythology coexisted: mythology as a

investigations into the category of "myth" and "mythology" in other high cultures through the perspective of a Hellenist scholar.

framework and mythology as lore. Mythology as a framework consists of a system of thought that is revealed, or rather *reconstructed*, by structural analysis—that is to say, the more or less complex, all-encompassing system that extends throughout Greek culture, with all its beliefs, practices and different types of accounts. Meanwhile, mythology as knowledge, prepared by ‘native theologians’, was written partly by the early logographers or historians, partly by the authors of the mythographic works that culminated in the *Library* attributed to Apollodorus that, in about AD 200, was revealing the full cultural richness of mythology in Greek society over a period of seven or eight centuries. (*The Greeks and Us* 39)

This all weighs on the itinerant *comparative* mythologist who attempts to stay mindful of cultural and intellectual translatability and non-translatability. On the scholarly level, it seems inevitable that he or she is left to navigate multiple disciplines where “myth” or “mythology” is deployed under the purview of a native field with its own set of qualifying definitions, or when navigating the traditions of those peoples beyond the Western canons. For instance, I have left some native categories *untranslated*, or have resorted to stop with the Romanization (e.g. *Kiki shinwa* which is typically referred to as the Japanese myths found within the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*).

Though the category of myth has been cunningly aggregated under a synchronic universality, a diachrony of such a category, as studied and applied by the ancient Greeks, remains quite unique. Rare is the instance of a fully realized *tautegorical* approach to myth as proposed by Schelling. In more modernized efforts, Hans Blumenberg rightly

calls attention to a subtle but significant distinction between the work *of* myth and the work *on* myth (*Work on Myth*). Such a distinction may help the mythologist clarify his or her position in relation to the traditions they research, and the nature of the material being addressed. Indeed, it amounts to two distinct orientations in mythological studies: the mythologist who commits to work *on* myth tends to be of the attitude of the critic, while the work *of* myth—“mythurgy” we might call it—is done through the efforts of mythologists who tend to edify and celebrate myth. These are obviously not absolute categories, and some researchers and analysts will find that both stances have their value and contribution to the overarching aims of mythological studies. Taken together, Detienne and Blumenberg both offer advantageous, modern, and critical positions that can serve as viable points of departure. I have found the distinction to be quite sufficient in gauging the use and reception of myth and mythology in the context of the various video games studied here.

Other students of myth and sympathizers of comparative studies have also offered valuable advice. In a Presidential Address at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religions in 1985, Wendy Doniger made this insightful statement:

People who study myths constitute a sub-caste of historians of religion, more precisely a half-caste formed through an illicit liaison between anthropologists and classicists. Mythologists, too, are Western sages, and like other sages they are also hunters. To the extent that they are sages, mythologists may enter into other peoples’ heads (that is, understand other peoples’ myths). But to the extent to which they are hunters, mythologists, like other sages, may also enter into other

peoples' hearts and bodies (that is, enter other peoples' emotions and lives). Like other sages, they do absorb, if only, sometimes, unconsciously, myths that become personally meaningful to them that become *their* myths. (O' Flaherty, "*Uses and Misuses of Other Peoples' Myths*" 224)

I still remain hesitant on glibly claiming other peoples' sacred accounts as "myths," unless there is some recognition on their part to rightly adopt the categorization. Another alternative is to retain its status as an analytical category.

Post-Jungian theorist and founder of archetypal psychology, James Hillman, has also made similar remakes on the necessity of keeping well in front of the analyst the projection of Hellenism (the fantasy, that is) onto Western tradition (*Revisioning Psychology* 27-30). Furthermore, Hillman implies that there is something profoundly Greek in the need for archetypes and myth for the Western psyche (ancient and contemporary):

We return to Greece in order to rediscover the archetypes of our mind and of our culture. Fantasy returns there to become archetypal. By stepping back into the mythic, into what is nonfactual and nonhistorical, the psyche can reimagine its factual, historical predicaments from another vantage point. Greece becomes the multiple magnifying mirror in which the psyche can recognize its persons and processes in configurations which are larger than life but which bear on the life of our secondary personalities. (30)

One wonders to whom “our mind and...our culture” Hillman is referring to: is it a pan-human canvas or a vista with horizons ending where the West meets the rest? Modern theories of myth have always tended to show an implied indebtedness to the Greeks; it is where we get the word, the concept and the tradition. Deeper probing into history challenges these fundamental assumptions, myths, and fantasies of Greece with recent studies arguing for the Greek indebtedness to the ancient Near East—e.g., Hesiod’s *Theogony* shows traces of the Succession Myth found throughout ancient Mesopotamia (West, *Eastern Face of Helicon*; Puhvel 21-30).

Nonetheless, to speak, discourse and theorize about myth (to give a *logos* of *mûthos*) remains a very Platonic project, so too the discourse on soul (a *logos* of *psychē*). As controversial as the genre and concept of myth is in the social realm of academic discourse, the archetype seems to participate just as much in a discourse that resembles a genre of literature that purports universality, but, ironically, within the narrowed confines of the West, its internal range of cultures, traditions and histories. We in the West still tend to think and psychologize with our myths, even when discussing others’ lore and traditions. Although the Jungian archetype is founded on the universal and similar, the universalist’s plea for sameness is still voiced in and conditioned by, time and position; that is to say, the universalist is still subject to history by arguing from a culturally relative (sometimes privileged) position. This does not mean that the comparativist necessarily avoids the “archetype” and the “archetypal,” but rather makes concerted efforts to clarify their position and lineage from which they speak; that is, there is still much room for the recovery of a pre-Jungian and pre-Eliadean conception that retains attention to the cultural, historical and geographic contexts and specificity. For example,

Mark Michael Epstein has phrased this as a necessary “harnessing” by introducing the concept of *indigenous archetypes*:

While accepting the increasingly prevalent opinion that the idea of the mythic archetypes ought no longer to be defended universally and uncritically, we should recognize nevertheless that this idea must not be eschewed summarily. Rather, we should seek such archetypes in the context of indigenous traditions, not as overarching inevitabilities but as fascinating examples of the ways in which native mythopoetic traditions order their internal world. (357)

On the opposite end is the extreme form of sameness articulated thus: “[archetypes] *do* exist and they are the same all over the world” (Campbell, *Myths to Live By* 216).

Within this study, I have attempted to move beyond these problematics by incorporating as much as possible, the native terminology for traditional categories (what Heda Jason calls ethnopoetic genres), and to use neutral terms where suitable; e.g. the neutrality of “story” “tale” or “sacred narrative” may be more suitable than “myth” in some instances; native terms for deities also have their unique histories, e.g., Greek *théos*, Japanese *kami* 神. The function of a story *as myth*—a mythic account—comes about not through content, but in use and in how it is applied by the culture that elevates the account’s status; myths can be theorized not on the true/false claims of their content, but rather on their cultural consequences and significations in the societies through which they circulate. I, in a sense, seek to pursue a problematic made (in)famous by Lévi-Strauss: “Whatever the ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it

originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world” (“Structural Study of Myth” 210).

In some cases, non-Western developers have openly referred to the fictional world of their video games as mythological, or have navigated openly within the category of myth and the mythic. But, as we have seen with video games like *Okami*, the native categories and genres hold just as valuable a path for the comparativist without imposing the Greek model nor translating the genres into Greek (or Western) categories, but instead maintaining and recognizing the distinction between analytical and native categories. What I call a critical comparative method would thus rely more on retaining categories for mindful cross-cultural comparisons, rather than predetermining and edifying universals: *a priori et aedificium ad universalia*. Instead, measured, modest and discrete instances of cross-cultural comparisons.

Another approach is to encourage and include independent developers who have already begun bringing in lesser known traditions and explicitly folkloric worlds. Thus far, such traditions are often fitted to the inherited and established forms of gameplay in video games; that is to say, the traditional folk games do not inform the actual game play, but the traditional folktale and myth (the “shell” or semiotic layers) is subjected to adaptation into a ready-made video game genre, or Mäyrä’s “core.” For example, *Never Alone* (2014), a recent video game deeply researched and informed by the native tradition of the Inupiat, utilizes the side-scrolling, adventure platformer made familiar by Nintendo’s *Mario Brothers*. Major studios have also made some attempts: Lucas Arts has tried to introduce elements from folkloric tradition in computer games like *Grim Fandango*, that explicitly plays on customs, traditions and sacred lore surrounding Las Dias de los

Muertos and Aztec sacred narratives. *Brothers: A Tale of Two Brothers* (Starbreeze Studios 2013) is another example of Grimmian and folklore-esque elements being brought together to inform the story of the game and the style of gameplay in which the player controls both brothers simultaneously with the game controller dual-joysticks of the standard XboxOne and PlayStation 3/4 consoles to mimic coordination and cooperation to fulfill minor and major challenges.

I have resisted the tendency towards universal declarations and have put forth closer, smaller comparisons of cross-cultural significance where problems of “myth” still exist and are perpetuated. Wherever a video game instantiates or draws from a cultural myth, it enmeshes itself—knowingly or unknowingly—into a complex network of received tradition. The semiotic and symbolic levels of representation compound the matter. Video games, when approached with the tools of analysis in general and mythic analysis in particular, open up to vast networks of associations that require much follow-up research by comparative methods and area studies. Universalist methods, Jungian theory, and Campbell’s monomyth, I argue, can lead to stagnant tautologies and taken, from the outset, on the basis of pre-determined agendas, fallacies common to excessive inductive reasoning. They have tended to dominate mythic approaches to video games, since they exude exceptional tools (ready-made narrative structures, patterns, models and archetypes) for mythic storytelling, character development and world-building. This project offers a point of departure towards meaningful, varied, critical and analytic methods of inquiry that do not seek to marginalize such approaches, but to offer viable alternatives.

For example, we can liken some approaches to the myth-game interrelation to T. S. Eliot's *mythical method*, which he defined in his famous 1923 essay "*Ulysses, Myth, and Order*" as a method "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity...a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history...instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method," concluding that "instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method" (177-78). The method was exercised throughout the *mythification* movement of 20th century literature by leading authors like Thomas Mann and James Joyce who translated myth into the medium of the modern novel (Meletinsky 275). For this study, we are nestled firmly in—what I have referred to as—a "metaxy," a betwixt-between condition poised between myth and game: the ludomythic imagination. Therefore, insights drawn from this investigation may serve those with interdisciplinary interests and inclinations in popular culture, philosophy of play, and particularly those interested in game studies, design and the study and theory of myth. As a line of inquiry we may ask several core questions: are video games capable of fulfilling a desire for myth? Do they reflect a need to sustain it? Do they enable new ways of mythic agency and engagement with myth itself? Have they developed a mythical method unique to the medium? And, conversely: Does video gaming allow for a new (retro)perspective on myth and its cultural analysis through history?

To address these questions, I have offered a two-fold endeavor: a theoretical framework with subsequent case studies of close readings of game titles and genres, and an auxiliary fieldwork component, which seeks to open the discussion out to the creators and maintainers of the gaming culture itself: designers and players. As a default initial

position, I believe there is a passionate drive by game designers and players to keep alive the old stories (traditional tales and sacred lore), while also generating new strains and paths for play and interaction in a dialogue with tradition and culture. In its most explicit usage, the video game medium allows for a unique level of interaction with traditional Western-derived mythological figures, gods, spirits, demons, angels, fairies and monsters amidst immersive story worlds (e.g. *Dark Age of Camelot*, or *Age of Mythology*), which derive largely from Norse, Celtic, Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian mythologies. In 2002 Matt Firor, game producer of Mythic Entertainment's *Dark Age of Camelot*, reflected on the practical aspects of using ancient myth, sagas and legendry in video games:

We were proceeding along under the DFC3D concept until our president, Mark Jacobs, came up with the idea of basing the game, at least partially, on the Arthurian legends. It was a great idea, since the stories of King Arthur are in the public domain, which meant we could use them with no fear of licensing issues. Of course, because the game was based on the idea that three Realms were in conflict, we quickly came up with the idea of basing the other two Realms on Norse Viking myths and Celtic Irish legends, respectively. ("Postmortem: Mythic Entertainment's *Dark Age of Camelot*")

We would be remiss to narrow our investigation to the Western canon and game titles alone, when the Asian canon—especially Japan—has much to offer in terms of myth, folklore and gaming. Asian derived mythologies, channeled largely through Japanese tradition, find their voice and presence in gaming culture and industry, offering

just as much depth of content and story worlds. However, the circumstances are not always so apparent. For instance, within this study I discussed the game *Asura's Wrath*, which depicts a syncretism spanning Hinduism and Buddhism as they are expressed from the Japanese perspective. Japan's gaming industry and culture stands firmly next to the United States as a leading force in its own right within the video game industry with such pioneering home consoles like the Nintendo Famicom, the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), and Sony's PlayStation platforms.

Beyond applying a culturally derived body of lore, video games, in their most ludic and creative mode of discourse, may readily fabricate an entire fantasy world, body of lore, story-arc(s) and characters from the ground up (e.g. *Super Mario*, *Zelda*, *World of Warcraft*, *League of Legends* to name mere a few), and so demonstrate the mythopoetic and cosmopoetic abilities of the medium. They also can render a fantastical and speculative simulation of some of our deepest yearnings to go beyond Earth and the known universe (e.g. *Elite* and *EVE Online*). Are these merely backdrops and back stories? How does lore impact the gaming experience? Why have these genres and themed storyworlds, particularly High Fantasy and Science/Speculative Fiction, persisted from the first computer games *Adventure* (1972) and *Spacewar!* (1962) down to today's diverse landscape of digital games? I argue that they reflect an important thread of tradition that gives coherence, structure and orientation for the greater community and ecology of video games, without which the myths really do become mere décor.

Our mythologies now find new voices and variants in simulated, ever-growing worlds of complexity, play, gaming and representation. It demonstrates, as I have proposed, the process of *interpretatio ludi*. Like the transition to written word from oral

tales, the introduction of the printing press and the creation of privatized novels, the experience and mediation of myths is, yet again, facing a time of transition through the trajectory of the material culture of gaming. Indeed, it is an overlooked and understudied thread of history and material culture. Storytelling and gaming, as activities of our species, have shared in a syzygy that has remained fairly intact since our remote past. Instead of shrinking into a private cubby, however, myths and games are coming to fruition within a public forum amidst our new social networks and online world communities of play. It has become fashionable to frame the rise of game and play culture through a utopian new ludic epoch (Combs, *Play World*; McGonigal, *Reality is Broken*), and so too as what David Miller in the 1970's referred to as a new emergent mythology of play (Miller, *Gods and Games*).

The mythic discourse around games shifts the paradigm from consuming and voyeurism to making (*poiesis*) and voyaging. Myth, through ludic framing, will persist in two major strands: Plato in his *Republic* 621c and Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* 1074b both observed, myths exist as implicit, stor(i)ed (*muthos esothe*), forms and schemata (*muthous schematai*) as much as they do in dramatic narrations, ritual enactments and explicit content; in other words, through esoteric and exoteric forms.

The new medium of video games stands at a textual and cultural forefront as we emerge into a smaller world where play is of the highest necessity to not lose touch seriously—for myth is more than a relic and artifact, it is a life-affirming, life-shaping way of perception, conception and meaning-making: a *Weltanschauung*; a worldview (Underhill, *Creating Worldviews* 282). When studied alongside games, a *Weltanschauung* comes more into focus as a multicultural mythology with ludocentric

tendencies. Culture is conceived and perceived as a pliable resource for *serio ludere*; serious games; the agonal spirit.

Myths are transmutative cybernetic systems designed to modify the human being's perception, conception and communication in relation to society and the environment (cosmos). Creation myths in particular tend to articulate the cybernetic solution to the problem of chaos; accounts of *proto heuretai* relate the cybernetic capacities of the individual. This is just to say that the use of myths entails the need for communication and control.

Review of Literature

Although I have already mentioned several scholars up to this point who will in various ways impact and inform my investigation, I would like to draw particular attention to the scholars, ideas and works most seminal to my study.

An investigation taking up the task of the study of games, myths and culture must, in my estimation, first begin with Johan Huizinga's influential *Homo Ludens* (1945). Play has a vested interest in, and pervasive occupation with, games and myth. Huizinga's work set out the important concept of the "magic circle" or the hermetic space wherein play emerges. I draw particular attention to Huizinga's use of mythological material in his own discussions of play, epistemology and mythopoetics to shed light on the often overlooked mythographic nature of *Homo Ludens* and Huizinga's dual contribution to the study of myth vis-à-vis play. Joseph Campbell was apt to cite Huizinga in order to shed some light on the deep relationship between play and myth (*Primitive Mythology* 23, 26; "The Historical Development of Mythology" 32). That is, I intend to use not just his use of mythic musings on play, but also his ludic interpretation of myths. I follow his

formulation of the magic circle and argue how video games create such a space, making it uniquely and remotely accessible as a virtual domain—recent scholars of game studies have also drawn considerably from Huizinga’s magic circle like Zimmerman and Salen in their standard text on game studies and design, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004), and Edward Castranova’s *Synthetic Worlds* (2005). Such a recurrence of scholarly interest spurred on by our theorizing of technology expands avenues of access to the magic circle and the amount of participants in such an arena (e.g. Massively Multiplayer Online Games). The concept of the magic circle and its inclusion within this study remains significant in establishing a nexus wherein users explore the ludic and the mythic simultaneously. As I have already discussed above, it needn’t be overlooked that the magic circle finds representation and utility in ritual practice, divination, and alchemy—it has had and continues to have strong connections with sacred and esoteric traditions of *serious* play within rules.

In addition to Huizinga’s work will be some of the major thinkers in his scholastic lineage, namely the continuation, elaboration and more sophisticated typologies of Roger Caillois in his *Man, Play and Games*. Huizinga and Caillois became—and are still—key forefathers of game studies. Through the course of this study, it will also become clear that they are both substantial mythographers in their own right.

David L. Miller is a pivotal figure who bridged the study of play, games and myth with his work *Gods and Games: Towards a Theology of Play*. The realm of game play is an activity often attributed to the demeanor of deities in mythology (e.g. the *lila* of Krishna, or Heraclitus’s Aion child). Therefore, certain levels of play (e.g. the cosmic) remain out of reach for humans—thus play supersedes human activity as a theological

and mythological matter. That is, myth proper is the arena wherein gods and goddesses play with the world. Returning to Caillois, however, he reminds us that myth parodies itself (and its deities) by introducing the trickster, the go-between wherein humans partake of mimicry and satire (138-141). In this regard, Caillois's typology will come to bear on my study as I investigate different genres of video games that explore his spectrum of *ludus* and *paidia*, with the classes of *agôn* (competition), *alea* (chance or fate), *mimicry* (simulation) and *ilinx* (vertigo).

Child psychologist, folklorist and play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith, reminds us of the greater fields of research and scholarship on play and the folktale, folk games and aspects of the play of the gods in his two major works cited in this study. His early *The Folkgames of Children* and later *The Ambiguity of Play* both offer insights into the interdisciplinary terrain of approaching the function of games cross-culturally. Sutton-Smith's perspective presents a counter-argument for the variety of ways cultures partake of play and games, working against attempts to universalize the activity as abstract categories. This is most readily reflected in his formulation of the seven rhetoric of play elucidated in *The Ambiguity of Play*. I draw particular attention to his chapter on *rhetorics of fate*, where he outlines the religious and mythological roots of fate, "the play of the gods" (55) and *rhetorics of power* (74).

Through Sutton-Smith's own transdisciplinary interests we may also gain much insight from the folkloric perspective on comparative and typological methods. Such methods are built on indexes of motifs and tale types, first initiated by Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne, continued by American folklorist Stith Thompson's expanded *Aarne-Thompson Classification System* (AT index), and, finally, Hans-Jörg Uther's recent

internationally revised *Aarne-Thompson-Uther* classification (ATU index). Thompson's own *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* still remains an invaluable research tool close for mythologists in particular. By utilizing such resources the researcher is well reminded at once that there are indeed recurrent elements in myths, legends, and folktales that may be *cross-cultural*, but are not necessarily *universal*.² Thompson's *Motif-Index* also provides the analyst with a classificatory system that avoids over generalization and conflation of motifs drawn from myths, legends, or folktales. For example, in a highly strict sense, the first two groups of motifs of Thompson's *Motif-Index* (which is divided into over-arching topics of an A-Z system with subsequent sub-groups in each topic) are A. *Mythological Motifs* and included within B. *Animal Motifs* is sub-groups B0-99 deal with mythical animals. Together, these two first categories sufficiently supply reference material from most major world mythologies and fabulous zoology. The mythologist may limit their material to just these categories, but will find much adjunct and overlapping material elsewhere throughout the *Motif-Index* like F. *Marvels* includes subgroups F200-399 *Marvelous Creatures*. Thus we can open the descriptive unit of the motif up alongside the analysis of myths, games and play as they manifestations in culture-specific contexts and milieux, while carefully building outwards to cross-cultural and comparative referents. For this study I rely more on the *motif* as a unit of classification than the ATU tale-type, since tale types are classified and linked through genre, culture-bound categories, and so are meant for lines of descent through diffusion and "genetic" lines of descent. The *motif*,

² Clyde Kluckhohn's article "Recurrent Themes in Myths and Mythmaking" remains one of the few instances of an attempt to test universal claims against empirical ethnographic and cultural data. The results demonstrate that of the 50 mythologies no one myth or theme was determined to be universal (that is, no exceptions found), except witchcraft. Others yielded Flood myths (34/50), Monster-slaying (37/50), Incest (39/50), Sibling rivalry (32/50), Castration (4/50) and Androgynous Deities (7/50). Selection was based on mainly on George P. Murdock's 1957 "World Ethnographic Sample" with recourse to Thompson's *Motif-Index* and the early 20th century project, *Mythology of All Races*.

on the other hand, is “free-floating” and applicable to the cross-cultural project with breadth (Jason *Motif, Type and Genre* 46). To this extent, I presented in a recent publication an analysis of thatgamecompany’s 2012 video game *Journey*, consulting and noting motifs and tale types in the video game’s storyworld (Guyker).³ Emphasis was/is placed on motifs for most of my analysis because they tend to be more mobile, internationally trackable and include explicit mythological elements, while the strict sequencing and genetic rubrics of a tale-type are more difficult to identify and track. However, the two may also be combined since, generally speaking, “a tale type [is] a self-sufficient narrative, and...a motif [is] the smallest unit within such a narrative” (Uther 10). For example, motifs that have clustered around the international dragons of myth, legends and folktales (generally classified B11 *Dragon*) are found in the heroic legends classified in the narratives of tale-type ATU 300 *The Dragon-Slayer* and ATU 673 *The White Serpent’s Flesh*. Two mythological motifs traced in some detail in the case studies include A162 *Conflict of the gods* (along with the sub-motif A162.1 *Fight of the gods and giants*) and A1631 *Emergence of tribe from lower world*. So it should not be overlooked that we are presently investigating a particular segment of culture—the video gaming sub-culture—with its own contextualized—and idiosyncratic—behaviors and ecologies, customs, and body of verbal and non-verbal lore. Mythic motifs are being modified and function within such a general context, but even from case to case the application of a motif may change in inflection. Throughout the remainder of this study, I

³ The central storyline focused on Ascent and Visionary journeys that tend to feature the traits and patterns of shamanic quests, rites of passage, and, in *Journey*’s case, the motif of the Twin Hero myths (Guyker). *Myst IV: Revelation* also features a cinematic and ludic rendition of the motif with the player entering Dream to reach the realm of the Ancestors to commune.

will be referring to the *Motif-Index* and tale types (i.e. ATU) with their proper identifying entrees.

I should also acknowledge that with the advent of game studies (ca. 1999-2001) significant schools of thought that attempted to distill the essential components of games as a stand-alone field of inquiry. *Ludology*, a term sometimes used interchangeably with game studies, was coined by Gonzalo Frasca, centered “on games in general and video games in particular” (“Simulation versus Narrative” 222). As the field has grown since then, game studies can reach out to include analog games alongside video/digital games. Frans Mäyrä’s book *An Introduction to Game Studies* (2008) features one of the better overviews of the discipline’s history, scholastic origins, recent developments and outlooks for future research. In particular (and as cited above and elsewhere), I have drawn on his conceptual and dialectical model of the dual-structure of games as having the “shell,” or representational layer, and the “core,” or gameplay as a kernel (17-18). I also draw on Mäyrä to distinguish between *ludosis*, or “meaning-making through playful actions,” and *semiosis*, or “meaning-making as decoding of messages or media representations” (19). It is on the level of *semiosis* where most mythologists will find a majority of mythological elements; however, I attempt to show that both have mythic dimensions. In the chapter 5 of this study, I offer a model for the way *myth* enters into the *ludo-semiotic* milieu of video games.

Certain theoretical stances in the treatment of video games from the outset should be clarified, namely, that video games are a cultural and textual experience for a *user/player*, as opposed to literature which relies on a passive *reader/audience*. They are not *static* texts, but innately dynamic and contingent. It is from this fundamental

perspective that I employ Espen Aarseth's work *Cybertext* (1997) in which he puts forth the notion of the *ergodic*, a term derived from the Greek *ergon* (work) and *hodos* (path). Aarseth proposes that certain types texts, which he refers to as "ergodic literature," require "non trivial effort," allowing "the reader to traverse the text" (1). I apply this idea to understand the effort of gaming. He further develops the concept of "cybertext" defined as "a machine—not metaphorically but as a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal signs" (21). This certainly applies to video games as "cybertexts." His comparative approach to various textual formats opens a pathway and methodology for addressing the unique characteristics of video games and for identifying video games as a specific form of ergodic literature and cybertext. Ergodic literature and cybertexts attempt to bridge the conventional gap between text and performance. Without such foundations, we may digress into particular instance of mythological content all the while overlooking and neglecting the particularities of the content for its user, or how the user configures the content based on strategy and decision making. Therefore, I would argue that the video game implicates the user as an authoritative participant—i.e., a factor with agency in the feedback loop—who controls the transaction between the self and the (cyber)text, to a greater degree than a reader's engagement with a linear "traditional" literary text and narrative.

For this study, I will argue for the treatment of video games as not just *ergodic literature* and *cyber* texts (textual pathways for user traversal), but also as *mythic* texts, that is, texts which either engage with inherited and traditional mythologies, or respond to and reflect contemporary mythologies of modern cultures and living traditions. By defining video games as *ergodic* that is, tracing an effective path and offering an actual

practice or activity and *mythic* I mean to put forth the claim that the medium is uniquely placed, for it synthesizes the textual, strategic behavior and performance. It is worth noting that a mythic text tends to remain a fragment or variant of a larger mythic canon. Therefore I pose the question thus: if video games function as mythic texts, what mythic themes do they articulate and what is the larger canon from which they draw? Further, do their designers construct/express, and administer a discursive mode that is markedly mythic in nature consciously?

Ian Bogost is another key scholar to emerge in recent years, offering an interdisciplinary approach to video games with such works as *Unit Operation* (2006) calling for the treatment of video games as an expressive form of media: one that represents *cultural artifacts*. As cultural artifacts consisting of software *and* hardware, video games and their platforms bridge the realms of tangible and intangible culture and history. It is in response to his work that I develop the argument that as students of myth, we must become increasingly aware of, and willing to explore the impact video games have and how they serve as, vehicles of *mythos* into material/tangible culture and our ever-growing cyberculture of the intangible and virtual. As cultural artifact and cultural activity video games offer the student of myth a pervasive living mythology that rests in the *metaxy*—the betwixt and between—of the oral and the written, the solitary and the social, word and action. Bogost phrases this as the video game's unique ability to be a response to our current theories of complexity—in a sense, to model and simulate scenarios of complexity. Video games express what he calls *procedural rhetoric*: “the practice of using processes persuasively [whose arguments] are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, [and]

construction of dynamic models.” (*Persuasive Games* 29-30). I work towards reconciling Bogost’s theory with a larger dynamic model, that of computational mythology, or the mythology of computation.

Such a case can be made by relying on Lévi-Strauss’ view that myths are not to be handled nor treated as static but that they are always in a state of process (Doty 422), through competing versions (Lincoln, *Gods and Demons* 55). What may ultimately divide Bogost’s *unit operation* from the motif is the former’s discrete functionality and resistance towards systemization. There is a very fine line between the dynamic and the static, process and product. When we approach mythologies in various states and conditions (from antiquated relics to an imminent *Weltanschauung*), circulation and retelling are at the heart of what keeps the myth in play amidst dynamic models. Further, such models must keep in accord with the realities of daily life, while also yielding origin(s) and trajectories of aspirations if we are to move the models from everyday occurrence to the mythic dimension.

A major field which remains sorely overlooked in game studies is the study of ritual, which I understand to be a persistent sibling field complimenting the study of myth as well as play. Indeed, the relationship between myth and ritual resonates with similar theoretical debates between game and story: Does the one give rise to the other? Do sets of rules and actions require fictional worlds or exposition? Certain rituals elicit the actualization of myth in vitalized form via enactment and embodiment. Ritual, in general, enables the carving out of designated space-time, i.e. magic circle. Through such demarcations, initiatory processes may unfold. Rites lay down the hard forms, gestures and rules that anchor a myth to the tangible world of the senses—they are what converts

myth into a sensual experience. Vladimir Propp postulated a similar stance, when he theorized that the wondertale and myths were the metaphoric forms of the embodied (rituals of initiation) (*Theory and History of Folklore* 22, 118). A similar arrangement occurs in game worlds, but through remote access.

Ritual theories from which I draw are Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*, and several of Victor Turner's works focusing on such concepts as *communitas*, *liminality* and the *liminoid*. Certain video games bring these concepts to the forefront, in their depiction and simulation of ritualized structures and storylines. For example, the video game *Catherine* situates the player in the midst of the critical events leading to the protagonist's, Vincent's, rite of passage: marriage, freedom, or change of partner.

Although *Catherine* presents a deterministic path of initiation, I do not mean to regulate ritual to the level of pure representation. One could make the case that most video games feature some structural facets of a rite of passage, or ritual initiation into game mechanics. Nonetheless, ritual theory can open up pathways to understanding the social dynamics of persistent online worlds as well. As Castranova has proposed, video games can be a viable social enterprise, and place for co-creation, conquest and co-quests and, thus, may illuminate essential components for a new frontier in the study of myth and ritual within game worlds (*Synthetic Worlds*).

To be sure, not all gaming genres call attention to the ancient myths, but rather have drawn from a particular cultural complex and trajectory of modern influences such as fantasy literature and previous analog and digital games. For example, in chapter 10 I demonstrate how a recent installment in the fantasy role-playing video game, *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, fabricates a milieu of fantastical races, pantheons, creatures and

locations familiar to modern fantasy audiences, but retains suggestive and much more ancient traditions—perhaps the very sources that influenced shaped the modern fantasy genre and its creators in general. More specifically, the *Elder Scrolls* lore alludes to a constellation of aesthetic, ergodic, and mythological motifs drawn from theoretically reconstructed from the Indo-European families. Alongside the greater correspondences, I also rely on closer area-studies of Pre-Christian Europe and specific texts of antiquity. These mythological motifs suggest that inherited cultural references run deeper than mere fantasy. Modern fantasy authors like J.R.R. Tolkien had their own predecessors and inspiration, namely, from the raw sources of mythology and folklore available to them. I analyze the wholly fabricated and mythic world of *Skyrim* by establishing connections to antiquity, citing such primary sources as the *Poetic Edda*, Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* and *Heimskringla* the writings of Julius Caesar, Virgil, Cicero, Lucan, Tacitus, Plutarch, Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and *Beowulf*. On the surface, the mythopoeia of modern fantasy genre manifest in literature and early board games (e.g. table-top and card games) offers explicit trajectories of integration into a game world ripe with literary referents—that is, it demonstrates a line of textual transmission and suggestive intertextuality.

My aim is to investigate emergent principles unique to the playful environment of the video game and how the medium facilitates a type of interpretation (i.e. *interpretatio ludi*), which expedites the processes of syncretism and redaction. Demonstrating that the fabricated world of video games stands in a mythic lineage with a certain body of older texts and discourse beyond the video world itself will be my initial comparative endeavor, while analyzing the discourse and use of myth within the game world itself remains a critical second piece of contextualization. The former process situates the video game

into a greater context of mythological traditions, while the latter process involves the analysis of the internal mythology of the video game world, i.e. the in-game lore and mythos. Jaan Puhvel's work *Comparative Mythology*, M.L. West's recent *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, and J.P. Mallory's *In Search of Indo-Europeans* serve as foundational secondary texts that expound Indo-European mythologies, their unique characteristics and their shared constellation of symbols, themes and motifs. To be sure, the terrain of Indo-European mythology is not a trivial nor settled matter in scholarship, and I would be remiss to not include the critical counter-argument of the (Proto-) Indo-European hypothesis by Bruce Lincoln. In his series of significant essays compiled as *Death, War and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice*, Lincoln both reveals homologous sets of motifs across the major Indo-European cultures involved, and also (years later) challenged such efforts of reconstructing Ur-myths. I adopt Lincoln's methodology towards mythic texts, specifically by placing individual mythic texts into their historical pretexts, contexts, subtexts and claiming "weak" comparative analysis with similar mythic material, gameplay style, and genre.⁴ In this way, my case studies are organized, amplified and constructed by the intratextual (what happens within the text) and intertextual (external influences and relations to other texts). I will avoid any final analysis that will consider the implications of building towards proving universality, and instead trace trajectories of comparisons and cross-cultural study.⁵ Further, when

⁴ See B.Lincoln's "Theses on Comparison" in *Gods and Demons Priests and Scholars* (2012) for the critique of "strong forms of comparativism" and the petition for "weaker and modest sorts [of comparative analysis]" (123).

⁵ For the argument for close analysis, see the Herskovits's section entitled "A cross-cultural approach to myth" in the Introduction to their classic 1958 book, *Dahomean Narrative: A Cross-cultural Analysis* (81-122)

comparative work affords deeper relations and connections in cross-cultural analysis, I move away from what Wendy Doniger denounces as “superficial” comparison:

Superficial comparatists (among whom I include Campbell) stop at the micromyth, at the stripped-down plot where several versions intersect. They quit before the hard work begins; if you just point out how *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is like Dante’s *Inferno*, you can see some interesting things, but you don’t see what you see when you go on to learn Italian and Tibetan. Abandoning the mythic analysis when you have just isolated the micromyth is like abandoning psychoanalysis at the point when the personality has been dismantled, before it has been rebuilt. (*Implied Spider* 92)

An example of superficial comparison has already occurred in some scholarly essays on religion and games such as Jason Anthony’s “Dreidels to *Dante’s Inferno*: Towards a Typology of Religious Games.” Anthony argues for categories and types of religious games without going much further into the idiosyncratic distinctions and particularities of the video game content. He compares Dante’s *Inferno*, the poem, with *Journey to the West* (unnamed, referred to as a 16th century novel from China that explores *Inferno*-like themes in a Taoist and Buddhist context. Though valuable for attempting to charter potential types and categories, Anthony’s typological effort, like most, tend to lean in favor of synchronic, ahistorical categories touting universal applicability, instead of developing the diachronic and historical dimensions of such categories as they manifest in different cultural and religious contexts. At this stage in game studies, typologies seem all but premature. Without the much needed collegiate and collaborative effort of case

studies, close-ranged comparative efforts and contextualized research, the emergent field of game studies risks remaining superficial. A successful comparative endeavor must give pause to overexerting neologisms and categories without proper recourse to *both* historical trajectories and factors (diachrony) *and* contextual data of any particular instance (synchrony), not to mention enough substantiated body of evidence.

In a seemingly counter-intuitive move, I must also not neglect Joseph Campbell's influential monomyth story structure put forth in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which will come to bear on my analysis of heroic mythology within the video game and creative industry. Campbell's story structure and its formation readily draw from two major schools: that which developed around ritual theorist Arnold van Gennep's *separation-initiation-incorporation* (i.e. *rites de passage*), and the school of thought that arose from the early studies of the hero in the works of Otto Rank and Lord Raglan. To those Campbell added the depth psychological tradition, drawing on the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and the analytical psychology of Carl Jung (especially the latter). Introducing Campbell's *monomyth* and ritual theory, especially van Gennep's *rites de passage*, remains critical to the effort to find analogous structures in the gaming experience. Campbell's comparative study and formulation of the Hero's Journey cycle proper has had a significant impact on storytelling today, especially across popular culture and the entertainment industries in the United States. It manifests itself clearly in our modern films, in part due to popularized export-renditions such as Christopher Vogler's *The Writers Journey*, consulted by writers of screenplays, video game player-arcs and novels. It may come as no surprise then that this modern tradition has trickled down into the contemporary video game medium—especially those meant for appeal to a

wide audience (See Guyker). In short, Campbell's *monomyth* has contributed a great deal to the self-conscious use of a certain *type* of mythic themes, motifs and structures. Our artists, designers, screenwriters, and directors of popular culture are active agents of Campbellian mytho-logics, putting themselves and their audiences in touch with a presumed global heritage of mythic themes. This however, becomes problematic in practice and as revealed by an analysis within gaming, for the *monomyth* becomes misappropriated or treated as a rigid formula, or worse, the sole means of applied mythology in the entertainment industry. Indeed, the monomyth is but a genre, type and mythology onto itself.⁶ It is a mistake for the critical scholar of video games (and myth in general) to let mythic discourse in popular culture begin and end with Campbell's *monomyth*, for, video games, theories of myth and the various works of Joseph Campbell all offer much more than what is conventionally understood to be the sum of his work.⁷ Further, when the monomyth is taken wholesale as a method for constructing a mythological story, it tends to Westernize and propagate a heroic story-structure, obscuring or dismissing non-Western categories of myth. To counter these issues, the analyst who ventures into cross-cultural material must always keep non-Western categories and mythic motifs and dynamics in mind.

Maintaining engagement with Campbell's works from another perspective of video games, Jeff Howard has pushed for a re-reading of Campbell in his book *Quests: Design, Theory and History in Games and Narratives* (2008). Howard takes up this

⁶ There still persists a strong criticism of Campbell's use of the term "myth," when the examples that he ultimately draws on come from genres of folk narrative like the folktale and legend.

⁷ In his four-volume *Myths of God* series, Campbell moved out beyond the monomythic traits of heroic myths and developed his "Four Functions of a Living Mythology." His endeavor remained highly influenced by the universalist tendencies of Jung's analytical psychology. However, Campbell maintained a mindful correspondence between the universal and the local, laid out judiciously in his Conclusion to *Primitive Mythology* (*Masks of God* vol. 1), entitled "The Functioning of Myth" (461-72).

challenge by seeking to find accord between game and narrative in their shared preoccupation with the quest and quest literature.⁸ His work makes an important in-road towards the integration of questing, quest literature, and the subsequent association of myth with that of video game design and the pedagogy of design principles. For example, Howard cites spatial allegories from Classical Medieval Literature as important to game dynamics. His evaluation of Campbell's work draws a critical distinction that will come to bear on my own analysis; namely, that Campbell's monomyth need not be the sole contribution to game design, but that his later work on the Western Tradition's formulation of quests (i.e. Arthurian Romances and Quest(s) for the Holy Grail) may offer a useful model from which video game design can draw (*Quests* 6-7). I agree with Howard's player- and designer-minded stance, insofar that "the individual multiplicity of creative quests," saves the gaming experience from becoming "rigid, mechanical, and monotonous" as per the monomyth "applied unimaginative[ly]" (7). Mythic texts, that is, texts that reveal aspects of a mythos, in this capacity may serve as inspirations for the game itself. For example, in the video game *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the player can consult a library of mythic texts to learn about the pantheons of various religious systems within Tamriel. Game scholars like Susana Tosca have also contributed key scholarly articles investigating the convergence of story and game in questing. Marie-Laure Ryan has also keenly observed that "at the present, the thematic and structural repertory of ontological/internal activity is quite limited" ("Beyond Myth and Metaphor" n. pag.). The pinch comes when narrative designers and theorists rely exclusively on Campbell's monomyth, or even Vladimir Propp's distilled morphology of Russian wondertales,

⁸ The quest in the video game context of massively multiplayer online games has already begun informing authors of fiction. Ernest Cline's 2010 novel, *Ready Player One*, is one such case where the protagonist whose user-name is Parzival in the OASIS (game) participates in an easter-egg hunt/Grail quest.

skazka. When dealing with the story-structuring of games one need not impose limitations nor impinge on the varieties of gaming and mythic experiences.

As I will demonstrate in my case studies, a single game may offer a variety of myths, while a single myth or mythological motif may be interpreted through different genres of video games. It is my contention that video games need not remain stuck with the monomyth, but can go much further and elucidate the polyfunctionality of myth across a diverse array of game scenarios. This is the distinct challenge and strength of video game worlds, that is, they take on linear and nonlinear structures with varying degrees of success. They ground the myth in a world where the player-hero may actually fail or quit.

In efforts to represent the variety of gaming and mythic experiences, I have extended my research into the fields of anthropology and sociology in general, and scholars focusing on virtual worlds and their ethnographical study in particular. Such pioneering scholars being Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, T. L. Taylor each in their own published works and in their collaborative book, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook on Method* (2011), along with William Bainbridge. I have also gained valuable insights from Gary Fine's investigation of table-top roleplaying games in his 1983 book, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Their invaluable insights will be most readily reflected in my field work component described in Chapter 2 and my current and projected efforts in the massively multiplayer online game *EVE Online*, with its subsequent findings and analysis constituting Chapter 8. The interaction and engagement with games as mythic texts also means that I address the socially

constructed and maintained experience (MMOG and multiplayer), alongside the privatized and solitary (single-player).

Lastly, certain works have illuminated my understanding of translation beyond the confines of linguistics. My usage of the concept of translation derives mainly from Roman Jakobson's formulation of intersemiotic translation, which opened possibilities for me to theorize myth in relation to the non-verbal, which he refers to as the process of inter-semiotic translation ("Linguistic Aspects" 233). The early stages of development of my theory of *interpretatio ludi* occurred as I researched into historically significant accounts and events of intercultural relations, exchanges, convergences, and practices of syncretism that often led to systems of myths and deities being shared internationally rather than being kept behind ideological or ethnic boundaries. The first work includes Jan Assmann's *Moses the Egyptian*, which offers a thorough account of syncretism and its practice in Greco-Roman antiquity alongside biblical monotheism. Mark S. Smith's *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* is a natural continuation of Jan Assmann's efforts in *Moses the Egyptian* with special attention to Smith's elaboration on translatability and non-translatability. Preceding both works is Garth Fowden's *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the late Pagan Mind*, a study that greatly assisted in my own thinking through its development of the idea of translation *as* interpretation. The interrelation between travel and translation was clarified for me by Roxanne L. Euben's *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*, where she states, "Inasmuch as the explicit link between travel and the pursuit of knowledge is itself mobile, transcending cultural and historical boundaries to evoke resonances and anxieties across language and time,

travel is, in Clifford's words, an invaluable term of translation" (41). Due in part to the possibilities of connectivity and international communication, translation and travel can occur almost seamlessly and instantaneously over the course of an online video game. However, this has not stopped players from travelling and exposing themselves to other cultures. A video game can serve as an impetus to bring two cultures together. Together, these works influenced the formulation of my theorized contribution of *interpretatio ludi*: the effects of ludic discourse on, and treatment of, deities, beings, location and myths (sacred and traditional stories) as they are presented in games and game culture.

The first and final threshold of our engagement with mythological material is the video game medium itself, which is a human product of commerce and designed for usage in the context of entertainment in contemporary culture. The video game must remain an object of commerce and industry. Roland Barthe's 1957 collection of ruminations, *Mythologies*—in both its case-based essays and final essay, "Myth Today"—has shaped and influenced my own understanding of myth's pervasiveness in the world around us. We inherit participation in myth. Although the content of many of the video games featured in the case studies depict archaic and fantastical mythologies, it is important to remember that they are being configured for purposes of the present and offer a perspective on our mythical speech about them. The spirit of Barthes's critic/mythologist has played an influential role in this study through the very gesture of attempting to analyze, situate and translate mythical speech as it undergoes reception, inflection and signification by a consumer product: video games. For, Barthes argued that mythic signification works through material that has already been worked on (first semiotic system, i.e. language), and through content that stretches beyond the verbal:

“[Mythical speech is] a kind of message. It is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all of these can serve as a support to mythical speech” (218). There is a significant but subtle distinction between the content derived from pre-existing mythological traditions, invented mythologies originating from within game cultures, and, lastly, how these traditions and mythologies are modified by the video game medium, i.e. the ludic mode, or *ludosis* (Mäyrä).

Organization of Study

I have assembled, organized and partitioned this study into two major divisions with their respective set of chapters. To clarify this general structure, I offer the following two divisions of the study.

The Theory and Poetics in the Study of Myths and Games

A brief chapter dedicated to the methodology I used for my field-research in *EVE Online* immediately follows this introduction. Chapters 3 to 7 present a continued discussion of the theoretical background, framework, and foundation for the subsequent case studies (chapters 8 to 12) featuring my analysis of particular game titles, genres, and themes. In chapters 3, present my argument for the value of pursuing research into the larger scholastic and cultural networks through which video games and myths meet. Chapter 4 outlines the general appeal that comes from designing and playing video games, and how this evinces their otherworldliness. Chapter 5 outlines some of the theoretical tensions that can occur when bringing narrative structures into video game design. I present an appeal to myth as a third category that can integrate both narrative and game.

In chapter 6 I argue for a more comprehensive and critical approach to the use of the heroic pattern in video games. In chapter 7 I focus on the issues of player autonomy as a subversive engagement with myth and how this relationship is reflected in the discourse of cybernetics, the playing video games and concentrated in the genre of cyberpunk. I include this set of five chapters to expound on general paths of scholarship and theories *about* myths and games, past and present. I view these chapters as an invitation into greater potential interdisciplinary conversation between game studies and mythological studies. I also argue that there is enough common ground for the development of critical approaches and transdisciplinary research to formulate compelling new directions. Thus, I present some challenging theoretical divides and problems, while also intimating where there are areas of meaningful connections and room for further shared research interests.

On Case Studies: Analysis of Games as “Mythic Texts”

Having established the theoretical framework and foundation of my analysis, I venture into the analysis of various cases studies, approaching them as one would a mythic text.⁹ Case studies either present close analysis of particular video game titles, genres or sets of core themes across various titles. Beginning with chapter 8, I trace the reception of mythological themes in through the figure of the mythic and epic heroes of *God of War*, *Dante’s Inferno*, *Asura’s Wrath*, and *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron*, arguing that a more sophisticated and nuanced classification of the genre of “epic” is needed to be of better service to the variety of ways it is explored by game developers. Chapter 9 focuses on the fictional world of *Catherine* and its occupation with

⁹ For a concise explication on the treatments and “protocols” of mythic texts I have relied on Lincolns *Theorizing Myth* 150-11, and Doty’s section on “Questions to Address Mythic Texts” (*Mythography* 466-67).

mythological, folkloric, and religious themes. In chapter 10, I analyze *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Okami* through the approach of a comparative method in efforts to build towards common traits in the two video games that transcend their immediate contexts, while also presenting their unique differences based on the traditions they evince. In chapter 11 I compare and contrast a sampling of god games, games involving gods and their ties to myth-types like theogonies (birth of gods), emergence (origin myths) and the motif of theomachy (conflict between/against gods). Chapter 12, my final case study, presents the research I conducted in the virtual world of *EVE Online* during the course of my study, with intimations on continued engagement with *EVE* as a field-site for virtual ethnography.

With all cases I rely upon the conjoined methodologies of synchronic and diachronic analysis. This means that I give attention to both their dynamic structures and historical lineages. It is also important to note that the vast majority of video games I analyzed in any great detail reside in the 2000s to the present. Therefore, I consider this a study of contemporary video games, rather than a proper general historical study of digital games. The latter project would require a far more extensive collaborative effort that would likely produce a multi-volume tome.

By proposing individual games *as mythic texts*, I present a schema by which a single game title serves as an entry point into a larger mythological network of intertextuality and referents. Thus, context, pretext, and subtext are all potential avenues of consideration. I would also add Gérard Genette's concept of the "paratext," which deal with social, public, and private components of a text that deal with its presentation, reception, circulation and mediation (*Paratexts* 1-3). By entering through a text, a user

may be exposed to the microcosm of that single game world, or find associative content that links the text to sources beyond its borders. Under certain circumstances, the mythic text may very well share the qualities of the magic circle as so defined by Huizinga, and more recently theorized by Castranova as a membrane with porous walls (147).

No single study of this topical nature can be justifiably “comprehensive,” and will require much subsequent research, follow-up studies, and efforts for future projects of smaller monographic concentrations, articles, and greater collaborative efforts. By offering and applying a variety of approaches and methods, I am arguing in favor of a general pluralism. I believe this disposition will contribute to the greater understanding shared between theory and praxis, scholarly inquiry, issues of design, and user-experience, keeping each as a discrete component able to relate to other aspects.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The following chapter provides an overview of the methods and approaches I learned, reviewed and applied during the course of my research in the field-site of choice, the virtual world of *EVE Online*—also considered a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG). I began research with several months of experience of participation in *EVE Online* as a player. However, the process involved an initial year during the time of my research to deepen my familiarization with *EVE Online* and the *EVE* community. This involved learning core mechanics to navigate the world effectively, interact with players for educational, social and non-research purposes, all prior to the selection of potential informants and the conducting of subsequent interviews. More of my experience, analysis and the results of the procedure outlined here are addressed in greater detail in my final case-study, chapter 12, dedicated to *EVE Online*.

Participants

The participants of my research may be situated into two major groups: players and designers. In a general sense, players are those individuals who devote their time to in-world or in-game activities alongside other players. They may also socialize and generate content for other players outside of the virtual world, but still within the confines of the community through blogs, fan websites, forums or other means of online communication. My informant maintained a blog dedicated to the lore and kept an extensive travelogue of his findings there for other players interested in the lore.

Group 1 consists of users, players and participants of video gaming culture. This group is rightly constituted of different kinds of users based on age and degree of engagement with the participatory medium. Such a party may be referred to as *user*,

player, gamer. From the participants interviewed, both of my informants may be said to partake in this group. One devoted his time to in-world activities while the other began as a player but moved on to join the development team of *EVE Online*, CCP. The category of choice—a massive online virtual world and game—dictates the kind of relationships and expectations players have for it. By this I mean that users of single-player worlds need not engage socially with others, but share a bond with the video game as a text. Other players engage in more socially-oriented worlds—ranging from casual online games to small-scale multiplayer to massively multiplayer online games— with each individual participating in some form of a social network. Small-scale online video games may involve team-play with other players as opponents during sessions of gameplay and outside of sessions in real world gatherings (e.g. conferences, competitions and conventions). For the purposes of this study, I have been involved with informants involved in *EVE Online* and not with participants of other casual online games or other small-scale online multiplayer. The only exception amongst my case studies is *SMITE: Battleground of the Gods*, which is considered a massively multiplayer online battle arena (MMOBA). However, I did not approach other players for any research purposes or interviews.

The second group of participants involved in the greater community of a video game is the designers of the video game products. I consider this group to be a significant segment of the greater social ecology of the video game or virtual world. Such individuals conceptualize, design and/or create the space for users to play in. Selection of the informant was based on the criteria that they were an active/former employee of CCP and that they have/had an active role in the development team. My informant had also

been an active player of *EVE Online* since 2003, with some time spent in beta testing phases prior to official release. He later joined as an employee in 2011 to write fiction for the official lore.

Both informants were contacted through various means of communication. My player-informant and I kept a correspondence outside as well as inside *EVE Online*. My second writer-informant and I contacted each other only outside of *EVE Online*, in order to openly discuss his experiences as a writer for CCP, to reflect on his experience as a player, and other influences beyond *EVE Online*. Interviews were carried out either over chat, email or remotely (Google Hangout).

Procedure

Informants speaking from *Group 1* were involved most intimately in describing the nature of their involvement with the field-site directly. Their perspectives provided an emic (insider) engagement with the product itself and the game world. As insiders with much more time devoted to in-world activities than myself, both informants offered well informed personal testimonies and invited me to consider the finer intricacies of their in-world culture. Before interviewing them I prepared questions and topics that would encourage them to discuss key social components, norms, customs and behaviors. My task as the investigator was to represent voiced opinions of the participant with utmost accuracy and fidelity. To do so required that I obtain data such as In-World conversations (chat logs) and snap-shots (screenshots) during ethnographic sessions. Such data was acquired with full consent of the participants when they are directly involved.

Group 2 was carried out mainly as open interviews with the participant so that we could explore topics like the creative process of game development, involvement in

writing official fiction, etc. Again, my key informant spent the majority of game-time logged into *EVE Online* as a player from 2002-12, until recently joining CCP as community relations and official writer of in-game lore.

I only obtained, and have drawn from, data that was approved by the participants with proper consent.

Risks

My main concern as the investigator was to never, under any circumstances place the participants in harms way, nor inflict harm during my interaction with them. Each individual as treated as such with utmost respect given to personal boundaries. The nature of my study involved dialogues and topical discussions that range from theoretical and intellectual terrain to everyday mundane activities within and/or revolving around video and computer gaming on- and offline. Hence, there were no foreseeable risks involved, nor anticipated with such interactions.

All parties discussed a range of topics outside of gaming during certain rounds of interviews. The purpose of inquiring about such topics was to document how participants define terms from within the target group. In retrospect, they were generally positive exchanges between me and the interviewees. If they did not understand the question or of what was being asked of them, they simply requested that I clarify or they decided not to answer.

I know from personal experience as a player that members of online communities take their social commitments seriously. Such is the case especially when the formation of communities involves and/or revolves around monetary and personal investment on the part of the users. It should be acknowledged from the outset that users construct

meaningful bonds and identities with other users in gaming cultures that are just as complex as non-gaming, non-virtual, actual world culture.

My belief is that everything, every activity, every individual is *really* real regardless of locale, i.e. In-world or Out-world. I stand by cultural anthropologist and virtual world ethnographer Tom Boellstorff's view that everything is real, only some activities take place actually, or virtually.

Safeguards

To insure that they were not alarmed or dismayed, I aimed to cultivate confidence and discretion between myself and the participant(s). Each interaction involved preliminary, on-going, and post-session assurances and "check-ins" with participants. I made myself easily contactable during all stages of the study in case they wished to voice concerns regarding their involvement or the topics discussed..

Benefits

My central subject matter was the degree by which users and designers cultivate meaningful experiences across our modern interactive media. I was interested in the social aspect of gaming. As a student of myth, I view myths as stories and mental/physical worlds that individuals and communities hold dear, i.e., they are somehow sacred and/or held in esteem. Participating in an online-oriented community provided a sophisticated field-site for myself as a mythologist, since it allowed me to investigate the relationship between groups and the lore they write, read or participate in within a highly interactive, complex setting of purposeful relationships. I sought to investigate how the lore took shape and how all parties shaped virtualized worldviews enage with.

With a spirited approach, I wanted all parties to come away enriched by the interactions. As much as I am concerned with myth, mythologies and mythopoetics (the mythmaking process), I also believe that *play* is a meaningful activity at work in video game culture, from the leisurely to the professional. Participants and I explored such topics in a mutually advantageous dialogue (perhaps even in the Socratic sense) arriving at a consensus on the topics we engaged with, but also opened up new questions. Though the data obtained comes from a select couple of individuals, my main intent was to having their voices and personal narratives present in a research project involving them and their media of choice. This investigator could not, would not, have the field-site without them and would not have arrived at certain formulations without first engaging with the interviewees.

Myths need to be handled with care when they are implemented and fed back to society—they have a particular potency that can be either harmful or healing. Thus, I hope that my study raises awareness for all participants, analysts and the investigator of such uses of potentially ideologically-charged material that can become as potently and divisively harmful, as it can be life-affirming and deeply meaningful.

Post Interview Follow-ups

I informed participants that they were partaking in a study backed and approved by Pacifica Graduate Institute and the Institutional Review Board. The purpose of such a study was to attain scholarly and ethnographic data from the chosen sub-cultural group regarding their engagement with play, gaming and traditional tales (mythologies).

Transcripts or audio recordings of interviews were shared with participants via e-mail, by which point they could review and offer additional comments on the content

and/or their experience of the interview process. Sets of questions were sent for the participant to answer to the best of their ability. All subsequent results of the study, once published, will be forwarded to the individuals for them to read the full report along with how their participation contributed to the study.

Research Material

In order to properly conduct and collect data for analysis, I relied on various hardware platforms and software; this too applies for the analysis of the video games during my own play-throughs. At the basic level computer and video game components are required for accessing the field-site such as a PC Desktop, Laptop, Android Smart Phone, Playstation 3, Playstation Vita, Playstation PSP and Xbox 360. Reflected in my games cited is the list of games that were analyzed and discussed. This required access to older console systems like the Atari 2600, Nintendo Family Console (Famicom), Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), or older computer hardware like the Commodore 64. In some cases I had had to rely on ported versions of computer game software, and later iterations restored or remastered. Thankfully, some archival sites are seeking to make publically accessible collections of older computer and video game software with through the means of emulators (software that attempts to render the graphical elements of a video game). For instance, I accessed some older emulated software at the *Internet Archive* website such as *Tir Na Nog* (Gargoyle Games 1984) for the ZX Spectrum and kept in the “ZX Spectrum Library” maintained by the archivist Jason Scott. It should be acknowledged that this is not entirely advisable for research projects involving methods and cultural histories of the tactile, tangible, and material aspects of the consoles, hardware and software itself. Whenever possible the researcher should ideally seek out

and play the actual software on the native hardware. Fortunately, archiving of the tangible products and hardware is well underway.

Communications technology was essential for me to conduct and exchange content with interviewees and informants. The following paths were utilized: e-mail, Google Hangout, and In-game Chat Messaging Systems (text and/or voice).

To allow further post-participation analysis of software and field-site excursions, image and video capturing of in-game events were documented and consulted for personal research notes, data collection, and later visual citations for data analysis.

Concluding Remarks on Methodology

This approach to the video game community and online communities serves to keep the analysis of them grounded in the reality of human activities and centered on the relationship between process and product. As Nick Yee of the Daedalus Project and author of *The Proteus Paradox* has proposed, virtual worlds offer three main trajectories: replicating reality, influencing reality, and reimagining reality (210-214). That is to say, they 1) “continue to perpetuate, reinforce, and produce social norms,” 2) “give us unparalleled tools for changing how we think and behave,” and 3) “could allow us to imagine new [realities]” (210-12). In considering Yee’s stance, the analyst (myself) has an opportunity to represent the complexity that is the experience of myth, play, and game within their own milieu, and in their own words. One cannot afford to neglect the social components of any one of these human activities. For, they attest the deep desire we have for interactivity, either with technology itself or through it in play and competition with one another. Although a game, a myth or the playful inclination may end up in the hands of specific individuals, elites, or small interest groups seeking authority and power, we

must all remind ourselves that these are mere nodes and passing moments in a greater cultural network of differing traditions wherein each of us contributes to the maintenance of myth, play, and game as interlocutors.

Chapter 3: Myth and Games in Analysis and Application

Man as *homo mythicus* can create myths and can consume them. He constructs his world out of an array of images, an assortment of symbols, pictures of the past, visions of the future, and common dreams. *Homo mythicus* completely reorganizes the chaos of his private and public life and transforms its lack of significance into a meaningful structure.

—David Ohana (*Origins of Israeli Mythology* 6)

Myths are—unlike fictions, folktales and legends—habitable. Like our planet Earth, a *living* myth exists in the “habitable zone” of a group’s sense of self-image, orientation and worldview: inhabitants of a myth are warmed, housed, and sustained by the message of the myth which in turn creates models of behavior and instills habits. There is, in this sense, a dual meaning to myth as being both habitable and habit-(en)abling. To this extent, a myth transcends the constraints of narrative and builds value through performance and application.

By myths I mean accounts of significant, authoritative and symbolic events which may belonging to, or rely on, a greater corpus, organization or network¹⁰ of associating events (i.e. mythologies) that conventionally represent the activities of deities, primordial beings, deep ancestors, spirits, denizens of the supernatural, accounts of Otherworlds, culture-heroes and -heroines; Plato (*Rep.* III.392a) had already made this range of subject matter clear, while modifying each accordingly throughout his *Dialogues* (cf. Brisson

¹⁰ The imagery of the network recurs throughout this study. It is a suitable and adaptive frame for approaching mythological traditions, especially in comparative analysis. An alternative is Lévi-Strauss’s “bundle of relations”: “The true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations* and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning” (“Structural Study of Myth” 431). Networks are not, by necessity, fixed or static taxonomies, but rather complex webbings that build over time and forge inter-connected pathways for agents (i.e. storytellers, content creators, users, and participants) to introduce modifications applied within a given context, or to navigate through changing contexts, i.e. events. Indeed, human agents produce, reproduce, and participate in accord with mythological networks. Further, one can posit that myths function as nodes that constellate within mythologies. Further, mobilized mythologies may encounter and interact with other networks of myths. The network is thus a perspective on myths and articulated bodies of mythologies that need not rely on hierarchical structures, but emergent models of interaction within a culture and between cultures over time.

How Philosophers 6). Such beings embody and personify core ideas, theories, beliefs, modes of thoughts and values held authoritative by the culture(s) of origin or by those who put them to use as authoritative, normative, natural and foundational accounts. In the absence of deities, a myth can still persist as an abstract ideology or set of concepts. Through their performance and pervasive discourse, myths render a consensual reality and worldview of a people that derivates from a primordial past, but impacts contemporary life and charters pathways into the future. Myths are constructed as time-honored assemblages hiding any single author, and so garner accrued authority through sanction from group consensus. Deities and primordial beings are but the figured powers that shape or embody the mask of a worldview. When such beings recede to the background, myth's power shifts into the abstract structure of ideology and available semiologic systems (viz. Barthes) wherein it becomes, in the Geertzian sense, "a story [people] tell themselves about themselves" (448). By acknowledging deities and primordial beings and thinking through myths, practitioners, and "myth-consumers," i.e. the inhabitants of myth, come to emulate the deeds of myth, translating word to deed. In this way "myth-consumers" become practitioners as well.

An axiom to be explored, and to which I will often return throughout, this study is succinctly expressed by Jakob Grimm: "Divinities form the core of all mythologies" (*Teutonic Mythology* vol. 3, xvii; Stallybrass). Sallustius (ca. 4th century) stated that "myths represent (*mimountai*) the active operations of the gods [*energeias...ton theon*]," and that gods themselves speak *mythoi* (*Concerning the Gods the Universe* 3).¹¹ Whether

¹¹ Designating, and limiting, *myth* to a genre of folk narrative dealing with primordial and cosmic events of (pre-) creation has been kept fairly consistent since Jakob Grimm. Stith Thompson defines myth as "a tale laid in a world supposed to have preceded the present order. It tells of sacred beings and of semi-divine heroes and of the origins of all things, usually through the agency of these sacred beings. Myths are

such beings exist or not falls beyond our present purview; such efforts are best left for a separate discussion of theology, dogma and myth (Blumenberg). This study is more focused on the broader category of myth as a form of mediation: accounts *about* gods. Moreover it is concerned with how they are mediated, represented, and imagined. The layer and distance (in space and time) that myth mediates differentiates myth from a direct discourse (*logos*) on the nature of gods, or *theoi* (i.e. theology). Strabo placed the body of traditional myths next to the relics of “archaic theology [*theologia àrchaikē*]” (*Geography* 1.2.8).

Mythology functions as both the ancestral and the coterminous mediator between narratology and theology. And so, it follows that aspects of narratology and theology are explored throughout this study, with theological matters coming to bear predominately in the chapters on pantheons in fantasy games, ludic depictions of gods and the god game genre. For our purposes, I do not assume a narrativist approach to myths; I argue that myths can be communicated through other nonverbal means (cf. Honko). On the whole, I disagree with Dundes’ stance that “myth = sacred narrative” on two fronts: myths are not always sacred, nor are they always narratives. The phrase “sacred narrative or tale” stems from a more proper and literal translation of Herodotus’s *hieros logoi* (Dundes, *Sacred Narrative; Histories* 2.81). Our modern usage of “myth” by the anthropologist, historian of religion, literary critic or folklorist is quite a modern construct (Van Hendy; Detienne).

intimately connected with religious beliefs and practices of the people. They may be essentially hero legends or etiological stories, but they are systematized and given religious significance. The hero is somehow related to the rest of the pantheon and the origin story becomes an origin myth by attachment to the adventures of some god or demigod” (*The Folktale* 9). Alan Dundes defines myth simply as “a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form” (*Sacred Narrative* 1). Heda Jason, in her magisterial manual for the compiling, classifying and indexing of folk literature defines myth thus: “Myth tells of the creation of the primary principles and entities of nature and human society. Man does not yet exist in the mythic epoch (it is his mythical ancestors who plays in myth). Myth is set in the creative mode, in the mythic and eschatological epochs and in mythic space. Myth serves as the verbal part of religious ritual and can be couched in both prose and verse” (*Motif, Type and Genre* 145).

In other words, myths can be secular *and* non-verbal. At best, the tools of narration and command of the sacred are domains that mythic discourse uses to gain authority and credibility (Barthes; Lincoln).

What of myths within the worlds of video games? By residing between the distance and delivery that mediation creates, I suggest that the image, as opposed to the presence, of divinities (i.e. *simulacrum*, *eikon*, or *eidolon*) maintain a semblance that is traceable through synthetic, aesthetic and semiotic channels, and that such channels circulate within a field of distribution and participation. It would be a mistake to simply identify myth by its subject matter (e.g. an account of gods and heroes). Instead, we also need to consider the context that gives a myth its authority, whether “sacred” or “secular.” Mythological elements osculate between:

1. *the transparent*, or implicit, way that the myth informs and shapes the user-experience and mode of thought, activities, and attitudes; ideological proclivities
2. *the opaque*, or the explicit, where mythic personages appear visibly as existents of the fictional world.

Myths are well suited for the interactive models of video games given that a myth can be approached not only as a genre of storytelling but also participation (i.e. in-game mythos), offering a structure for engaging its mode of thought. Myth’s elasticity places it above other types of stories and narratives, since it offers multiple hermeneutic possibilities of application.

If we return to the conventional claim that myths are accounts of gods and heroes what divinities are represented, what do they signify, how do they function? Furthermore,

if compared cross-culturally, can we assume that myths convey an aggregated idea that can be simply expressed by or adequately translated by the Western-centric category of god(s) and goddess(es)? I give preference to the term deity(-ies) for its neutrality. Such figures may constitute the core of mythologies, but not all divinities are equal in power, potency, domain, and station. In chapter 7, for example, I approach the issue through the case of two distinct uses of polytheistic systems, one wholly artificial and simulated (*Skyrim*) and the other culturally derived (*Okami*) the first being a poetic mythology of divinities, and the second coming from the realm of Shinto *kami*. In the case of the latter, I take up a further qualifying distinction between *shinwa* 神話 (“myth”) and *jingi setsuwa* 神祇 説話 (“stories about *kami*) as proposed by Jin’ichi Konishi in *A History of Japanese Literature vol. 1: The Archaic and Ancient Ages* (165). Grimm’s use of the plural (divinities) may also relegate our classification of the mythological to polytheistic concepts, systems and representations of the divine. For instance, it remains problematic and unresolved for scholars of religion to call the biblical stories of Jewish and Christian tradition “myths.” However, as we will see in chapter 9, monotheistic constructs hold sway over the video game genre of the “god game” and its ideological framing that tend to simulate the perspective of omniscient god-vision and omnipotence.

It is valuable to compare myths in relation to other forms, genres, and prose narratives of folklore. For example, I follow Vladimir Propp when differentiating between a wondertale and a myth: “unlike the wondertale, whose plot content is a relic, myth provides a living link between a tale and the entire reality of a people, their economic production, social structure, and beliefs” (*History* 120). Though he only applied myth to a “primitive” society, Bronislaw Malinowski’s concept of myth also

identifies its “social charter,” wherein myth is “a direct statement of its subject matter” (“Myth in Primitive Psychology” 101). Through the immediacy of semiotics and ideology, Roland Barthes argued that contemporary bourgeois society is (innocently) living myths. Joseph Campbell called this the *bios* of *mythos* attempted to connect the way myths meet in the individual’s biology and biography, as well as in the collective organism of society. Berger and Luckmann’s “symbolic universe” is evoked as a means of approaching mythology as a social construction and conception of reality “that posits an ongoing penetration of the world of everyday experience with sacred forces...[entailing] a high degree of continuity between social and cosmic order, and between all their respective legitimations,” and so, “all reality appears as made of one cloth” (128).

It thus follows that we need not treat our subject matter, myth, as a dead object—a relic—revived, for it draws sustenance from the agency and motivation of human participation, imagination, performance, word-of-mouth and direct feedback—that is, the social and communal spheres of action and speech. The above theorists offer glimpses of myth’s life-line through embodied experiences. In this way, their collective notions and theories of being able to step into a myth and live it means that myths surely function as models of behavior: paradigmatic models of (divine/cosmic) order, according to Mircea Eliade in *Sacred and Profane* (95-99).¹²

¹² An antecedent to this idea is suggested in Sallustius’s treatise, *Concerning the Gods and the Universe*: “The providence of the gods stretches everywhere and needs only fitness for its enjoyment. Now all fitness is produced by imitation (*mimēsei*) and likeness (*omoioteti*). That is why temples are a copy of heaven, altars of earth, images of life (and that is why they are made in the likeness of living creatures), prayers of the intellectual element, letters of the unspeakable powers on high, plants and stones of matter, and the animals that are sacrificed of the unreasonable life in us. From all these things the gods gain nothing (what is there for a god to gain?), but we gain union (*synaphē*) with them” (XV; Nock 29).

On the whole, I follow Bascom's distinction of myth, legend and folktale (Bascom, "Forms of Folklore" 9-29; cf. Frazer, *Library* xxvii-xxxii). However, I would modify his identification of myth as a form preoccupied with the remote past or prehistory. It could just as easily be addressing "deep history" still active in the present. Myth may adorn itself with deep ancestral events, but it brings it to bear on the present. The immediacy of myth distinguishes it from any other form of folklore and classes of folk narrative. In this way, I follow Bruce Lincoln's designation of myth as an account that provides *truth-claims*, *credibility*, and *authority* in one constellation as opposed to "history" (only truth-claims, credibility), "legend" (only truth claims), and fable (pure fictions). Myth's key trait, according to Lincoln, is its power-position. That is, it claims authority to make societal models and controls the way such models are talked about. If events happened in a particular place and time, it could be a legend or possibly a history if recorded; if events recounted are not tied to time or place, i.e. a fictional world, it is a folktale or her descendents. Only in myth are the remote past and its extraordinary events given the authority to shape a people's present vision of themselves, and sometimes others. To be clear, I do not claim that a work of fiction like a novel, for instance, will forever remain inconsequential to, or within, the life of their reader. Instead, once the fiction is lifted out of the context of written word and applied in to context of a readers' life, reflections on life, or outlook, some form of transmutation is possible: this transmutation shifts the world of the novel from fiction to an endowed approximation of the mythic.

Beyond folkloric genre and classification of narratives, we can gain further insights by comparing how myths in video games derive structure and authority from

fictional worlds and rule-sets (Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*; Juul, *Half-Real*). Through such means we can then posit how the mythic and ludic partakes of the others' mode and discourse. Rather than being voyeuristic venues of spectatorship, myths and games, as we shall see, impinge on both the fantasy life and reality of the individual and the collective, when both are approached through function and participation, rather than the limitation of narrative and literary elements of representation.

To be sure, it is one of our main tasks to pursue myth as action, performance, and application as it migrates from one myth-user to another, rather than trying to get at it directly through ontological grounds and definitions alone; that is, our task is to examine what myth *does*, rather than what myth *is*. A fable or folktale can change status and be transformed into a myth if it is given privilege as a distinctly important narrative in a given society. The power of myth is not necessarily in its content but in the delivery and reception (Lincoln, "Early Moment" 242-243). Indeed, it then falls upon who is delivering and to whom the myth takes. These fundamental communicative mechanisms imply configurative and interpretative practices along the path of transmission. We can heed a cautious proclamation made by Walter Burkert, "Myths are multivalent: the same myth may be applied to nature or history, to metaphysics or psychology, and make some sense in each field, sometimes even striking sense, according to the predilections of the interpreter" (*Structure and History* 5). In a similar vein, we may follow Wendy Doniger's idea about the "multivocality of myths," relying on her conception of myth as "a story embodied in a group of texts" (*Implied Spider* 88). Here, I modify her definition by considering their application and performance, and in this way extend myths to the media of video games. In fact, I am apt to agree partially with Burkert's more concise

formulation of “myth as *applied* narrative” (*Structure and History* 22-26). However, I hesitate to relegate myth solely to narrative; not all narratives are myths, nor are all myths imparted through the verbal form of narrative. Collectively owned, shared and applied, myth may be more rightly referred to not as a sacred narrative, but rather as the more inclusive term used by Malinowski: a sacred or signified *tradition*. Tradition has a dual sense of meaning a process and a product worked on by a group.

Here, again, there is much to be gained by comparing not just the differences but the similarities myths have with other forms of expressive culture such as legends and folktales. They are collectively owned and shared, rather than privately held as any single individual’s property; though textualization, intellectual properties, franchises and industry have complicated matters. The stories of myth, legend, and folktale withstand circulation and distribution. Myths and folktales by nature spring from and propagate communal identity and reflect social norms—at the local or national level; they are in the public domain; they are products of multi-authorship. Thus, literary theorists like Thomas Pavel have proposed a reassessment of ancient myth and our modern own fictional worlds: “The universe of Greek gods and heroes was not invented anew by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; instead each developed a certain language or a certain angle of vision in relation to a relatively stable mythological universe” (*Fictional Worlds* 54). And so it follows that myths are prime wells for side-stepping “intellectual” property. However, what of cultural property and appropriation? During the writing of this dissertation, the independent video game *Never Alone (Kisima Inŋitchuŋa)* was released. Centered on the life-story of a young Iñupiaq girl, Nuna and her snow fox companion as they navigate the arctic land and Otherworld, *Never Alone* is an important and significant

example of elders affirming the latest form of media to impart their body of sacred lore to the younger generations. The category of myth can often take one into the typical world of Classical Greco-Roman myths of antiquity or Medieval legendry, but *Never Alone* reminds the audience, analyst and designers that myths are very much a part of living traditions today and require careful attention to be voiced within contemporary culture.

A myth, as well as her correlatives, may come into the possession of, be related by or entrusted to an individual, a priesthood, a scholar, an elite or a franchise, but only a particular version or variant told by that party is recognized as authoritative and/or identified with that source so that the unique rendition becomes imbued with the bias, motive, interest, aesthetics and ideology of that interpreter. Consider for example, Homer's Olympians versus Hesiod's, Ovid's, *Clash of the Titans*, *God of War* versus other versions told through epic, poetry, film, or game respectively, or Sophocles' Oedipus versus Sigmund Freud's version. Although a myth may be channeled through an individual storyteller, very often there is a preface or invocation signifying a denial of authorship, and that it is but a reworking or re-telling of time-honored, well-known and privileged lore. Modifications to the myth-lore cue the analyst to the raconteur's interests and innovations, while revealing their distant relation to the material by invoking predecessors and, sometimes, contemporary alternatives or authors whose versions they contest (Lincoln, *Gods and Demons* 53-57).

Much is at stake between a myth-teller and his or her audience, for, they are collectively shaping and managing a worldview comprised of core meanings, values, and rules. This approach of fragmentation and redaction within the collective is a challenging task for one seeking to define *the* myth, for it always exists in a proliferated state, spun

through ever-more fragmentations. Often the student of myth is required to consult and collect as many “versions” or variants of a myth—à la Lévi-Strauss—to distill defining characteristics, settings, actions, sequences of events, characters, creatures and themes involved. Laurie Patton challenged Lévi-Strauss on this point while keenly proposing that perhaps there are vestiges of “mythological fragments” whose very function is to be disruptive and deconstructive. As she states:

If, indeed, the presence of mythological motifs in a work of art or literature implies both disruption and continuity, mythologists might take advantage of the recent trend in literary analysis toward an analysis of ‘the fragment.’ We might look again at the notion of the mythological fragment, not as some of our forebears have done, as building blocks toward some cognitive or ontological deep structure, but as forms in themselves. There may indeed be artistic or literary remnants of myths that are not simply parts of some lost whole but whose very nature it is to be fragmentary and whose function might be disruptive in order effectively to reconfigure and challenge previously accepted meaning. (Patton 395)

Roland Barthes has also argued that myth itself functions best by co-opting incomplete images (237). In our exploration across various game worlds we may have to initially question both the form and content—that is the aesthetics, from variation to variation—but, ultimately, in pursuit of use and performance. Our core subject matter and medium, the contemporary video game, is itself a dynamic field-site of action, a heuristic, an act of

cooperation, a field of emergent behavior, and form of participation in mythic not a static text by any means.

It is important to emphasize early on that the very word *mythology* is a contentious and agonistic compound (μῦθος [authoritative speech, account, story, plot, lore, fable] and λόγος [persuasive speech, tale, account, report, log, discourse, reasoning, study]), a neologism of its time coined by Socrates in Plato's *Greater Hippias*. The term itself provides a clue into the complexity of its recursive and ouroboric nature as a form that has been at odds with itself. Since Plato it has been used to understand a culture and society *in transition* from one mode of mediation to another: from oral to literary communication, authorless to authored texts, poets to philosophers, *mythos* to *logos*.¹³ Plato's heavy-handed critique of Homer and Hesiod did not include a critique of *mythoi*, but instead the ways *mythoi* were used and handled by the poets. In so doing, Plato prepared the foundation for inventing *mythoi*, or modifying existing ones, in service to the project of philosophy and truth so defined and legitimated by the philosopher. Plato's act of navigating between innovation and tradition marks one of the key gestures mythologists tend to emulate: when a culture or society becomes exceedingly aware of itself and its destiny its mythology becomes more apparent and opaque, at which point it is cast off or refigured, only to be re-discovered through nostalgia. To be sure, "mythology" can be the body of myths, their interpretation, study, and/or recounting; *mythologia* can be strictly transliterated as "storytelling," while *mythologéō* can be translated as "telling mythic tales" (Liddell and Scott). Methods of myth-analysis are

¹³ The earliest usage of the Greek *mythologia* was by Plato in his *Greater Hippias* 298a as simply meaning "storytelling," finding its place alongside human artistry of works reaching for beauty: decorations, painting, sculpture, music, and speech (*logos*). Marcel Detienne argues that perhaps it is the very questions and orchestration of absolute answers that generate this quality in myths and mythic discourse. Thus "mythology" emerged or was "invented" out of the great shift from *mythos* to *logos*.

diverse and have been approached through allegory, dramaturgy, philosophical analysis, historical rationalization (Euhemerism), linguistic analysis, reconstruction, living traditions (folkloristics, ethnography, sociology, cultural studies, depth psychology), literary criticism, narratology, political science, art history, religious studies, media studies [...] the critical and collective study of myth has been the interdisciplinary endeavor *par excellence*. The mythologist must not only become familiar with bodies of myths (mythology as corpus), but have a grasp of the history of the study of myth (mythology as discipline): “While ‘mythology’ is the study of myth, a look at the history of mythology is a study of the study of mythology, thus a sort of ‘metamythology’ not unlike the history of science or the history of any other branch of scholarly endeavor” (Puhvel 7). How such bodies of myths mobilize in the present tense, and have been mobilized in past societies, spans from elite propagandist campaigns to folk oral histories; myths occupy the mind of groups seeking meaning through storied events (significant events) that provide a structure, a self-image and a worldview. Myth has the acute challenge of delivering a singular expression through a multiplicity of voices, associations and symbols. The plurality of voices generates “a volatile field of contestation, within which multiple variants jockey for acceptance, each one of them situated, partial, and self-interested” (Lincoln, *Gods and Demons* 55). Consider Hesiod’s pair of poems and what they reveal about the nature of myth: *Theogony* is a victory hymn in honor of Zeus and his rise to power among the immortals; *Works and Days* is a pragmatic hymn about what it means to live in a world as a mortal among mortals overseen by the immortals of *Theogony*: mortals live in a field of contestation. Hesiod distinguishes two kinds of competition or Strife (*Eridon*) at odds with one another. The

Oppressive Strife (*Erin bareian*), “fosters evil war and conflict [*he men gar polemon te kakon kai derin ophellei*]” (*Works and Days* 14; Most 87), while the Good Strife (*Erin agathe*) stirs healthy measured competition stirring so that “potter is angry with potter, and builder with builder, and beggar begrudges beggar, and poet poet” (24-26; Most 89). Ultimately, Strife is to be honored in its two aspects, since even the very principle is at odds with itself, and so permeates the life of work in both the mortal and immortal realms. Myths can narrate such stories of conflict, but also each telling of a myth competes with other myths. This is what I refer to as an *agonistic theory of myth*. Contestation is the vital core of a mythology that has not yet crystallized into a ridged dogma, cult or religious narrative. That is, where *a single version determines orthodoxy*. Religious narratives (and histories) stress the orthodox (right opinion), while myths attempt to maintain the paradox (peripheral opinion).

A rare textual example of this process of mythmaking can be discerned in the similarities and differences between the *Kojiki* (compiled AD 712) and *Nihonshoki* (compiled AD 720) and their accounts of the Age of the Kami (*kamiyo* 神代): *Kojiki* (Books 1-2) narrates a single homogeneous development and genealogy of the accounts about *kami*, while the *Nihongi* or *Nihonshoki* (Books 1-3), presents variants of a single episode in the Age of the *kami*. The *Nihon Shoki* first offers a “main version” followed by subsequent versions ranging in length and presenting slight modifications to details of the main source (See Aston, *Nihongi* xx).

Any individual project using myth as a point of departure must inevitably be faced with the give-and-take of solution and dissolution, and must be willing to venture into other fields to define itself and the boundaries of discourse and analysis, to find

identity through alterity, and to steer through the transdisciplinary and transmedial. Hence, the mythologist must sometimes rely on the insights and specialization of other disciplines readily and earnestly if comparative methods are to offer insights beyond a mere quest for universals (cf. Shushan). The mythologist must become familiar with, discern and observe competing variants of myths and discourses about them, and so, participates frequently in metalanguage; the forces that shape speech and how to speak about types of speech-acts.

In so doing, the mythologist may in turn propose how mythologies make connections, build bridges, and cross boundaries (e.g. *bricolage* as elucidated by Lévi-Strauss). Myth theorists, critics and mythologists were, and occasionally still are, apt to build on a methodology of worldwide-syntheses, universality and grand comparatism (e.g. Müller, Frazer, Jung, Lévi-Strauss, Eliade, Campbell, and most recently Witzel)—a task that requires the proposition of some unit or structure that transcends the boundaries of a single tradition. For example, Jung formulated the idea that *archetypes* comprise a collective unconscious, and that they manifest spontaneously in a variety of elaborated forms of cultural expression, often vividly presented in the context of mythologies, religions, and folklore. The object is not to reach the archetype directly, which is never truly accessible through conscious means (as Jung was quick to point out), but rather to identify its dynamics through symbols, motifs, artistic representations, and other conscious elaborations. Jung later postulated the concept as the *archetypal image* as a concrete manifestation of such unconscious dynamics. Although his contribution to the study of myth is essential to the history and development of mythological studies as a discipline, I will not be relying on Jung's hypothesized collective unconscious nor on the

panhuman/universal conception of archetypes. I tend to follow instead Barthes: “*myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not make disappear. There is no latency of the concept in relation to the form: there is no need of an unconscious in order to explain myth” (231). Having said that, the video games analyzed or alluded to in this study (e.g. *Catherine*, *Xenogears*, *MegaTen* series and *Persona* series) utilize the theories of depth psychology for the purpose of creative storytelling and world-building. These particular games tend to employ the Jungian archetype, archetypal images and concept of myth in their “eternal,” “ever-present” forms as they manifest in the time and life of the fictional world (i.e. *diegetic*) of the video game’s characters. Therefore they all draw on the encyclopedia of deities, spirits and demons that operates as a compendium of supernatural beings at the disposal of, or in combat with, the player. In this way, my own analysis rests more on the discrete, artistic and self-conscious uses of Jungian theory in particular videogames, rather than a reliance on the theories themselves for a final analysis proper.

In recent scholarly efforts, Sarah Lynne Bowman and Whitney Beltrán have both attempted to apply and link Jungian concepts of myth, play, and active imagination within the context of role-playing games (RPGs) and live action role-playing (LARP).¹⁴ Though both scholars have laid important groundwork in initiating a conversation, and discerning tempting affinities between Jungian concepts and RPGs and LARPs, it has yet to be cogently argued why specifically Jungian concepts of the archetypes and why the Campbellian hero of myth have an essential value or should be heeded without recourse

¹⁴ See, Bowman’s *Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (13-16, 76-77, 143-154); and “Jungian Theory and Immersion in Role-Playing Games” in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*; and Beltrán’s pair of thoughtful essays, “Yearning for the Hero within” and “Shadow Work: A Jungian Perspective on the Underside.”

or relation to opposing methods, paradigms and schools of thought in psychology and the study/theory of myth. That is, without addressing the significant critiques of Jung and Campbell.

Other scholars studying myths from a comparative perspective in general have alternatively sought to narrow their scope slightly to regions or demonstrative language families, carefully reconstructing proto-myths of common origin and migrations (i.e. diffusion). Instead of seeing the archetype as a dynamic residing in a non-local psyche or in the mind of universal man, such scholars conceive of the archetype as simply the “original form” of a myth or tale located in a specific geographical location and ethnic group. The units are more properly distinguished as mythological motifs and tale types, and are arrived at through close readings of texts, comparative linguistics, collected recordings, performances and material culture. The textualist perspective stems from the schools of philology, while the latter attests performances of folk literature. Kaarle and Julius Krohn would develop the historic-geographic (“Finnish”) method at the turn of the 20th century. Out of such efforts, their student and fellow folklorist Antti Aarne (1867-1925) formulated and compiled the pioneering index *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* later revised and expanded by Stith Thompson (= AT Index), compiling his own separate *Motif Index of Folk Literature*. Such indexes rely on coordination between the trained ethnologist of a given local or regional tradition for collecting and recording, and the archivist who catalogs and indexes the material. They therefore demonstrate an ethos of bottom-up, emic and contextualized units of study on the basis of which we might posulate greater cross-cultural congruencies and etic units.¹⁵

¹⁵ In *The Folktale*, Stith Thompson remarks that the tale-type classifies a genetic relationship between tales, while the motif is of international usage (415-16). Hence, I rely in the main on the usage of the *Motif-Index*

Under such rubrics, the historic-geographic method would work towards the archetype, or original form of a tale type, but under the framework of diachrony, monogenesis and diffusion. For example, the influential folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1878-1952) postulated that certain types of a folktale migrate and distribute amongst a certain geographical regions, nation, district, or province (i.e. *milieu*) with slight variations in the immediate areas, terming these units *oicotypes* (alt. *oikotypes*, or “ecotypes”) (Sydow, “Geography and Folk-Tale Oicotypes”). The *oicotype* is perhaps an advantageous unit for comparative analysis in that it could be tested against video game worlds that seek to virtually represent and simulate the environment of folkloric and mythic content sourced from actual traditions. Regionalized and localized scholarship based on living and extinct language families, societal structures and myths could yield more carefully constructed and proposed hypotheses than those proposed from a top-down perspective. Georges Dumézil’s tripartite structure of (Proto-)Indo-European cultures may reveal mythic ideals that do not necessarily reach fulfillment in societal roles and structures, but still perpetuate through mythological traditions. Though not universal, the tendency still is towards creating meta-structures for the theorizing of myths and social ideologies through comparative methods and types from the top-down.¹⁶ Even under such meticulous scholarship and scrutinizing attempts to relate mythic texts to their societies, Dumézil’s major contribution of comparative mythology—like many projects of

in applying it to the video game medium unless significant genetic continuities of cultural influence and inheritance are reflected in the video game world. Under such circumstances, it may warrant the argument for the depiction of a tale-type.

¹⁶ See C. Scott Littleton’s *The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil*, for a thorough overview of Dumézil’s works; especially his brief comments on the similarities and differences between Lévi-Strauss’s universal tendencies of structuralism and Dumézil’s more measured approach to a specific body of traditions, their structures and ideologies (202-203). The substantial criticism aimed at the latter is based more on the grounds of imagined communities, than imagined universals.

ambitious comparativism—are often met with subsequent critics and contestation (see Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth and Death, War, and Sacrifice* 123, 231-43; cf. Arvidsson). In general, the various disciplines and methods of comparative mythology have been succinctly defined by Littleton as:

...the systematic comparison of myths and mythic themes drawn from a wide variety of cultures and involves attempts to abstract common underlying themes, to relate these themes to a common symbolic representation (e.g., the forces of nature, fertility, or, for Dumézil, social organization), and/or reconstruct one or more protomythologies. (*New Comparative Mythology* 32)

The individual mythologist may also contribute by presenting the variety of ways myth can be approached (Detienne's *The Creation of Mythology*, Doniger's *Implied Spider*, Coupe's *Myth*, Von Hendy's *Modern Construction of Myth*, William Doty's *Mythography*), or he/she dons the role of editor of an anthology or scholarly symposia relying on voices from multiple perspectives: Henry A. Murray's *Myth and Mythmaking*, *Myth: A Symposium*, Gregory Schrempp and William Hansen's *Myth: A New Symposium*, Alan Dundes's *Sacred Narratives*, and Lauri Patton and Wendy Doniger's edited collection of essays, *Myth and Method*.

Revivalist movements in the humanities and the arts have kept certain mythological systems from antiquity in vogue. For example, the revival of Greco-Roman myth in poetic imagination has its roots in the Renaissance and the emergence of the professional mythographer "[whose] manuals were carefully consulted by artists, by writers, and by the educated in general" (Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myth* 147).

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* serving as a painter's handbook for handling mythological subject matter is an example (Seznec 258). Giovanni Boccaccio (AD 1313-1375) attempted to systematize "pagan" traditions into a coherent genealogy—to, in a sense, bring order out of chaos—with his mythographic *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (On the Genealogy of the Gods of the Gentiles). The reliance on a fixed body of myths lends itself to the production of mythographic compendiums for future consultation. Preceding the Renaissance, major examples from antiquity include Pseudo-Apollodorus's (dates range between 300 BC - AD 200) *Library* (*Biblioteca*) of Greek mythology and Gaius Julius Hyginus's (ca. 64 BC - AD 17) *Fabulae*. Presenting myths through a rational, secularized, non-believing method helped preserve the classical Greco-roman myths in the works of literature, the visual arts, and philosophical treatises. It was a slow process of secularization (Eliade, *Myth and Reality* 156-57). Once belief falls away, a myth can no longer be sustained by sacred (authoritative) status and lived reality, yet can retain a hallow shell of itself in a genre of once-believed, old time tales, a shadows of a former self. This is why the fine balance between synchronic and diachronic approaches to myth are critical for orienting analysis: the former reveals the myth's structure while the latter traces how the myth is used, expanded on or recedes through time.

The tradition of relying on handbook textualization of mythology persists today in popular literature. Though conventionally avoided in the higher ranks of mythological studies, we can consider the distilled commercial retellings and handbooks of Classical mythology through the works of Thomas Bulfinch's *Mythology*, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* and Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths*, geared towards popular consumption and—not to be overlooked—general public school education. Of these three Graves'

mythological tome tends to stand above the others for its erudition and scholarly rigor. Though often scoffed at as being “bowdlerized,” these condensed and polished renditions of myths are nonetheless viable variants that make myths easily accessible, debased as they are from “raw myth,” and so may end up being the source of a myth for a developer or designer of video games. A couple cases may suffice to intimate this kind of direct transmission from this source: Robert Graves’ tome, *The Greek Myths*, inspired Stuart Smith, creator of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, to make a follow-up game based on the Twelve Labors of Herakles in *Return of Heracles* (83). In an interview with *PLAY* magazine, Robert E. Vardeman, co-author of the 2010 novelization of the 2005 video game *God of War*, once revealed that the mythology of the game world was directly inspired by Edith Hamilton’s renderings in her popular *Mythology* handbook. Along a similar line we may also look to writers of popular children’s literature like Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* series which have introduced our youth to the world of myth, perhaps, for their first time.¹⁷

However impertinent or imprudent such literary reworkings may be or how they may work against scholarly theory, they nonetheless have made considerable mainstream contributions to the public awareness of myth, for they attempt to orchestrate a symphony out of a cacophony, and may serve as go-to sources for the curious youth, creative artist, writer and designer. They make classical mythology and mythologies of the greater world readable and inviting. For consulting purposes alone, such handbooks play a vital role in circulating versions of myths through products developed for popular consumption.

Video games are no exception and could easily be accused of pushing mythic vulgarities

¹⁷ Riordan has gone so far as to write the introduction to a recent 2012 reprinting of Graves’s *The Greek Myths*.

to extremes. The stigma of encouraging violence that video games sometimes receive, may well be given an alibi by using myths, since myths have often been accused of attributing human scandal and violence onto the divine. When matched with a vulgar video game the reversal of bowdlering may fall upon myths, and instead an exaggeration of a myth's pathologies may ensue. Censorship and abuse of myths and games have deep roots.

Since the 18th century revival of the study and problem of myth, the discipline of mythological studies has yet to forge a truly global symphony of indigenous and exogenous contributors. The study of myth has found a place in departments of literature, classics, anthropology, and world religion. The paradigm of an independent discipline is slowly emerging through the efforts of outreach by studies from multiple fronts. The effort to study myth and its cognates across a multitude of socio-historical contexts may be enhanced over the coming decades as access to scholarly resources increases and translations continue. It remains a group effort, rather than resting on the efforts of a select few scholars.

Myths are in many ways a type of memory-technology (mnemonic vehicles, as it were) and are further representative of our instinct and fascination with the technique of mediation. However, as we shall see, myths have an ability to migrate, adapt, and transform *with* technological advancements. We need not limit myth to a narrow definition of *narrative*, for it is more potently a plane or space existing in and allowing for the negotiable, the contingent, the alternative and the imaginal. By the imaginal I mean a domain in which ideas remain in a state of play and contingency with images and symbols. We might say it signifies how one envisions a vision. As an innovative leap in

imagination, myths help speak about the invisible, while a ritual can make the mythic speech visible. Hence, while discussing myths, we need not reduce them to, nor dwell on them as, simply narratives or *muthos* (viz. sequences of events), but follow Jesper Juul's definition of *fiction as imagined world* (*Half-Real* 122), or the more recent conception of *storyworld* by media scholars of transmediality (see Jenkins; Klastrup and Tosca). There is room and a need for fresh and precise terminology as advances are made in media studies. The area of transmedia storytelling, as proposed by Henry Jenkins, is one such locale where the media-conscious mythologist may find much compelling sets of terms.

Just as Propp distinguished myth from wonder tale, I do not mean to distill all fictional and imagined worlds to the status of myth—nonetheless, there is much we can learn from noting distinctive factors in the ludic rendering of fairy tales, wonder tales and folk tales when compared to the potential for a ludic discourse of myths. Through comparative means, we can extrapolate the process by which myths are constructed, expressed and experienced through the medium of the contemporary video game.

Our task is to parse out the transitions of technologically innovative forms of myth and mediation; that is, to engage in a media-conscious approach to myth. Video games, in particular intimate new versions of old myths, or perhaps more precisely, new ways and inflexions in which a *user* can virtually experience a corpus of myths within *an interactive schema*. In other words, the user comes into synthetic and ludic contact with mythologies and their denizens. Games allow for an interior view of mythic spaces, figures, situations and themes. They create a distinct and discrete level of immersion into an imaginal and mythical space. However, I suggest that during a session of gameplay the user merely glimpses an aspect of an entire myth in a very acute, albeit immersive,

encounter episode by episode always in a state of *metaxy*, or In-Between reality.¹⁸ It is my contention that the structure of a myth “in-forms” gameplay, yet only in part; this informing yields merely a piece of the sourced myth in simulacra for the user to digest and configure to his or her purposes: to be in play with contingency. Here, it may be more proper to employ the term *mythic*, by which I mean the atmosphere and intimations of a myth and its *familial network of relations and symbols*. The clustering nature of a mythology results in a rich and complex grammar of metaphor and metonymy (See Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language” 129-33).

The myth theorist Ernst Cassirer once stated, “The mythical form of conception is not something super-added to certain definite elements of empirical existence; instead, the primary ‘experience’ itself is steeped in the imagery of myth and saturated with its atmosphere” (10). I am in basic agreement with Cassirer on the grounds that a myth—as I have previously stated—is a *habitable* model and account of the world. To this extent, I follow Cassirer’s qualitification of the space that myth creates—the *atmosphere* it produces. The construction and conception of myth as atmospheric—and thus, as spatial—means that we, again, not reduce it to strictly a narrative mode of discourse, but rather world-making; that is, mythopoetics as cosmopoetic. Already game scholars have made some headway in recognizing the value of myth in game world settings, as Tanya Krzywinska makes clear: “The mythological mode of creating a world and its concomitant meanings enables players, by virtue of drawing on archetypes, to live virtually in ‘once upon a time’ and has a significant role in framing the conditions of play, beyond the programmed mechanics and rules” (“World Creation and Lore” 138).

¹⁸ See Embry 43, 168-69 for his commentary on Voegelin’s usage.

Our next challenge, then, is to situate the video game medium in a continuum of tradition(s), which I suggest, means a return to fundamental activities—i.e. storytelling, playing and gaming. As a multimedia enterprise, video games attempt to take on all such tasks. These are not antagonistic categories, but rather exist along a spectrum where a synthetic world (the game world) remains in a state of play and contingency—at least while the activity takes place. This may come as a surprise at first, since I have just described how impactful stories are for a people when they are privileged as—and elevated to—myth. However, myth tends to proliferate into polymorphic and polyfunctional areas of a culture. Hence, it not only codifies, but necessitates occasional coding (consolidating, distillation) allowing for concentrated *traditio* (handing-down, or Aristotle’s *paralemmenous muthous*). Luc Brisson referred to this usage of myth as “communicating the memorable” (*How Philosophers Saved Myth* 16). Hans Blumenberg in *Work on Myth* states:

Myths are stories that are distinguished by *a high degree of constancy in their narrative core* and by an *equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation*. These two characteristics make myths transmissible by tradition: Their constancy produces the attraction of recognizing them in artistic or ritual representation as well [as in recital], and their variability produces the attraction of trying out new and personal means of presenting them. (34; italics mine)

Barber and Barber have proposed that certain types of myths served non-literate cultures with the means to store and transmit information of actual events, functioning like time capsules (2). Myths can, then, serve as an acute mirror of what a culture determines is

most worth handing down: meaning, value, wisdom and knowledge. Further, because myth tends to tap into and operate within the imaginal plane (i.e. the realm of images, imagination and imagery), it necessarily allows for the play of such content in a metaverse. In other words, myth, in its terpsichorean nature (that is being pliable to multiple renditions), has as an axiom a condition of playfulness and the treatment of “serious” matters as play-forms. Gaming (i.e. the basic activity of the video game user) taps into playfulness and interacts with play-form models, grappling not with pathways of passive readership, but of pathways of active user-ship. To know the terrain and its residence within the play-sphere is a key factor in initiating participation. Taking these factors into consideration, my study and approach to myth’s reception in video games will be three fold:

1. *Mythographic*: Tracking, observing, recording and categorizing mythic themes, motifs, mythemes, and defining sets of myths. A means to explicate the *ethos* of *muthos*. The thematic level.
2. *Mythologic*: the *logos* or discourse of myth, noting its significance to particular culture(s) and the formulation of a *body of myths* into a single whole and system. The discursive and analytical level.
3. *Mythopoetic*: how myths find expression unique to a given medium, addressing such issues as content, form and aesthetics subject to artistic autonomy, intentionality, and *poesis*.

Mythopoeia—or “mythmaking”—is the re-purposing of myth, and may be used for artistic, social, philosophical, religious or political ends. The creative and performative level.

These three modalities will be the basic toolkit applied to various video games considered for this study in efforts to extract the mythic themes. It is worth mentioning that these modalities can be applied to methods of mediation beyond video games. Attention will also be given to the history of convergent moments between myths and games, in efforts to sustain a *historical* and *comparative* study of the material. And to be clear, a comparative method needn't strive for universals as the final destination, but rather to build outward from smaller comparisons to establish meaningful connections on the level of local, cultural, national, and transnational with an eye towards distilling sets/clusters of ideas and motifs, and/or methods of mediation. The dynamics between the historical (diachronic) and the comparative (synchronic), I suggest, offer a dialectical approach that maintains the integrity of the core subject matters: the mythic and ludic.

A Brief Excursus on Game Studies, History and Antecedents

Frans Mäyrä has emphasized the lack of a coherent discipline of video game history, and so diachrony is more multifarious than unified (30). There are diachronies overlapping. This is, perhaps, a natural reflection of the greater shift away from grand theories and towards area studies and New Historicism. Important efforts on narrating histories of video games as commercial products is already underway with such notable works as Steven Kent's *The Ultimate History of Video Games* from 2001, Mark J. P. Wolf's edited 2008 volume, *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond*, and Tristan Donovan's 2010 *Replay: the History of Video Games* for example. The history of the game medium is hardly linear with threads of history running through platforms, individual companies, game development studios, and the history of particular genres, to name a mere few trajectories. Including these histories,

Mäyrä suggests six paths of research, each with varying degrees of published efforts and tracks (30-31):

1. Art historical perspective
2. Software industry perspective
3. Technology history perspective
4. History of mentalities perspective
5. Games historiography, or meta-history

I would also add that academic pursuits in the American branch of the discipline have developed comprehensive programs devoted to the practice of game design, exemplified by Salen and Zimmerman's seminal 2003 book *Rules of Play*. Like the category of myth, a game can either be studied through analysis or applied through *praxis*. Espen Aarseth has also argued that the vitality of game studies (research on/about games themselves) can be found in its very proliferation across several disciplines ("How We Became Postdigital"), but that its origins in academic discourse may be traced back to Mary Ann Buckles, whose 1985 PhD thesis entitled *Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame Adventure* began the pursuit of video games as an object of study (Aarseth, *Cybertext*). Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983) may also be considered one of the first major works of the "pre-game studies" era, combining ethnography, participant observation and the cultural activity role-playing games—specifically on *Dungeons & Dragons* culture. Aarseth suggests that the contentions and polemics over the formation of a fixed department or a singular discipline keeps the academic study of games from becoming stagnant; in a word, it is a clear sign of a *healthy* emerging field. In 2014, Aarseth delivered an important keynote

for the Central & Eastern European Game Studies Conference at IT University of Copenhagen that offered a brief retrospective and update on the field entitled “Game Studies Challenges – Past, Present and Future.” Furthermore, games are not so easily divorced from the study of play or from the creative industry of design. In their 2004 book, *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman present the many systems of theorizing, traits and definitions of games (both digital and non-digital). Reaching a consensus on a definition of games has been a project onto itself. Salen and Zimmerman (73-80) and Jesper Juul (*Half-Real* 22-28) have offered valuable surveys of attempts at definition. After their extensive survey, Salen and Zimmer found that rules and goals were common across designers and scholars cited (79; cf. Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics* 235-36). Together, they offer one of the more comprehensive definitions of games: “a *game* is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (80). It is therefore important to emphasize that there is no one way to study, define, design, or play a game; it is, like myth, an inherently transdisciplinary subject.¹⁹ As game studies and its involvement with historiography continue we will, I believe, naturally fill in such gaps over the next decade.

From the outset we can simply state that, at present, what unifies *game* studies is also that which generates multiplicity: it is defined by any scholar and serious student from a native discipline who has taken *games* as their central subject matter and research interest. It is still very much a nascent field defined more by the object of study, rather than any fixed schools of method. Just as myths can be situated alongside different genres of story like folk narratives, (video/digital) games are borne from a deep material history

¹⁹ See the insightful Appendix to *Video Game Theory Reader 2*, “Video Games through Theories and Disciplines,” for reports from various authorities speaking on how to situate video games within their native fields.

of rituals, folk games, customs, economics, and laws; both games and myths have a share in societal plays of power. The result is a rich variety of voices to draw from in one's own research, which means that the field of games studies—at least in the first couple decades—is an exemplum of flourishing interdisciplinarity. It has built bridges and has gotten scholars from seemingly diametrically different research backgrounds and native fields to enter into conversation.

The study of games, extended outside computer and video games, is as much a multi-disciplinary project as the study of myth. Aarseth delineates “five independent and interdisciplinary research traditions that cover some aspect of games” (“How We Became Postdigital” 40-41):

1. Game Theory
2. Play Research
3. Gaming and Simulation
4. Board Game Studies
5. The Philosophy of Sport

Such trajectories of research agendas readily suggest the pervasiveness of games from mathematics to military training, philosophical discourse to cultural activities. Mäyrä, again, offers a concise summation of the task and its various fronts:

Game studies is faced with the double challenge of creating its own identity, while at the same time maintaining an active dialogue with the other disciplines. As long as there are only a few institutions dedicated solely to the study of games, the majority of game studies will continue to be practiced by individuals who are nominally situated

in some other field: in literary, film or media studies, or in departments of communication research, sociology, psychology, computer science, or in some other of the numerous fields where game studies is currently exercised. In a lucky case, they will find it easy to apply the traditions of their native fields into. (5)

Mäyrä has written elsewhere that the interdisciplinary nature of game studies is something of a necessity for now, but will need to find its own place for it to truly engage in collaboration with other disciplines (“Getting in the Game”). Native fields that situate games within their larger cultural complexes could be Anthropology (Cultural), Ethnography, and Ritual Studies. Indeed, in the Western Tradition the inclusion of games within the purview of ethnography and customs of leisure can be seen in the *Histories* of Herodotus, and in the Roman historian Tacitus’s *Germania*. Mircea Eliade declared that “every act which has a definite meaning—hunting, fishing, agriculture; games, conflicts, sexuality,—in some way participates in the sacred,” furthermore, “the only profane activities are those which have no mythical meaning, that is, which lack exemplary models” (*Myth of Eternal Return* 27-28). I partially agree with this sentiment insofar that myths, their world, and their entities, clearly offer complex exemplary models, or “archetypes” from which to draw from for molding and designing “profane” worlds like those in video games. Whether such video game worlds in and of themselves contract the sacred, however, remains another matter. Video games reveal and accentuate the ambivalence of myths, unmasking them as virtually participatory constructs of sacred *and* profane export. To endow a video game—its internal world or its exterior packaging as a product—with sacred discourse and value, would be to turn its virtual ambivalence into

what Marx effectively termed, commodity fetishism. Forefathers of modern cultural anthropology like E. B. Tylor dedicated considerable time linking games to practices such as divination. The religious origin of games had been emphatically declared by Emile Durkheim: “It is a well-known that games and the principle forms of art seem to have been born of religion and that for a long time they retained a religious character. We now see what the reasons for this are: it is because the cult, though aimed primarily at other ends, has also been a sort of recreation for men” (381). Clifford Geertz published an entire article to the problem of “deep play,” a concept derived from 18th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, as “play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from [Bentham’s] utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all” (432).

Through practical application and aesthetics one can branch out to the frontline efforts of industry with game developers, designers, and programmers whose tasks range from overall concept, storytelling strategies, game mechanics and aesthetics. The “native field” I offer stems mainly from the perspective of the study and theory of myth.

Myth, the Multi-headed, Social Beast: Polysemy

Myth studied is as variegated as myth applied. Like the study of myth, games share the advantages and disadvantages of intellectual, cultural and academic pluralism; the discourse is, in major and minor ways, shaped and redefined by each theorist and author/user/designer. Perhaps this merely reflects the complexity that is myth and game. Interest in them range from leisurely reading, performing, and playing to rigorous scholarly engagement. That is, both straddle vernacular and scholastic pursuits; both can be exercises in *serious* play. Following Mäyrä’s categories of investigation within video

game history and game studies, I would also posit that scholars of myth take on very similar, but not always identical, paths of interest:

1. *Philosophical* (e.g. Plato's *muthoi* and the allegorical method of Neoplatonic and Hellenistic Schools)
2. *Historical and Rational* (e.g. Euhemerism and Palephaitos's *Peri Apiston*, Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova*)
3. *Comparative* (including philological, linguistic; e.g. Grimm, Müller's, Dumézil's tripartite hypothesis of Indo-European society and myth, Puhvel's comparative treatment of Indo-European myths; Joseph Campbell, Wendy Doniger)
4. *Myth and Ritual* (e.g. J. G. Frazer's *Golden Bough*, Jane Ellen Harris's *Themis*)
5. *Folk Narrative Research, Folkloristics* (e.g. Antti Aarne's Tale Types, Andrew Lang, Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, Lauri Honko, Alan Dundes; Fairy tale scholars Jack Zipes and Marina Warner)
6. *Psychological* (e.g. depth psychology: Freud's psychoanalysis and Jung's analytical psychology, Erich Neumann's Jungian approach to myth, Hillman's archetypal psychology)
7. *Sociological* (e.g., Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religion*)
8. *Anthropological* (e.g. E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Margaret Mead,

- Lévi-Strauss's structural approach to myth, and M. J. Herskovit's *Dahomean Narrative: A Cross-cultural Analysis*)
9. *Archeological, Geomythology* (e.g. Adrienne Mayor's *Fossil Finders*, Marija Gimbutas's *Language of the Goddess*, Elizabeth W. and Paul T. Barber's *When They Severed Earth from Sky*)
 10. *Art Historical* (e.g. Jean Seznec's *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*)
 11. *Literary/Mythic Criticism* (e.g. from Aristotle's *Poetics* to Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*)
 12. *Symbolic and semiotic* (e.g. Ernst Cassirer, Roland Barthes, James, J. Liszka)
 13. *History of Religions* (e.g. Mircea Eliade, Bruce Lincoln, and Wendy Doniger)
 14. *Historiography, or Mythography* (e.g. William Doty's *Mythography*, Van Hundy's *Modern Construction of Myth*)
 15. *Myth in relation to Media* (Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Henry Jenkins, Janet Murray)
 16. *Games Studies* (Tanya Kryzwinska, Marie-Laure Ryan, Susan Tosca and Klasttrup, Jeff Howard, William Bainbridge, Robert Geraci)

This list is by no means comprehensive, nor exhaustive, but merely emphasizes the various paths by which scholars (modern and ancient) have approached the study of myth highlighting leading and pioneering individuals in each field—each of whom could

arguably make a contribution to other branches. Furthermore, certain scholars are not necessarily relegated or reduced to a single approach. For example, Wendy Doniger works within the tradition of the History of Religions, but also builds towards the valuable insights of close comparative and cross-cultural analyses of myths, as well as Freudian interpretations. The Barbers' in *When They Severed Earth from Sky*, rely on geomythology and the human perception of natural phenomena, but apply methodologies based around the science of cognition to present their four core "mytho-linguistic" principles: Silence, Analogy, Compression and Restructuring (3-4, 245-251). No school of thought has the last word/analysis, and each stands as a significant marker in the greater understanding of "myth" in all of its complexity. There are as many myths as there are theories about them. Myth is an indeterminacy shaped by the determinacy of its users. This may come across as "chaotic" as Lévi-Strauss described the field in 1955, but in recent decades after emerging out of 20th century schools of thought, myth's polysemy both in theory and in application has shown that it is not simply a stew of the chaotic, but a *longue durée* refinement of the agonistic.

Techniques of approaching the problem of myth may also purposefully avoid monistic tendencies by emphasizing myth's polysemy and polyfunctionality.²⁰ Here, they argue that pluralism and eclecticism is integral to myth's very pervasiveness and

²⁰ From the writings of Sallustius (ca. AD 363), *Peri Theon kai kosmou* ("On the gods and the universe"), we have an early instance of the polyfunctional (more like an intermingling trifunctional, with a disparaged fourth) approach wherein Sallustius delineates interpretations and types of the traditional "pagan" myths: 1) Theological, dealing with the nature of the divinities themselves, 2) Physical, from natural phenomenon 3) Psychic, revelations of the workings of soul and 4) Material, the weakest, mainly Egyptian-derived, and most ill-informed in Sallustius' assessment. It is quite alarming to read that Modern theories have not progressed much past the Ancient and classical thought. See Joseph Campbell's Four Functions of a living mythology: 1) the Metaphysical-Mystical Prospect, 2) the Cosmological Prospect, 3) the Social Prospect, and 4) the Psychological Sphere (*Creative Mythology* 609-624).

endurance and therefore essential to its analysis, cultural circulation and application.²¹

Such approaches tend to position themselves as post-modern, in the sense of moving away from the grand theories, universalism and general typologies of 20th century scholarship leaning more towards context, case-studies, particularity, or small-scale comparisons (Patton and Doniger, *Myth and Method*). At the same time, both disciplines—the study of myth and game studies—have branches that have made earnest efforts to distill an essential foundation spurring healthy debates and controversies—e.g., the advent of the term “ludology” within game studies and a sturdy definition of “myth” within mythological studies. Indeed, the history and emergence of game studies and mythological studies as autonomous fields of intersecting inquiries is a project onto itself. We might say that both are easily co-opted and subjugated under different disciplines with divergent research goals and methodologies. Mythology (the study of myth) in its autonomy has had a young history in modern thought and scholarship perhaps beginning with Friedrich Schelling’s *Philosophie Der Mythologie* (1857), a manifesto of sorts arguing for studying myth in its own terms, that is, a “tautegorical” approach to myth (cf. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* 12). All previous and subsequent approaches have tended to relegate myth under a certain interpretation derived from a separate discipline. This conflict of interests and lack of a proper unified field gives rise to what I refer to as the *agonistic theory of myth*: contestation between schools of thought in the scholarly debate on the problem of myth which persists in present-day debates, but are seen, for example, during the time of Frazer who summarily described the age-old conflict

²¹ See Honko’s “Problem of Defining Myth” for a brief, but invaluable overview of the major schools in antiquity and modernity that developed methods and theories of interpretation and analysis of myth. Cf. Von Hendy’s *Modern Construction of Myth and Rise of Modern Mythology: 1681-1861* extended treatments of schools of interpretation from 18th century to the modern day.

between “Euhemerists” (human deification) and theories of “Personification” (natural processes personified as deities) (*Golden Bough* 655-56). Jaan Puhvel posits two methods of comparative mythology: diffusionary versus universal (3). Patton and Doniger have sought to reconcile false dichotomies by arguing for the mutual deployment of comparison *and* context (*Myth and Method*). It seems inherent in the study and theorizing of myth that contestation permeates and reigns.

For this study it will be of value to draw on multiple perspectives with their subsequent specialists and scholars. It is beyond the scope of the present study to address each scholar’s approach in any great detail. However, I offer instances of potential avenues and points of contact between the study of myth and game studies. Over the course of my research, I have come to understand that certain video games demand the application of a particular set of theoretical perspectives. Much like Sallustius’s attitude towards interpreting and categorizing Greco-Roman myths by type, and the thematic organization of Indo-European myths, traditions and epics by Jaan Puhvel (See *Comparative Mythology*)—whose method was later practiced by Anne Birrell in her representative compilation of Chinese sacred narratives (*shenhua* 神話)—I also apply sets of tools from various theories of myth that are most appropriate and suitable to the task. Indeed, determining such qualifiers has been part of the challenge; no one theory of myth can satisfy a mythological analysis of video games (let alone a theory of myth itself)—the same holds true for games. Instead, one video game may clearly convey Campbell’s monomyth structure (departure-initiation-return), another may reach for cosmic-scale conflicts akin to *theomachy* (“battle of the gods”) or cosmogonic myths, furthermore, one may deploy frontier and colonizing myths underlying cosmic society

games or real-time strategy games, and further still, another may pattern itself off myths of the mystery religions and their solemn rites (e.g. *Catherine*). Just as theories of myth privilege a *type* or *genre* of myth as the prime specimen (e.g. Müller's solar mythology, Freud's Oedipus myth, Jung's myths of psychic phenomena, Eliade's etiological myths, Campbell's monomyth), a video game developer's selection of material signifies a privileging of sorts in the development and design of a game influencing mechanics, narrative structure, and mythological referents.²²

On this level of analysis, myth may be understood as a governing narrative structure (mythocentrism) or a mythic referent for the player's experience. Myths do not solely function through narrative, but narrative remains the dominant means for myth's mediation. To intimate the non-narrativity of myth, the analyst is then left with the task of extracting the myths operating on the level of representation (motifs, themes, typical events), application (how elements are deployed) and performance (participation within and through such elements, i.e. embodiment and enactment). Upon further extrapolation, the analyst may also report on the manipulations, modifications, and variants at odds within the video game *as mythic text* and the larger network of variants found in other forms of mediation and contexts. This correspondence may end up demonstrating an

²² Barber and Barber in *When They Severed Earth from Sky*: "Literacy alone...does not destroy mythology. Many People who can read nonetheless reject the stockpiled information and its logical implications, preferring the inherited stories. Others reinterpret the old myths to fit newer trends of thought. Thus Jung restructured Greek mythology for his own purposes in using names of Greek gods—Apollo, Dionysus, Epimetheus, Prometheus—to represent his classification of observable human temperament types, while Joseph Campbell restructured world mythology to serve what Jung would call an "Apollonian" view of the human psyche. Freud, for his part, completely reinterpreted the myth of Oedipus to suit his psychoanalytic theory that men desire their mothers. The core of the ancient tragedy was that Oedipus did *not* know that the queen whose throne (and hand) he was offered happened to be his birth-mother. Believing his mother was someone else entirely, he had run away from home to avoid marrying *that* lady (after hearing the fatal prophecy), and in horror repudiated his marriage when he learned Queen Jocasta was his real mother. Poor Oedipus would undoubtedly feel equally horrified to hear what (restructured) "complex" his name now adorns" (151-152).

allegorical relation, a play on metaphor, and metonymic²³ cognates. As William Doty states:

[The] transmission of myths can sometimes be located in ritual contexts, but actually, every retelling is a transmission that adds or subtracts something from an earlier version. It is shaped for the particular hearers or readers, so much so that it is almost impossible to speak of exact repetition: even if the words of a second telling are precisely the same, the performance (another form of ritualization) will vary as the teller takes into account the interests and situations of the listeners. (*Myth* 135)

Rather than having a situation of repetition *ad infinitum*, each telling (or playing) of the myth amounts to a recursivity. When the myth is translated into a video game, the traditional “myth-teller” can be made present by in-game cinematics and narration, but ultimately the unfolding of the myth relies on the agency and actions of the player; the player is both mythopraxic and mythopoetic. Given the affordances of polysemy and polyfunctionality, the reader may notice that certain myths or bodies of myths will be addressed and returned to throughout this study to demonstrate how even a single myth (or mythologem) has multiple applications in the ludic context.

As a concluding remark on the pluralistic traits of myth, the situation can be stated in a Deleuzo-Guattarian way of speech: myths impose structure but it is arborescent use only (that is to say—it spreads from root to branches), through their discourse about myth, but also through the proliferation of its variants, as well as through

²³ On *metonymy* and its distinction from *metaphor*, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (35-40).

the study of how myth spreads, in the manner of an underground interconnected root system, a rhizome. When “all variants belong to the myth” (Lévi-Strauss), the mythologist glimpses the rhizomatic spread of a myth. The structuralists and typologists yearn for tidy gardens, but are often times challenged by weeds and the underground root system that makes those weeds inextractable from the garden.

Confluence of Tasks and Scholarship in the Study of Games and Myths

As a student of myth, I tend towards the mythological significance and implication of games in particular, while working towards the articulation of a metaxy and continuum of game and myth in general. Both fields need not remain mutually exclusive, but rather inclusive and in dialogue with each others’ respective findings. We are not in a quest for monistic origins or a grand unified theory, nor for which came first, myths or games, but rather in developing their relationship in a *syzygy*. I use the term “syzygy” predominately in agreement with its original sense of the Greek *syzygoi* (“to yoke”) as a linking of two or more things. However, I would also offer suggestive usages of the term under the purview of the depth psychology of Jung who formalized a syzygy as the union of opposites, or the bond (and play) between animus and anima. A “syzygy” in astronomy is also considered the alignment of three celestial bodies to which we might theorize myth, game and play as a “tri-body syzygy.” And lastly, that there is always an emergent syzygy at work in the playing of a game between two opponents, which was so well reflected in Nolan Bushnell’s and Ted Dabney’s 1969 game company, Syzygy Co., a name that fell out do to usage by other industries, but nonetheless is a fascinating origin story to which I give homage. Thus, myths and games co-exist, constellate and co-mingle as activities of/at play within each others’ mode of discourse; they are contiguous. They

are far from being antithetical categories of activity and study. Indeed, when one reads a definition of “myth” and its multiple uses in discourse, one can nearly replace “myth” with “game”: “[‘Myth’] is used...sometimes as a genre label, sometimes as a mode of thought, sometimes implying an association with ritual, and sometimes even as a derogatory term for what is false” (Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination* 18). It is as if myth and game in the vernacular (i.e. non-serious), modes of thought, and in folk genres, are not only syzygetic, but metonymic; each are able to stand-in for the other. Certainly not in all instances, but nonetheless, instantiations occur.

I will adopt a pluralistic theory of myth and game with careful attention given to context *and* comparison, contiguity and similarity. As I seek to demonstrate in cases studies, each video game explores different aspects of the mythic in either implicit or explicit ways. One key characteristic shared by games and myths, as we will see, is their involvement with sacred (set-apart) and secular (worldly) aspects of culture; or sacred and profane (Eliade). Although this dichotomy has its value in partitioning out the experiences space-place in daily life, the issue is far from resolved with video games and with myths. Rather, they primarily set these boundaries while transgressions are penalized and made taboo (one of bounds). Instead of positing a strict binary opposition between the sacred and profane, I prefer the distinction espoused by Tom Boellstorff between the actual and virtual rather than reality versus fantasy (fiction, non-reality).

Although we may note general historical developments, I have chosen to address particular histories within each given chapter, genre and game to establish a lineage of sorts through time with all of their unique idiosyncrasies. There is no one meta-narrative at work, but instead discrete trajectories of traditions, antecedents, spiritual succession

and textual sourcing. For example, the trajectory of fantasy-based game worlds may rest on themes derived from medieval legends; while science fiction based worlds address societal structures, interstellar travel, or our relationship to the cosmos or technology. I also rely on the aesthetics of games, for we cannot overlook, nor neglect the intermingling nature of the video game as a holistic multisensory experience, i.e. a multimedia product; nor still, can we neglect the work of art direction or sound design in the production of the game as a product of the creative industry. The aesthetics and artful use of mythological imagery and themes is no mere issue of décor, nor confectionary allure, but *decorum* or a technique of maintaining stylistic integrity in accordance with the subject matter. In other words, it is a matter of appropriation.

Myths, like their consorts, games, in general, are a social enterprise, with socially constructed fantasies that can be easily mobilized and co-opted to declare discursive claims on reality; they both can forge social contracts and perpetuate themselves through their own discourse, effectively “naturalizing” their messages, rules and conduct they convey. Thus, Roland Barthes effectively limited, or honed in on, myth to discourse: “Since *myth is a type of speech*, everything can be a myth, provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones” (Barthes 217; italics mine). It may be of historical interest to note that Julian the Apostate also argued that myth is a type of discourse (*logos*), and like other types it consisted of language (*lexis*) and thought (*dianoia*) (*Oration* 7.218a-219a; Wright 106-9). Furthermore, he also held an ambivalent position on the myths and argued that they could be invented (*plattomen*), and that it was the phrasing (framing?) of the myth through

language that required close scrutiny. For Julian, it was *how* the myth was spoken than what the myth spoke of. Barthes also argued that nearly anything talked about (i.e. signified through mythical speech), could fall prey to myth. For example, the Oedipus legend was endowed with the status of “myth” by Freud (as a central complex), Jung and Lévi-Strauss (“Structural Study of Myth”), but as folklorists (conscious of folk narrative genres) would argue, the legend is a tale-type (AT(U) 931 “Oedipus”) and not a “myth-type” (cf. Dorson, “Theories of Myth and the Folklorist”; Dundes, “Madness in Method”). However, once the psychoanalytic interpretation of Oedipus *as a myth* gained currency in Western society, it fell prey to a “mythical speech,” and so was transposed from legend to myth. A similar tendency for naturalizing seems to also manifest in the ludic as much as the mythic.

In her book, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (2009), artist, scholar, and play theorist Mary Flanagan presents a strong case for the need of research into the role of the creative artist and game designer in dialogue with larger cultural movements and art history, aiming for “ways in which individuals and groups involved in creating and playing games have worked, and are working within, social, political, and cultural systems” (4). She further asserts that “As a cultural medium, games carry embedded beliefs within their systems of representation and their structures, whether game designers intend these ideologies or not” (223). Following Flanagan, I would also agree that it is a sign of the medium’s maturity that video games can assert playful *and* critical stances at once, and determine the proper stylistic choices across the various genres—or, even go against the convention of industry to subvert genre expectations. Indeed, subversion of genre maintenance is of the utmost importance for keeping the medium

true to form, i.e. playful, with the occasional break-out of iconoclastic games from independent game developers, artists and designers “who are ‘making’ for ‘making’s sake’” (Flanagan *Critical Play* 4). Subversion is not just a characteristic of games, but also myths as Wendy Doniger asserts, “Myths do not merely reflect the eternal, reactionary archetype or even the present hegemonic *Zeitgeist*; they can subvert the dominant paradigm” (*Implied Spider* 107). If one is to assert the expressive power of games within a field of discursive systems and networks, then it requires an analysis of the *mythic* discourse of video games as well. For, video games participate in the myths they construct not just within the game world itself, but in the cultural networks in which the product circulates.

Amongst the various forms of story and narrative, a myth, for the native, taps into the imaginings of the fictional, while grounding the message with the gravity and authority of fact. For the native immersed in a myth, the storied world is received as a notional space. When coupled with a game, something of a special union occurs, for, a game also generates a space where a set of rules are real within the duration of game-time. And so, the mythos, or storied world operating within a gameworld, tends towards mythic genre. However, insofar as the game enters or explores the mythic, myth, in turn, takes on the mediated garb, interface and *affordance* of the ludic; “affordance,” to be clear, is a specialized term in psychology first used by James J. Gibson defined thus: “The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill...something that refers to both the environment and the animal...[it] implies [their] complementarity” (127). This term has since moved well beyond animals and is used the study of interactive design. Don Norman advanced a revised

understanding of affordance in relation to user-experience design and offers his own definition as “the relationship between a physical object and a person (or for that matter, any interacting agent, whether animal or human, or even machines and robots). An affordance is a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (11). Thus, for our purposes, the video game environment provides *affordances* to the player as the player acts and engages with the medium on the physical level of the various controllers, hardware and devices, while a subtle semiotic, ludic and virtualized affordance may be accounted for between the in-game character and the gameworld environment, one of which also lends a certain *ludic affordance* to a myth. In other words, when a myth is rendered in the environment of the video game, a particular affordance takes place that opens the myth to playability. Unlike other forms and genres of storytelling (e.g. folktale, prose narrative, fairy tale, wondertale, and the literary novel), myths bolster world-building, world-conceiving, and world-perceiving. Myths are accounts of mapped affordances. Narrative genres, when transmuted into the participatory and the ludic, edge closer to myth: the account that shapes the experience of the game world for the player and the discourse that naturalizes the extraordinary acts of video game characters.)

Games, Play and Myth converge in some of our oldest relics and iterations of the core forms and artifacts of gaming and mythological systems from the remote past to the present day. They also tend to recur in collaboration towards the enrichment of life-experience and the everyday—or, at least to serve as catalysts for the amplification of the heights and depths of attitude towards life on the individual and collective level. In other words, games and myths are like stimulants for the mind and imagination. As a syzygy,

they sustain each other through promiscuous play with Myth presenting bewildering scenarios for Game to decipher, or a game may immerse one in perplexing situations with myths striving to explain how the system of rules works. Aristotle once posited, the lovers of myth [*philomuthoi*] and the lovers of wisdom [*philosophoi*] find their nexus in wonder [*thaumai*] (*Meta.* 982b11-982b28). Myths and their conduits generate wondrous worlds for the philosopher to investigate. That is to say, myths generate the content through which inquiring minds may decipher and interpret. As Lévi-Strauss once said, myths are “good to think” (*Totemism* 89); totemic animals feed the mind of the human devotee. Myths and games have an intrinsically heuristic value and can lead a person or group out of the deepest and most profound *aporia*. That is, out of puzzlement and impasses. In his reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Paul Ricouer translated *muthos* as “emplotment” (*Time and Narrative* 31), which “replies to the speculative *aporia* with a poetic making of something capable...of clarifying *aporia*, but not of resolving it theoretically” (*Time and Narrative* 6). Myths test the limits of the rational; they present a scholastic challenge to the individual through a recursive discourse, and thus present a game to be played, or reveal the game that scholastic endeavors face.

Consider the young Emperor Julian the Apostate’s concession to his own theory of myth’s value to human life, and life of the individual in relation to the gods:

Our ancestors in every case tried to trace the original meanings of things, whether with the guidance of the gods or independently—though perhaps it would be better to say that they sought for them under the leadership of the gods—then when they had discovered those meanings they clothed them in paradoxical myths [*mûthois*

paradoxois]. This was in order that, by means of the paradox and the incongruity, the fiction might be detected and we might be induced to search out the truth. Now I think ordinary men derive benefit enough from the irrational myth which instructs them through symbols alone. But those who are more highly endowed with wisdom will find the truth about the gods helpful; though only on condition that such a man examine and discover and comprehend it under the leadership of the gods [*hēgemósi tois theois*], and if by such riddles as these he is reminded that he must search out their meaning, and so attains the goal and summit of his quest through his own researches; he must be modest and put faith in the opinion of others rather than in his own mental powers. (*Oration* 5.170a-c; Wright 475-77)

Likened to a riddle or puzzle to be solved, myths, as Julian argues, must undergo a proper hermeneutics, which Julian phrases much in the spirit of a game or quest; a heuristic edification of myth seems to be suggested. As a self-proclaimed follower of the Neoplatonist Iamblichus, it is no surprise that Julian held the view that myths, with all of their paradoxes and incongruities, invited and encouraged careful study to unlock their hidden meanings through the classical means of allegorical interpretation and *theurgy*, the latter being a term proposed by Iamblicus in his *De Mysteriis* that literally means “divine work” (*Oration* 7.222c-d; Wright 119). Such was the case for many Stoics and Neoplatonists working with the problem of myth and her incongruities (Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths*). For Emperor Julian, and his contemporary Sallustius, myth’s incongruent appearance is only a device to “imitate the gods and teach the foolish simply

that the gods exist, and the wise their nature and character” (Nock xliii). For this reason, Julian also posited that the myths could have possibly been invented for their pedagogical value and, most notably, for “childish souls” (*paidiōn psychais*) (*Oration* 7.206d; Wright 79). Though Wright has rendered the Greek *paidion* with the negative connotation of “childish,” I would venture to offer a possible *positive* reading of Julian’s use of the term to mean “youthful soul” and/or “child-like soul,” or even the more common English phrase: “young at heart.” It is then possible, at least through this particular reading of Julian, that myth, for him, had inherently playful characteristics that encouraged youthful education, even for adults. James Carse shares similar sentiments, offering a suggestive analogy between myths and types of intellectual games: “Myths are significantly unresolved—but unresolved in the way of an infinite game, gaming rules, or narrative structure, that allow any number of participants at any time to enter the drama without fixing its plot or bringing it to closer in a final scene” (143-44).

In this way, I do not posit an etiological contest between myths and games regarding which came first; i.e., which activity holds the time-honored authority. A history (or grand narrative) that presents itself as an authoritative narrative on games, myths, or play as the first or oldest formation of culture is sure to disappoint, or will seek to frame its argument as an origin myth of the chosen subject. By the same token, the scholastic task to situate our origins through a myth, or a “mythogony,” is an attempt to “account of the genesis of myth,” and is sure to be making a strategic move in a larger game of hegemony (Blumenberg 52-53). Walter Burkert has argued along similar lines:

‘How is myth created, and by whom?’ It is not the ‘creation,’ not the ‘origin’ of myth which constitutes the basic fact, *but the transmission*

and preservation, even without the use of writing in a ‘primitive,’ oral civilization. Whatever creative agents have been proposed to account for the origin of myths, whether inspired poets or lying poets, ‘*Volksgiest*,’ the universal human mind, or the unconscious dynamics of the psyche, they seem to belong rather to a creation myth of myth than to a rational approach. (*Structure and History* 2; emphasis mine)

I agree with Burkert’s emphasis on transmission and preservation over origins, and would add that the media-conscious approach to myth is my basic stance stemming from such premises. We might also have recourse, once again, to the words of Julian who likened the search for the origins of myth to the attempt “to try to find out who was the first man that sneezed or the first horse that neighed” (*Oration* 7.205c; Wright 75). When a myth, or theory of myth, gains currency, circulates and dominates, it sways opinions of other schools, but where it does not hold centrality or given credence, the theory is merely a genre of myth, or, conversely, myth is seen as a genre among others.

Let us consider an example that has some semblance of material and textual evidence revealing a re-currency of the myth-game-play triad, and how they can forge both a constellation and continuum for cross-cultural analysis.

Confluence of Worlds: Myths, Games and the Underworld

Myths are habitable; games and virtual worlds make myth virtually accessible. Points of contact between myths and games go well beyond scholastic endeavors. Indeed, the confluence of myth and gaming occurs frequently in relation to the Underworld. For instance, one of the most vividly rendered, and oldest, inflections is the Ancient Egyptian board game *senet* (*s’n’t*) (Parlett, *Oxford History of Board Games* 65-68). The game

featured the trappings of the Myth of the Underworld/afterlife Journey in two aspects: 1) in later additions, it featured iconography about the essential divinities met in the *duat* (Egyptian underworld), and 2) the board game itself is featured in papyri of the *Books of the Dead*, with two seated players. This is a striking and pertinent example of convergence and illuminates the deep historicity of humanities fascination with the porous exchange between games and myths. For we have both the myth translated into a game model and the game represented in a mythic sacred text. The final journey to the afterlife is given a mythic structure for meaning, while the participation in one's dissolution can be approached with the attitude of entering a game. From the literature and material culture of Ancient Sumer we have the earliest attested board game Royal game of Ur (Parlett 63-65) and the tablet *Bilgames and the Underworld*, a text which narrates the excursion of Enkidu to rescue Bilgames's ball and stick from the Underworld. In the Americas there is the famous episode from Mayan *Popol Vuh* of the divine twins Hunapu and Xbalanque descending to Xibalba to participate in a ball game with the Lord of the Underworld, One and Seven Death. In chapters 10 and 11 of *Xiyouji* 西游記 (*Journey to the West*), Tang Emperor Taizong plays *Weiqi*²⁴ 围棋 (popularly referred to as "Go") with Weizheng prior to his own dream visions and subsequent Underworld journey to Yama (Yu, *Journey vol. I* 245-46).

This configuration of game-myth-underworld finds other apt renderings in Greek and Roman literature and culture. From Rome the Tarentine Games (*Tarentini ludi*) of the Campus Martius, were celebrated in honor of Dis Pater and Proserpina with a suggestive ritual intent: "The Roman ritual for the dead at the *Tarentum*, the 'crossing

²⁴ *Weiqi* 围棋 also has roots in divination and astrology, as the board was seen as a mirror of the constellations.

place', is at the same time a ritual to assure the long life and the orderly succession of the generations; it is a reaffirmation of the crossing of the *saecula* of a hundred years" (Watkins 353). The myth-game-underworld continuum rests on this very principle, namely, games with the highest stakes (of life and death) present the occasion through which contemplation of primordial binaries life/death take place. It can thus become ritualized with festivities celebrating the miracles of rebirth, regeneration and transformation.

On this level of analysis, Lévi-Strauss's structural assessment of myth (i.e. mythologies) is particularly apt for the analysis of this configuration since, for Lévi-Strauss, "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution" ("Structural Study of Myth" 224). During a research report given in 1954-55 entitled "Relations between Mythology and Ritual," Lévi-Strauss made the following remark:

It is to linguistics that the mythologist should best address himself in order to elaborate his explanatory modes; to study rituals, one should rather look for them in the theory of games. But if a game is defined by the collection of its rules which make possible an infinite number of playing of that game, the ritual resembles a privileged example, the only one retained out of all the possible playing, because a certain kind of balance between the two sides results from it. (*Anthropology and Myth* 205-6)

One particular instance is attested in the King Rhampsinitus episodic tale within the *Histories* of Herodotus (2.121-124), where we have the King's renunciation, penitence

and installation of a ritual associated with the Underworld. King Rhampsinitus, after being bested by a thief, hands over his estate and his daughter to the cunning man. The king then journeys to Hades in a solemn *katabasis*, or descent. There he participates in a game of dice with (*sugkeuein*, lit. *dice with*) Demeter/Isis and wins. Upon the king's return a festival was established to honor Demeter/Isis in which a priest was lead blindfolded out of the city by two jackals, symbols of Anubis, to the Temple of Isis and promptly returned. (Herodotus is quick to clarify his own Greek interpretation by reminding the reader that Demeter and Dionysus were seen as the rulers of the lower world to the Egyptians as Isis and Osiris.) The story at once brings together several themes: thievery, a Myth of the Descent into the Underworld (*katabasis*), and a ludic contest with a divinity associated with said Underworld. A ritual is then established to enshrine the mythologem for the locals to memorialize their king, victor against Demeter/Isis.

However, the ludic element of the Underworld journey is often expedited by the itinerant figure of the Messenger, Go-between, Mediator, and Psychopomp (soul-guide) of a pantheon. Such liminal divinities include the Haitian vodun *loa*, Papa Legba (= Yoruban Eshu Elegba), Norse father of the Aesir, Odin, and Coyote of Native American legends. Within the complex milieu of syncretic relations between the Greeks and Egyptians, this typical deity is most explicitly represented in the figure of Hermes-Thoth, who was also given the designation of a first inventor/discoverer (*prōto heuretai*) of many arts and sciences. According to Plato's famous account of Egyptian lore (*Phaedrus* 274c-d; Fowler), Theuth (Thoth) "invented [*heurein*] numbers and arithmetic and geometry and astronomy, also draughts and dice [*petteias te kai kubeias*], most important

of all, letters [*grammata*].” Here we have a patron divinity as the culture-hero with domains reaching into both mythic and ludic history. Such a synthesis is not an innate or universally agreeable unit. In Yoruban Ifa divination, for example, Ifa is the *orisha* of divination, while Eshu/Elegbara is the Divine Trickster (Bascom 103; Johnson 28, 32-34; cf. Belcher 97-99, 316-17). Nonetheless, there seem to be considerable overlaps in the understanding of many cultures through time that games had sacred counterparts in the practice of divination, and that this came to be embodied in divine figures that have collectively been referred to as the Trickster who plays and mediates between the world of divinities and humanity. Divination, however, has many different forms.

According to Chinese tradition, the paternal ancestor Fu Xi 复习 was said to have invented the *bagua* 八卦 and so also the *Yijing* 易經 (I-Ching).²⁵ Although tangible divination proper may not be considered to bare effective administration through a video game, it is significant that mythological, ancestral figures like the Trickster and other culture heroes, retains an auspice over the ludic-mythic continuum, and so also with aspects of divination.

I would also draw attention to the historical persistence of, and human adoration for, *dice* (Peterson *Playing at the World* 312-320; Pennick *Secret Games* 31-36). They manifest in some of our oldest traditions from Vedic and later Hindu. We can begin with the evocative *Hymn of the Dice Player* from Rig Veda 34. It stands as one of our earliest literary treasures and offers a profound meditation on the gaming object that is both the source of pain and companionship for a gambling fiend. It offers a powerful glimpse into the psychology of gaming, addiction and the degrees to which both negatively impact

²⁵ According to some texts, Fu Xi (also known as Pao Fu), received the revelation of the *bagua* from observing the shapes in the sky, and the patterns of the earth, birds and beasts (Birrell 46).

practical living aims and relationships with loved ones. This becomes poetically and tragically rendered in Yudhishira's famous, or infamous, gambling away of his entire family of Pandavas to Shakuni in the Mahābhārata. At the cosmic and mythological level of play, Shiva is said to have played dice with his wife Pavarti. It is also important to note that the four outcomes of Shiva's dice game are named after the four *yugas*, eons, or Ages: *krta*, *treta*, *dvapara*, *kali* (Zimmer 13), which is to say that in certain mythological (i.e. *Puranic*) traditions, the cosmos is inherently founded on the play of the gods; what in Hindu tradition would be properly called *divyati* (literally: *dice throw*) or, more loosely, *lila*, the playfulness of "as if" (Huizinga 31-32).

Dice as an object and instrument of fate and chance never quite leaves gaming even to this day. Indeed, the dice reveals the profoundly deep relationship between gaming, magic, and divination posited by the early cultural anthropologist E.B. Tylor, "Arts of divination and games of chance are so similar in principle, that the very same instrument passes from one use to the other" (Tylor 80-82; cf. Mäyrä, *Introduction to Game Studies* 37-38). The "survival" of the dice as an evocative symbol and staple for gaming in general, but is particularly represented prominently today in table-top fantasy role-playing games like the highly influential *Dungeons & Dragons*—itself based on the German practice of training officers for war through the use of miniature figurines and dice referred to as *kriegsspiel* ("War Games") (Peterson). As a game designing strategy, developers often still leave the mechanics of chance—that is of the dice roll—integrated into key moments such as the random drawing of one's character in an online arena, random generation of character skills, or the determination of the first move in a match.

As a general choice term of classification, we may rightly adopt Caillois's category of *alea*, itself the Latin term for dicing, and Callois's term for games of chance.²⁶

In this way, the dice may be considered a strong example of what Tylor referred to as "survivals," that is, "processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved" (16). Though criticized in modern scholarship of cultural anthropology and folkloristics for his framing and reliance on evolutionary progress, Tylor's concept of survivals remains a succinct term for objects like the dice, board games, and other ludic objects, which, though they have lost their efficacy within a supporting belief-system, their symbolic ties of meaning to divination, continue to function in secularized game sessions for the sheer pragmatics of introducing chance, embroidering the aesthetics of a game with aspects of the "occult," "esoterica," and "mysticism," where once a deity held sway in a ritualized setting. As survivals, their patterns persist as mere rote and routine: game rules, mechanics and ludic elements.²⁷

The recurring theme of bifurcation across mythology and gaming tends to partition the sacred and profane arenas. This gap can be filled by hermeneutics. As an underlying governing principle and marker for this behavior, I can find no better mythological exemplar than the Trickster who has the habit of occupying the domains of gaming, divination, play and even mythology itself. For example, Mercury offers

²⁶ See also Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* XVIII.1x The gaming-board (De tabula): "Dicing (*alea*), that is, the game played at the gaming-board (*tabula*), was invented by the Greeks during lulls of the Trojan War by a certain soldier named Alea, from whom the practice took its name. The board game is played with a dice-tumbler, counters, and dice."

²⁷ For an extensive survey of the divinatory history and roots of board games and other ludic paraphernalia, see Nigel Pennick's *Secret Games of the Gods: Ancient Ritual Systems in Board Games* (1989).

suggestive and pervasive expressions, with suggestive etymological roots in *mercatus*: trade, traffic, bargaining, Buy/Sell, Festivity and assemblage of games).

From Norse *Edda* tradition, the confrontation between Odin and Vafthrudnir in the *Vafthrudnismal* is a particularly fascinating example of the wisdom contest scenario regarding ancient lore in the form of a riddling session. The Eddic poem features the god of runic wisdom (and Trickster of sorts) and divination, poetry, and magic,²⁸ against the Giant. Over the course of their wisdom contest, we discover key markers on the road towards Ragnarök.

I offer these examples of congruity to suggest that our current endeavor cannot be fully ascertained within this study's undertaking alone, but rather it points to a larger web of inter- and intra-relations that have migrated across time and across through cultures remaining exceptionally intact. Indeed, mythological motifs, the problem of death and games meet in other forms of media outside of video games with significant inflections: for example, Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film, *The Seventh Seal*, conjoins life-death not by dice rolls and chance, but by chess and strategy. The Underworld under its many mythological guises manifests throughout video game worlds as a prime locale from the "serious" role-playing fantasy like *Ultima Underworld: Stygian Abyss* (Origin Systems 1992) and the first-person shooter *Doom* (id 1992) to the more parodic and comedic depictions of *Grim Fandango* (Lucas Arts 1998). Nonetheless, over the course of our present project I will seek to develop a core group of themes that games and myths co-inhabit, one being the journey to other worlds, be they situated above, below, or parallel.

²⁸ We may note that Tacitus in *Germania* 9, according to *Interpretatio Romana*, readily equates the patriarchal deity with Roman Mercurii. These powers of Odin recall a similar set of attributed to Socrates's Theuth in *Phaedrus* 274. Of all the divinities within the European and Ancient Near East traditions, it is perhaps of no surprise that the liminal deity receives the most sophisticated translation: Thoth-Hermes-Mercury-Odin.

In a word, this study will have its necessary *limits*, but will hopefully invigorate and catalyze other scholars from the many aforementioned fields to pursue its collective development in collaborative efforts and individual research endeavors.

***Interpretatio Ludi* and Its Relation to an Agonistic Theory of Myth**

Games and myths draw on the cultural content of art, literature, history, religion and philosophy converting or translating them into a ludic mode of practice. I call this distinct characteristic of the myth-game continuum *interpretatio ludi* akin to the comparative methodologies of *interpretatio Graeca* and *interpretatio Romana*: practices common amongst authors of Greco-Roman antiquity who syncretized in order to occurred to comprehend and reconcile the alterity of foreign pantheons. We have seen instances of this above in *The Histories* of Herodotus as he translated, to the best of his efforts, the Egyptian pantheon into rough Greek equivalents (e.g. Isis = Demeter).²⁹ However, *interpretatio ludi*, as a modern practice of game play, tends to engage a worldview of secular pluralism and consumer culture. In the context of Roman culture, the term *Ludi* referred to a variety of activities including “public games, plays, spectacles, shows [and] exhibitions, which were given in honor of the gods” (Lewis and Short); it follows that *interpretatio ludi* evinces the value of play.

In video game culture, popular imagination holds sway over the representation of mythological traditions and pantheons. Objects and subjects of reverence are converted to play-forms or *ludicrum* in a secular context of competing voices and versions, i.e., agonistics. *Interpretatio ludi* reveals the playful and creative possibilities for

²⁹ Herodotus claimed that nearly all of the names of Greek deities originated from Egypt (*Hist.* 2.50), while other customs and rituals for acknowledging *theoi* came from Pelasgians (2.52); and, finally, he refers to Homer and Hesiod as the formulators of the Greek mythological tradition replete with *theoi* genealogy, names, spheres, functions and outward forms (2.53).

mythological systems and attempts to make them appealing to markets and economics while *agonistic theory* accounts for the ways various play-forms behave within arenas, contests and events. *Interpretatio ludi* mobilizes and perpetuates variability, while agonistic theory determines which variables are comparable, well-matched and/or dominant.

In order to gauge these endeavors, it requires some familiarity with the users and consumers. Video game culture is transnational and is becoming increasingly so with the advancement of networked communication. In this context, identity is not solely based on ethnic or national boundaries per se, but on the play and tension between the local and the universal. Within this frame of reference, players and self-identified gamers stand out as one of the few trans-ethnic “folk-groups, identified by folklorist Alan Dundes as “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor” to establish a strong bond with other players and gamers from around the world through shared interests and activities (*Study of Folklore* 2). Their bonds and contestations are not necessarily founded on common universals, but on cross-cultural and intercultural relatability, keeping distinct each party’s *rôle*.

I use the distinction, badge, or title of “gamer” as a term for an individual who is part of a seemingly homogeneous, but pluralistic multicultural group with a “socially constructed reality,” based mainly in the activity of gaming and game culture; games themselves both link opponents and forge cooperative guilds. However, the term has mobilized its share of controversy in recent popular discourse, with the title “gamer” accruing a metonymy that can either mean 1) a person who plays games, 2) a cultural-political identity in “culture wars” played out in media, game journalism 3) male

misogynist. I will not be addressing the latter two in this study in any great detail, and will be predominately using player/user/gamer interchangeably as neutral terms.

However, what such controversies entail is that gamers are also part and parcel of the still emerging community of cyberculture, whose socio-cultural boundaries and limits are not so easily defined due in large part to networked systems of information technologies.

Indeed, cyberculture and game culture adhere to the use of avatars, multiple user-names, aliases, and anonymity; identity in both communities is a poetic and cosmetic endeavor, and a *choice*.

However homogenous gaming is not a move away from the particular towards the universal; players utilize anonymity, identity, and alterity for a diverse range of purposes. Furthermore, one can make a strong case for the culturally and ethnically conditioned tendencies of gaming guilds, teams and internationally competitive pro-gamers representing their nation of origin. Gamers and designers garner pride for their individual and group identities. If we acknowledge that games are valuable culturally expressive artifacts, then we must also recognize that they can be used to present a culture's and an individual's identity to the global community and marketplace.

Interpretatio ludi is in no way a process that trivializes culture or identity (although the potential exists and there are instances of trivial pursuits), but rather one that is vitalizing, and a sign of healthy cultural confidence, criticism, commentary, commerce and creativity—all with due measure and respect. Indeed, it speaks to the occasional need to “subvert the dominant paradigm” (Doniger, *Implied Spider* 107). For example, in Japanese culture there is an enduring aesthetic known as *kawaii* 可愛い that converts even the most diabolical character into a “loveable” collectible figurine like a

chibi チビ(caricature-like small child) or the popular *Pokémon* characters. The tendency to put a face on the “Otherness” of the supernatural has deep roots in Japanese culture such as the various *yōkai* 妖怪 (see Foster). *Interpretatio ludi* in action has its shadows, and differs in one significant way from the equivalences and correspondences reached by the dialogue between neighboring pantheons via *interpretatio graeca* and *interpretatio romana*: in a play-form the deity’s mana, will, or divine efficacy, is all but made mute. Nevertheless, its iconographic signatures may very well persist. So, while its sacred function gives way, a *simulacrum* is mobilized, repurposed and reanimated to adorn the *ludicrum*. Media, whether verbal, nonverbal, visual or aural, preserves the synthetic aspect of the subject-object and stores it for export and exchange. The task, then, is not to scrutinize the medium, but rather to investigate what components of the myth persist in the conversion from sacred to secular, from myth to game, that keeps the content consistent with the original source. *Interpretatio ludi* is both the game of hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of gaming.

For our present purposes, is there a way of understanding this phenomenon through a mythological lens or through a particular mythological figure? As previously mentioned, I would argue that we can observe and report with some detail the activities of the Trickster as an instructive governing agent.³⁰ The Trickster is one of the most prevalent figures manifesting across a vast array of traditions and mythological systems (identified in Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index* as A521 *Culture hero as dupe or trickster*). It is not enough, however, to articulate the degree to which the Trickster can be understood as a trans-cultural, universal archetype (if such a category exists). One must demonstrate

³⁰ See “The Trickster and the Liminal/Liminoid” (360-65) and “Ludic Liminality” (401-404) in Doty’s *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (360-65).

that a Trickster continues to function in a particular context with the same identifiable traits in both myths and games. For, as Lewis Hyde has stated, “Actual individuals are always more complicated than the archetype, more complicated than its local version, too” (*Trickster Makes World* 14). So too, tricksters are more complex than the universal stereotype of this figure. The devil’s in the details. The Trickster’s behavior revealed in myth permeates and surfaces as a felt presence in gaming culture, and gaming culture remains our axial point of focus. From metagaming (strategizing beyond the immediate game rules) to gaming (within the immediate rules), from metalanguage to language encoding, the emergent behavior of gamers, decoders and glitch-finders (i.e., hackers, cheaters), the Trickster operates through many levels, never exclusive or partial to one side or the other. There is a catch-phrase of cyberpunk sourced from William Gibson’s 1982 short story, *Burning Chrome*, which reads, “the street finds its own uses for things” (199). The hacker-Trickster breaks and bends rules, but in so doing establishes new ones all for the maintenance of a meta-game and meta-narrative of liberation. As Paul Jahnsan succinctly states in *Cybermapping and the Writing of Myth*: “Hackers are the myth-builders of cyberspace” (87). When Hermes earned his title of Argeiphontes (lit. Slayer of Argos), he exercised his prowess for killing surveillance in the mythical figure of Argos Panoptes (“All-seeing”) covered in one hundred un-sleeping eyes.³¹ Although we may not approach this particular theme of hacker- and cyber-culture with any great length

³¹ During the preparation of this study, the post-cyberpunk game *Watchdogs* was released which allows players to hack into other peoples’ game-worlds through the affordances of online multiplayer connectivity. The theme is rather ambiguous in Greek mythology, but Odysseus’s dog is known as Argos, while the giant Argos Panoptes could be interpreted as a “watchdog” guardian of Io.

in this study, it is still worthy to note the way the hacker can be seen to embody the Trickster in cyberculture.³²

Beyond the games and language-games that the Trickster plays up, the mythological figure is also prone to bestow gifts of the road, hints and cookie crumbs. Trinkets of the Trickster in gaming culture are expressed in the symbolic significance of *coins* and tokens.³³ Consider, for instance, the coin operated arcade or the coin collecting act in the classic video game, *Super Mario Bros* to the thievish deed of looting on an adventure. The symbol of the coin and currency remains tightly intertwined with the Tricksters' dictum of "freedom at a cost," and the cunning "Free-to-Play" (F2P) business model in recent online games. Further, with the rise of mutual participation between the prefigured world and the re-configuring of the participants therein, the process can quickly become a project of the finest and highest persistent form of *bricolage* and assemblage such as in *Second Life* (2003) and *Minecraft* (2011). These two particular communities share the qualities of being persistent, perpetual and poetical, thus they establish and maintain assemblages over extended periods. This is perhaps a fine reminder that the stereotyping of gamers as anti-socialites, escapists and violent individuals is quickly losing ground as the gaming community grows into itself as just that: a *community* with a passion for co-creative projects and cooperative play.³⁴

Interpretatio ludi is thus a conceptual framework and method for situating video games (as texts and cultural artifacts) within larger networks of intertextual and intercultural

³² I would offer Vincent Mosco's 2004 book *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*, as a recent work that explores these themes in some detail.

³³ Ernest Cline dwells on the symbol of the coin in *Ready Player One* as a literary equivalent to a major quest item, and as culturally significant to the Golden Age of vintage arcades.

³⁴ The marriage of violence, war and games was apparent enough for Isodore of Seville to dedicate Book XVIII of his *Etymologies* to War and Games (*De Bello et Ludis*).

relations as they pertain to mythological traditions and systems of divinities. We will return to *interpretatio ludi* throughout the remainder of this study for heuristic and hermeneutical purposes.

Chapter 4: Homo Faber & Homo Ludens: How We Build What We Play

If world-builders like Tolkien and the designers of MMORPGs have succeeded in establishing a *new mythical cosmos*, we may see a truly vast expansion in *synthetic world* populations in the twenty-first century, with consequences so deep and broad that they are simply impossible to predict right now.

—Edward Castronova (*Synthetic Worlds* 276; emphasis mine)

The field, or *magic circle*, is not just a pre-manufactured product of game design, but a space in which gamers directly engage with a fantasy realm. Magic circles are portals to a ludosphere or game world. A game world is not just a confrontation between players (PvP: Player versus Player), but a meeting of minds between game-designer and game-player. The dialectic is either simple or on-going. In a simple dialectic, the designer or game development team constructs the rules, setting, story and characters from the ground up and offers it to the gamer to play in, at which point the exchange is rather finite. In the complex, or on-going dialectic, game developers maintain a relationship with their game followers by releasing additional content through patches, expansion packs, downloadable content (DLC), and software development kits (SDK). The configuration may be put into various terms and synchronic taxonomies, but to acknowledge the deep history of the pair's relationship through time, I refer to them as Homo Faber (human, the maker) and Homo Ludens (human, the player). It is, I argue, an *archetypal arrangement*: that is, an arrangement that finds antecedents in the “creative mode” of myth and the models of mythic figures.

Another point that deserves attention here is that I do not work within the framework of the Jungian archetype. Instead, I use it along with other approaches to the concept of an archetype, as a heuristic and hermeneutical device for the formal characteristics (i.e. motifs, themes, functions, tale types), while alluding to the use of

typical biological designations of the human species. For example, that we are conventionally referred to as *homo sapiens* has at its core the history of scholarship and discourse on Darwinian evolution—a trajectory carefully constructed from ancestral descent and the emergence of the Wise Human. The cultural constructs of human activities goes far beyond the biological trajectory, and so I use *homo faber*, *homo ludens*, *homo narrans*, and *homo mythicus* (or Eliade’s *homo religiosus*) to designate certain tendencies of our species to occupy and constellate around a set of fundamental activities. These are not by necessity *universals*, but typical to the extent that they surface and recur when surveyed cross-culturally. As Frye once remarked: “Emphasis on impersonal content has been developed by Jung and his school, where the communicability of archetypes is accounted for by a theory of a collective unconscious – an unnecessary hypothesis in literary criticism, so far as I can judge” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 111-112). Instead, he defines them thus: “Archetypes are associative clusters, and differ from signs in being complex variables. Within the complex is often a large number of specific learned associations which are communicable because a large number of people in a given culture happen to be familiar with them” (102). During the course of this study, I will be referring to “archetype” and the “archetypal” in more or less the sense of an original or originating form that shapes a paradigm, serves as a paradigm or model for subsequent iterations and actions in congruency with the pattern. On the whole, I do not use the term in its Jungian aspect (i.e. with reference to psychic unity, panhuman, or a collective unconscious) unless I explicitly state some aspect or content as relating to a *Jungian* archetype.

I also should clarify my use of the phrase “creative mode.” Defining modes of genres and sub-genres has been handled masterfully by Heda Jason in *Motif, Type and Genre: A Manual for Compilation of Indices & A Bibliography of Indices and Indexing* (2000). In it, Jason delineates ethnopoetic genres by “modes”: the *Mode of the Fabulous* is defined thus: “In the mode of the fabulous, man confronts extra-natural forces and worlds.” (138). Within the Mode of the Fabulous, there is the Numinous Mode which has three sub-modes itself: *creative*, *marvelous* and *demonic*. Thus, for Jason: “Myth tells of the creation of the primary principles and entities of nature and human society. Man does not yet exist in the mythic epoch (it is his mythical ancestor who plays in myth). Myth is set in the creative mode, in the mythic and eschatological epochs and in mythic space” (145). On occasion I deploy the phrase “creative mode” for its evocative allusion to the events of a myth, while also having some appeal and familiar meaning in the context of a video game that virtually recreate mythic events.

This perspective is demonstrated most clearly through the Classical Greco-Roman myths of the Divine Craftsman (Deus Faber; e.g. Hephaistos) and the Renowned Craftsman (e.g. Daidalos) (See A141. *God as craftsman.*; A15.4. *Artisan as creator*). Subsequently, the demigod or hero-role is fulfilled by the player (e.g. Theseus, Perseus, Jason and Odysseus and other heroes of classical antiquity) within the gameworld as a Labyrinth or Road (*odos*). *Deus Ludens*, the Divine Player, would be the figure like the Trickster who can make worlds and rules, play within them, and break them down, but without the same means and ends like Deus Faber, who builds for purposes of design and engineering, rather than discovery and heuristics.

Playing, crafting and thinking mythically form an evocative syzygy, not just as activities—physical or cognitive—in the concepts of some of our major thinkers. Lévi-Strauss found recourse in the verb *bricoler*, a term for ball games, billiards, hunting, shooting and riding, recognizing the terms later reflection in the role of the *bricoleur*, or craftsman, and arrived at his famous concept of *bricolage* to characterize mythical thought (*Savage Mind* 16). Barthes was not quite as permissive:

There is...one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, metalanguage is referred to a language object, and myth is impossible. (259)

In connection to a video game world, this might limit or evade possibilities for myth; the more control over the gameworld and its creation, the less opportunity is presented for the Barthesian myth to take hold. The caveat against this assertion is that the gameworld remains virtual, digital, and, therefore, distant from the players' efforts literally to "transform reality." The layer of the image is still very present in the economy and ecology of the interaction.

To understand this perspective on gaming culture, game worlds and industry, and to clarify my own usage of the highly technical term *archetype*, I venture to rely loosely on Mircea Eliade's treatment of archetypes and myths as paradigmatic models of behavior (*Myth of Eternal Return* 34; *Sacred and Profane* 29, 205). The usage of this formulation of archetypes and myths situates the activities of game designers (*Homo Faber*) and players (*Homo Ludens*) as potent and pervasive models for participation in

the creation and sustenance of gaming culture. In other words, they are the two parties that have the most direct agency over and within the video game. Human universals are not easily ascertained—nor are they of central concern for our present study. Instead I draw on Donald Brown’s *Human Universals*, and follow his cogent argument for the occasional inclusion of universals, but on the basis of their demonstrative potential (51-53). Mythic engagement rests on basic human activities, drives, and technological competencies. Such venues, I claim, have built the various gaming arenas themselves. Without such universals the mythic models could not play themselves out through the ludic imagination or appeal to a broad international audience. However, it is also important to remember that myths are built on—and often presented as—a system of relations likened to kinship (e.g. Hesiod’s family of gods). To have a relationship requires room for diversity, differences, variability, pluralism, and tensions. The nomenclatures for the human species—*homo sapiens*, *homo ludens*, *homo narrans*, *homo faber* and *homo mythicus*, etc.—are not intended to be treated as universals, but roles through which we socialize and realize the complexity of what it means to be human. In this way, they are tendencies towards anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism—constructing reality as through human forms and human orientation. How we ultimately end up socializing through these roles vary—sometimes considerably.

The creation of a game is a ludic recapitulation of cosmogonic first acts. A point that is worth mentioning here is the natural propagation of game worlds, that is, the natural succession and cycle of making games. It could be stated that the drive to make games rests on the designers’ first experience of a game world in youth. Taking in such an experience could naturally yield to the desire to make one, and further to re-create that

first experience for someone else. The recapturing of that initial experience is bound to collapse, but the desire to attempt at all means that there is some relationship to reception, repetition and (re)creation. Eliade refers to a similar phenomenon in ritualized sacrifice and “the abolition of time through the imitation of archetypes and the repetition of paradigmatic gestures” (*Myth of Eternal Return* 35). In further expounding on the value of repetition, Eliade continues: “through such imitation, man is projected into the mythical epoch in which the archetypes were first revealed” (35). By committing time to playing within an imagined world, one can readily pick up the tools and build such a world through words, deeds, configuring or in the modern mode of programming. In *The Forge and the Crucible*, Eliade would later remark that, “On the mythological level...it has to be emphasized that the imitation of divine models is superseded by a new theme: the importance of the work of manufacture, the demiurgical capabilities of the workman; and finally the apotheosis of the *faber*, he who ‘creates’ objects” (101). When given the tools, the human proclivity towards building quickly evolves and leads to the drive for constructing worlds. To express what happens in those worlds, and to animate them with events, requires some inevitable use of structural traits shared with the power of story, narrative and myth. The animation and the enactment of the world still rely firmly on the side of the player, participant, user, agent: *homo ludens*. Homo Faber is compelled towards creation, while Homo Ludens is compelled towards action. In this way the human agent can derive their fundamental activity on a divine model; that is, the Eliadeian *paradigm-archetype* verisimilitude. It is no surprise that Eliade privileged cosmogonic myths as primary. As David Leeming states: “In creation myths characterized by the *deus faber* there is a direct connection between human crafts—

carpentry, potter, tent building, sculpture—and this way the creator creates the world” (319). By relying on the practicalities of creation, myths involving *deus faber* in a sense mirror our own proclivities towards imagining and then engineering an inhabitable world: “The *deus faber* creation is a celebration of human ingenuity and a justification for what we do. And it turns what we do into something mystical and magical. It makes our crafts microcosmic representations of creation itself” (321). Although myths represent the activities of the gods, Sallustius was quick to assert, “The universe itself can be called a myth, since bodies and material objects are apparent in it, while souls and intellects are concealed” (V.9-11; Nock 5). Such is the case with myths in the tangible world. This conception seems to reverse itself in the conception, creation and participation in virtual and game worlds. What I mean to say, is that virtual worlds allow “souls and intellects” to interact, while “bodies and material objects” are concealed or shadowed as appearance and adornment.

Mythographic Environs and Other Worlds

Imaginal spaces, fictional worlds, the mythical, and fantasy play a large role in both myth and games. In previous chapters we have addressed in some fashion, the exploration of topical and themed environments that are portrayed in video game settings. Like the previous methods of mediation and technology, video games are increasingly utilizing our deep drives to think through constructed spaces of our making and imagination, and crafting technology to physically build the means to reach into other worlds. In this way, the quest for the Other World is both spiritually and materialistically motivated.

In this chapter we will explore certain places and settings that add significance to the ontological claims of myth and mythical realms, namely, that of the Other World. Otherworldly accounts legitimate and naturalize myths, since they both derive authority on personal experiences of an Other World and articulate how the Other World impinges on “this” world. Pathways to the Other World vary, but can be traversed through vehicular journeying, soul-wandering or dream-visions. Accounts of Other Worlds create and reveal an implicit umbilical cord between two worlds. In the *Rg Veda* 10.14 we read that King Yama was the first “Pathfinder” of the Other World and the realm of the Ancient Fathers, and so secured a safe route for devotees (Doniger 43-46). One distinct difference between a mythic account and an otherworldly account is that the myth is generally told by someone who heard it from someone who in turn lays no claim to authorship, while an otherworldly account carries the authority of experiential “evidence,” sometimes of a first-person report directly from the voyager or from an informant. Propp has also argued that the close affinity of soul-wandering, soul-ships and other worlds may point to a deeper relationship between tales and beliefs (*Morphology* 106-7). At the end of Plato’s *Republic* Socrates asserts the mutual advantages of each account in the Myth of Er, in which Socrates concludes with the remark “*kai ho muthos esothe* (and the myth was saved)” (Nagy, “Can Myth be Saved?” 246). A myth can serve as the mnemonic vehicle through which the visceral account may be passed on to future generations, and laced into the greater vision of a mythic cosmography and a map of sacred geography.

If we invoke, again, the Geertzian line “a story they tell themselves about themselves,” we get a clear sense of the strength self-narration has in identity construction. Implicitly, however, the underbelly negative statement can be coerced out:

the story people tell themselves about *others*; the story others tell us about ourselves. Otherness as a category is a trait that fuels and spins out a certain style of myths that legitimate or criticize the in-group (*indigenous*), while projecting onto—and sometimes fetishizing—the out-group(s) (*exogenous*). When we turn to the oldest attested texts of ancient lore, sometimes all we have is the myth told by an outsider of the myth's native peoples. A prime example would be the figures of the Druids of Celtic legend whose stories and rituals are coached in the exogenous writings of Julius Caesar in his *Gallic Wars*, Tacitus in his *Germania*. The “indigenous” voice in writing would not occur until the 12th century compilation of the *Lebor Gabála Éirren*, a period well into the Christianization of Europe.

Indeed, myths can be employed to educate a people about others, while serving as a distorting medium through which the Other is “translated” and “interpreted,” or worse, misrepresented as “mythical” and, thus, de-humanized (Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth* 211). Here, we may consider also Barber and Barber's Myth Principle, the Centaur Syndrome, residing within the greater cognitive category which they call Principle of Restructuring: “People of other times or other cultures come to be seen as different in an absolute sense (e.g., as nonhuman, possibly as fiends or demons)” (146). Palaephatus in his *Peri Apiston* (On Unbelievable Tales) makes a similar case for the amalgamation of horse-men and the origin of centaurs as the false perception of horse-riders (Stern 30). Not only does Otherness give rise to places, but also to peoples and the generation of mythical and fabulous beings.

The construction of a wondertale or myth can come about by the itinerant, his or her travel-log, and the audience whom they disseminate and tell the tale to:

The narrative is thus always a collaboration between at least two “authors,” the travel writer and her reader. In this way, the act of translation is double: the traveler “sees and makes seen” for those in his own world, but to audiences in a variety of cultural and historical locations the travels may disclose different kinds of knowledge. The very claim that tales of “wonders and marvels” are translating practices that constitute a nonpositivistic source of knowledge rather than a mere repository of fantasy is a case in point. (Euben, *Journeys to Other Shores* 42)

If such descriptive and identity-building stories are somehow required for any sense of distinctions and differences, what then, is the function of the purely Other Worldly and why do myths have a vested interest? These are questions that cannot be easily addressed here, but open the way to deeper issues at stake in the production and fascination with Other World mythologems and the video game medium as an extension of, what I call, *ulterior longing*.

Positionality and orientation are two major stances taken both in situating *where* the Other World is, and *how* one can access it. Alterity may be the constant characteristic, but the Other World is not just one fixed location in time-space, for there is the highly enigmatic and subjective realm of the mind:

The location and properties of our “mind space” are probably the most challenging riddles human beings have been confronted with since ancient times; and, after two dark centuries of positivism have tried to explain them away as fictitious, they have come back more powerfully

than ever before with the dawn of cybernetics and computers.

(Coulano 3)

Unlike other *mimesis*-oriented mediums, video games enable the seemingly experiential dimensions of simulation and participation—i.e. *methexis*: the semblance of participation in Otherness and other worlds. Like dreams, they both happen and do not happen, the family members deceased/living can greet the oneironaut. And so, in the latent account given by a player or a dreamer afterwards can be either believed or not, a whimsical fancy or a true testimony of meaningful events. So too does it follow in the study of near-death experience (NDE). Such experiences sometimes validate and lend credibility, authenticity and authority to an Other World. Such experiences build up the conception that there is an Otherworld beyond the current focalized “reality” of appearances and waking life.

If we return to the relationship between myth and alterity in history, we find that “otherness” has been a constant trait of *mythos*—in the Greek sense—since its inception (Detienne, “Myth to Mythology”). For when *logoi* fail to deliver through verifiable accounts and identification, *mythoi* may be employed to speculate and project on alterity (Myth of Er). For instance, in a derogatory way, the athletic hero of Pindar’s *Epinikia* is memorialized by *logoi*, while *mythoi* are treated as distorting accounts and slanderous rumors. These traits and mechanisms of myths to perpetuate alterity are still very much embedded in our contemporary society. As Barthes, in his essay on “The Martians” attests:

[The] impotence to imagine the Other is one of the constant features of all petit bourgeois mythology. Alterity is the concept most antipathetic

to ‘common sense.’ Every myth inevitably tends to a narrow anthropomorphism and, what is worse, to what might be called a class anthropomorphism. Mars is not only Earth, it is a petit bourgeois Earth.
(40)

The fact that enough leisure time is left to design and play within a game world as both product and process within a consumerist society, suggests that (petit) bourgeois mythologies can be found hidden in our virtual activities, only amplified and/or digitized.

Mythic Situations: Descent and Ascent as In-forming Principles and Paths of Game Play

High-low, related to favourable-unfavourable, fortunate-unfortunate, is an opposition which Western literature has inherited from the late biblical vision of heaven and hell, and from Latin and Greek mythology.
—Mieke Bal (*Introduction to Narratology* 216)

Writing and constructing myths into the gameworld landscape can be, and has been, done through the use of motifs drawn from *Otherworldly Journeys* (F0-199), and can be partitioned into F10 *Upper world*, F80 *Lower World* and F111 *Earthly Paradise*. A significant overlap and coordination with cosmology and cosmogony motifs implied in *Otherworldly journeys* (see A600 – A899 *Cosmogony and Cosmology*), to merely suggest that there are way-finders of worlds far away; both implies the other. The visceral undulation and cadence of a gaming session may also evoke ecstatic highs and lows: the literal ups (surmounting) and downs (spelunking) of the gaming experience; successes and failures innate to a gaming session. We may recall our discussion above of the unique triplet of game-myth-underworld, and track its continued manifestation in popular video games. Although the gamer remains in a liminal state prone to rapid success or failure,

the path of challenges are motivated by the gamers' strife ultimately towards ascendency and triumph: some form of excellence remains the major goal—albeit, essential pedagogical episodes can come from the player's most atrocious lapses and follies. *Dante's Inferno* explicitly derives its world from the literary depictions of Dante Alighieri's epic-romantic poem *Inferno*. However, Atlus's 2009 video game, *Demon's Soul*, released a year before *Dante's Inferno*, re-popularized the unrelenting, "hopeless," difficulty and game play harkening back to older classic dungeon crawl and rogue-like gameplay.³⁵ These titles serve as dynamic models of the Underworld Journey in its ergodic mode. They also attempt to meld the ergodic with thematic, emotive and evocative content. Each game reveals essential structures common to the descent and ascent, but how it "gamifies" the experience for the player varies. The underworld remains a classic theme in its own right within the young video game tradition, going back to such formative commercial home console classics as *Mario Brothers* and *Legends of Zelda*. The adventures of Mario (if we simply follow Nintendo's 1985 *Super Mario Bros*), in a sense, typify the various topographies and motifs of the Other World journey available to the video game player: the default Overworld, the underworld (replete with portals/pipes for entry and exit), haunted mansions (the spirit world), and the clouds (celestial realm of ascent).

In computer gaming the *Diablo* series (Blizzard) stands apart as a series that popularized the quasi-universal dungeon looting trope (also known as "dungeon crawl"). These, in part, draw on the preceding table-top games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and

³⁵ Rogue-like dungeon crawlers (*Ultima* series, *Rogue*, *NetHack*) have made a revival through the retro-gaming movement, but are also represented in more mainstream video games like *Demon's Soul* are situated between a spiritual predecessor in *Kings Field*, with the later (arguably even more popular) video games *Dark Souls* and *Dark Souls II* (although, criticism has been made towards *DSII*'s "softer" and forgiving gameplay)

the ancestor of contemporary MMO's, the *Multi-User Dungeons* (MUDs). Richard Garriot's *Ultima Series* (1981-1999) stands as the quintessential and exemplary model of the role-playing computer game genre. Of the greater series, the one which readily explores the Underworld mythologem is the highly influential stand-alone title, *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* (1992). Within this complex of content and symbolism we may begin to explore the drives, motivations and fascinations with the Underworld as a common topographical motif in video games.

The great "Boss fight" and creature slaying often take place in the subterranean realms to achieve a compelling storyline Herculean in scope and tenor. Through analysis of the Underworld Journey sequence, I seek to understand and illuminate the psychology of this particular segment of the gamers' quest. In other words, what motivates the user's fascination with depth? What is the appeal and lure of catacomb lore? And what values can be attained by the descent?

The game world does not simply entail a perilous pursuit of geographic depth, but offers a challenge for the player in the eventual path to ascendancy. A salient mythological example would be the *God of War* series (discussed in more detail later on), which narrates the spiteful career of Kratos as he sought to storm Mount Olympus. However, in less dramatic form, we have the career of Mario traversing atop clouds as much as catacombs. In my assessment we can acknowledge that a degree of user-empowerment drives the design of the game world. Like the term implies, users are gamers: they seek out paths of challenge and progression, or they devise cunning stratagems to at least *appear* as if they have surmounted a challenge that the rule system has put forth. Brushing up against denizens of the subterranean, the Land of the Dead, the

Netherworld or Otherworld may satisfy a deep desire to face Death, Thanatos, or the ultimate unknown; to beat Death is the ultimate game; like Hercules the player is driven towards an apotheosis. Such is the draw of the Underworld as a way-station, a must-see destination, a necessary obstacle on the “road of trials”—i.e. the ergodic—for gamers.

Mythic Architecture and the Game World Environment (as Opponent)

The evolving innovations in technology that impact simulation and representation of game worlds open new vistas and opportunities for generating dynamic models of mythologies. Further, the medium allows a variety of ways for myth to be presented, explored, navigated and played with. To reiterate, we need not restrict myth to strict narration and verbal expression, but rather develop an understanding for the rich capabilities that the video game medium enables in conveying the complexity of myth. For within the medium, players are able to temporarily live within a myth, i.e. role-play, and be exposed to the visual aesthetics of a mythological theme; the more sophisticated the world-building becomes, the more shape is given to the mythological dimension. And in their young history, computer and video games have grappled with mature, philosophical themes from morality and ethics to spiritual growth. Aesthetically, game designers have always strived for innovative uses of software and hardware, while also being constrained by them having to tether creative aspirations with practical solutions. However, memorable and successful games often are able to find a balance. Single-player experiences in particular rely on a challenging environment in the absence of human opponents, or PvP (Player vs. Player). Instead, PvE (Player versus Environment) is the main scenario wherein “Players are opposed by the environment—that is, the virtual world,” and “a combat situation...[in which] player characters (PCs) fight monsters”

(Bartle 406). I propose that we analyze two main trajectories of mythic significance: the game environment as Labyrinth and the Game World Map as they relate to monster-slaying and heroic mythology.

Investigating the Labyrinth firmly situates us in the Greco-Roman myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, where the climactic conflict takes place at the center of the mythological structure. The Minotaur as symbolic of the dragon is, as the account goes, to be slain within the inner most chamber of the Labyrinth.

Opposing this trope is the dragon confronted on the fringe of society, beyond the *oikumene* or inhabited realm. A prototypical myth would be Gilgamesh and Enkidu going beyond the city of Uruk to battle Humbaba in the cedar forest. We can also consider the early career and labors of Theseus on his road to Athens—Theseus is both the hero and monster-slayer of the outskirts and the inner sanctums. In many respects, the Perseus cycle is the more familiar and influential archetype: dragon-slayer and rescuer of Andromeda. Perseus sets the trope for later medieval romances of knights saving a young maiden from the dragon. The story of St. George and the dragon from Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend* ca. 1260AD remains the exemplary literary model (238-242). However, in the figure of Theseus is a more complex and dynamic culture hero. Theseus is indeed given the distinction of bringing about the *syncoecism* or unification of Attica (Walker 15; cf. Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 24.1). As innovative and intricate as the two traditions may be presented, it is in their time-honored expression that we find the vestiges of mythological references explicitly sown into the inner sanctums of catacombs or the wilderness landscape of danger beyond the village.

The Labyrinth (Re)visioned: *Portal*

Let us turn, then, to a case in which the mythic architecture and symbolism meet ludic elements: the *Portal* series. The specific contemporary aesthetics, allusions and game play within *Portal* point to a unique adaptation and evolution from within the video gaming tradition (Tutorial prelude; algorithmic competency; Boss fights) as much as it patterns itself off of mythic structures such as the Labyrinth and the Journey of Ascent in *Portal 2*. I tend to think of the *Portal* series as an encapsulation of Janet Murray's concept of the procedural—i.e. an “ability to excute a series of rules”—and Ian Bogost's later addendum to Murray's concept in his own theory of procedural rhetoric, defined as “the art of persuasion through rule-based representation and interaction rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” (Murray, *Hamlet* 71; Bogost, *Persuasive* ix). Much of *Portal* is based on quiet moments of thinking through the rules of each individual testing lab in order to advance to the next lab room. To do so also requires the mastery of algorithms. In a 2012 article for the academic journal *Game Studies*, Burden and Gouglas have—in my opinion—effectively interpreted *Portal* as an “algorithmic experience.” I would argue that it can also be approached not just as a liberation-quest from systems, but as a mythic endeavor in the dress of cybernetics. I would further argue that this form of dialogue may open a larger discussion about the relationship between the modern myths we make and their effluence with technology and computation.

Let us first begin by introducing the game world of *Portal*. Released in 2007 by Valve Corporation for the PC, *Portal* is a first-person computer game that places the player in the role of Chell, the female protagonist as she navigates test chambers within a

science complex known as the Enrichment Center for Aperture Laboratories, or Aperture Science. Chell wakes up from an unknown stasis and is greeted by the seemingly helpful and spirited voice of Genetic Life and Disk Operating System (GLaDOS), an artificially intelligent research assistant and the disk-operating system. GLaDOS guides Chell through the various test chambers of the Enrichment Center and functions, at first, as the kind overhead-voice of the lab's speaker system. However, as Chell proceeds and expands her knowledge of the Enrichment Center, GLaDOS gradually reveals the more sadistic back-story alluding to the Aperture Laboratories' greater existence and ties of operation.

In order for Chell to escape each test chamber, she is handed the iconographic Portal Gun, or Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device (ASHPD). The portal gun is a simple device that creates portals in special tiles of the test chambers. There are only two luminous portals that it can discharge, one orange and the other blue. When discharged a glowing oval ring is created parting the tiled section, however, the portal won't entirely open until the second portal is placed elsewhere. Thus, if Chell were to place a blue portal on the floor in front of her and an orange portal on any wall or the ceiling, she would fall into the portal, exiting the orange portal—and vice versa. With this simple mechanic, Chell can seamlessly teleport within a test chamber, and even more creatively use it to build gravitational momentum, say, if the entrance portal is placed below her from a great depth and the exiting portal set beside it, Chell would drop into the entrance, and depending on her velocity, the fall would become a jump as she exists the adjacent portal. Test chambers become ever more elaborate and lethal as Chell progresses with ever

growing complexity and objects. She is, in many regards, a lab mouse in a sinister maze. The essence of the game is the art of escaping through cunning and careful planning.

Being that there really is only one route of escape for Chell, that is, one way to beat the game and confront GLaDOS, the labyrinthine structure of *Portal* is best characterized as *unicursal*. *Portal* does not utilize a nonlinear unfolding of the story and is thus not *multicursal* in nature. The Enrichment Center *as labyrinth* was founded on and derives its dramatic tension in, the premise that the Center is a vicious feedback loop meant to push its subjects to insanity, submitting to an infernal sacrifice, or, in Chell's case, finding a way outside of the vicious cycle.

To understand and appreciate the mythology, atmosphere and aesthetics of the *Portal* universe, it is important to see it within the larger context of Valve's *Half-life* universe made up of *Half-life* and *Half-life 2* with their respective expansion packs—in short, *Portal* and *Half-life* take place in a shared universe. *Half-life* was released in 1998 as a first-person shooter taking place in the fictive labs of the Black Mesa facilities in the deserts of New Mexico. As the young theoretical physicist, Dr. Gordon Freedman, the player is greeted into Black Mesa Research Facility as an employee hired to conduct a dangerous experiment with antimatter. The catastrophe induces an otherworldly vision, giving Gordon a glimpse into another dimension of reality, or what later is revealed as a dimension called Xen. A gateway is opened to this other dimension and the fall out begins as the Black Mesa facility is invaded by the otherworldly beings. From this moment onward, Gordon must survive the ordeal and escape both as a witness and fugitive of the fall out. It is important to acknowledge the revolutionary storytelling introduced by *Half-Life*, which mixed cut scenes seamlessly into the gameplay,

immersing the player into the world of the Black Mesa catastrophe via skillfully paced scripted events. This innovative storytelling trait was passed on to *Half-Life 2* and later to the *Portal* series. In many respects, the Half-life mythos is kept well intact in *Portal* with the core themes of experimental laboratory gadgets and weaponry that alter reality in very simple, but profound ways. In *Half-Life 2* the player is introduced to the Gravity Gun or Zero Point Energy Field Manipulator, which can attract and carry nearly any object allowing the player to carry it with ease and thrust it at enemies becoming lethal projectiles. Rather than relying on the violent offensive tactics, the portal gun of Chell's arsenal is more of a tactical weapon for escape. The open-endedness of the lab scenario invites the player to do just that, play.

Cosmopoetics and World-building

World-building (*cosmopoeisis*) has been a primary concern for early game designers since the earliest days of the programmable computer. To fully grasp the “root genres” of contemporary gaming imaginaries (i.e. fictional worlds), namely, fantasy and science fiction, one may look no further than the games developed by the innovative individuals at the University of Illinois responsible for the PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations), one of the many archetypal educational systems developed in 1960.³⁶ The PLATO saw the computerized inception of the two literary genres in titles like *pedit5*, a fantasy dungeon-crawler, and *Empire*, a networked multiplayer space-simulation. Echoes of these archetypal games can be seen in some of our case studies like *Skyrim*'s fantasy world and *EVE Online*'s massive online space trading and combat. World-building was and remains a common feature of fantasy and

³⁶ Here, I use “root genres” in a similar fashion to Gerard Genette's conception the “architext,” and “architextuality” (Genette, *Architext* 82).

science fiction literature with salient works like J. R. R Tolkien's Middle Earth, and Robert Heinlein's Future History. Pioneering game developers, like Richard Garriot, carried the world-building tradition of fantasy literature directly over to his first computer game *Akalabeth: World of Doom* and later his extensive *Ultima* series. The game mechanics and number-crunching computations of the table-top fantasy role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, provided a prime model for translatability to the computer from both the perspective of programmability and player-interaction.

By developing the impact of design on the virtual and gaming worlds, I have found it useful to turn to practical issues involved in production. In particular, Richard Bartle's *Designing Virtual Worlds* clearly and—at times bluntly—reveals some of the core ethical concerns a designer must pay attention to when addressing sacred traditions: when in doubt, avoid their usage, or be willing to face some back-lash from the native religious community, or communities.

The deeply embedded idea and mode of reciting the *creation of the world* has been one of our great mythic and high mimetic endeavors represented in the global heritage of creation myths. *Deus Faber* (or god as Maker and Builder), was vividly rendered as the Demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus* and has come down through the Jewish and Christian tradition as being represented as the Omniscient Designer, a living God, who also works through human history. These godly behaviors have, as it were, become themselves embodied in the game designer, who has the ability to model dynamic virtual worlds. Since myths (in the folkloristic sense) are said to be set in the creative mode of a pre-cosmic, pre-human epoch, the stages of game development would, in this way, imitate a mythic time-space. However, just as there are many gods, and many ways (and

myths about how) a world comes into being, the human designer (*Homo Faber*) mirrors such proclivities either, consciously or unconsciously. The worlds that designers construct and the worlds that players participate in are slowly giving way to the paradigm of virtual worlds as Sutton-Smith observes:

Given that there is nothing more characteristic of human achievement than the creation of illusory cultural and theoretical worlds, as in music, dance, literature, and science, then children's and gamblers' full participation in such play worlds can be seen not as a defect, or as compensation for inadequacy, but rather as participation in a major central preoccupation of humankind. The modern computer-age habit of calling these 'virtual worlds' rather than illusory worlds highlights this move toward a more positive, if narrower, epistemological attitude about their function. (Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play* 54)

Though it may appear as one world between the designer and player it can be, and often is, a drastically different experience; indeed, rule sets and design can be employed, but how players interact with the rules can differ. The designer concentrates on the deeper structures of the world that is, the architecture, while the player works from the outside, perhaps admiring the thematic elements more than the designer. The player, in his or her contribution, takes on an active role in the fabricated world; he/she has what Janet Murray refers to as *agency* as it relates to interactive fiction, interactive media and video games (*Hamlet on Holodeck*).

In recent trends of gaming culture, this necessary arrangement of agency, co-creation and room for the play element has given way to the empowerment of the player

as a co-author or one involved in re-configuring the fabricated world. Cases like the widely popular games *Little Big Planet* (2009) and *Minecraft* (2011), the mythic arrangement opened the way with the most liberated tool-kit being virtual worlds like *Second Life* (2003). Here, I argue that the mythic arrangement, that of Homo Faber in dialogue with Homo Ludens, has developed into a co-forging of the “magic circle” wherein the role of and relationship between World designer and World user become renegotiated from a state of dictation to co-creation; tools are taken from the workshop and placed into the hands of users. A clear example of this state of play is in the rise of MODs: user-made (MOD)ifications that grew out of the offering up by game developers of Software Development Kits (SDK), which allow access to game engines. In such arrangements it is not so mutually exclusive pairings, but co-creative confluences.

By emphasizing the worldly component to game play spaces, I mean to develop a more substantial and multivariate concept of mythoi and mythology as world-building impulses and world-maintenance engagement. In other words, we can move away from the strict fixation on narrative, or scenario sequencing, and instead view mythologies as navigable spaces. In this capacity, I have drawn from the outstanding efforts by Klastrup’s and Tosca’s proposed transmedial worlds. By shifting away from rigid structures of linearity, story canons within transmedial worlds keep content fluid and dynamic while still adhering to a recognizable and common fictional universe. Transmediality ultimately allows our investigation to remain engaged with the social components, environments and constructs that game (and mediated) worlds ennoble both from In-World practices and Real-World *fandom*, i.e., the fan-driven culture that circulates beyond In-World and operates across online forums, websites, fan art and fan

fiction. The participatory characteristic of fan culture is thus a central driving force for the economy of cross-cultural mythological content; fan engagement injects a folkloric inflection in the project of world-building. Behaviorally, this may seem quite akin to diffusionist theories of myth, which rely on Oral Tradition, commerce, and word-of-mouth traffic.

Games and play often take place in marketplaces and locales of commerce both from within a game world and without during fan events. We can consider the various venues of conventions (Cons, Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), PAX, ComicCon) and industry (Game Developer's Conference, International Game Developer's Association), while also acknowledging famous districts of popular and game culture like Akihabara in Tokyo, Japan. The impact of a dynamic market is felt both from the meta-gaming of merchandising, and *inludi* from within the gaming market and economies of objects, items, spells, charms, weapons and skills most readily represented in fantasy role-playing, strategy, Free-to-Play models and MMO's in general. Apart from investigating the world-building activities of Homo Faber and Homo Narrans (a subject of our next chapter), Homo Ludens partakes of the world with utter delight, frivolity and—of course—play; currency becomes play-money, tokens, credits or chips meant to flow with ease. To be sure, the climate of the player-driven world and its worldview is mercurial indeed.

Designers and Players

By maintaining attention on the video game as an object of human production and play, my aim has been to be practical and holistic in scope. The process of production and reception involves dialogue between designers and players. Treating the gameplay field from the etic and emic points to my larger project seeks to capture the complexity of the

gaming culture. It is also my contention that the gaming community has a viable, vital vernacular culture replete with its own language (1337/Leet/Elite-speak) and unspoken commonsense code of behavior and engagement. As Mary Flanagan cautions, “To the typical gamer, computer games are not obviously aligned with such concerns as ancient divination, psychoanalysis, utopian tax laws, environmentalism, or social protests” (252)—how much more so for discussing the mythic expression in all of its various modes. My aim was to allow the exchange between the etic and emic to provide insights and observations that simply would not be possible if I were to remain on one side of the fence.

Lévi-Strauss once confessed in his *Overture to The Raw and the Cooked* that to undertake the study of myths and mythological thought meant risking the natural fallout for the mythologist, that of generating a “myth of mythology.” I take it that such risks may emerge during my effort. The aim is to cultivate an understanding of the metaxy—the “go-between” qualities—of textualized (static) lore and its direct experience as *living* lore. Together, the interviewees and I explored the terms themselves like *myth* and *lore* to get a sense of how each player and designer understands, defines or conceives of them. For inevitably, we are dealing with material developed out of pre-fabricated worlds—i.e. of a literary nature. But also, not all game worlds are designed with the strict traits and restraints of a literary source; they oscillate between a fixed path of challenges or achievements (leveling), or they operate as open-ended pursuits with little consequence for diverting away from storylines. In the more literary game world, a role is given for the user to adorn, but in the open-ended world(s) the player designs their own path (albeit within limits).

One hypothesis to be tested was as follows: when the mythic content is negotiable and co-creative, i.e. when the world is malleable to the user's touch, does the emergent lore takes on a much different quality than the pre-fabricated lore? Richard Dorson, the renowned American folklorist, saw this problem existing between *fakelore* and *folklore* as it related to early commercialization of American manufactured "folktales" in service to industrial enterprises (e.g. Paul Bunyan) ("Folklore and Fake Lore"). So although we are focusing on myths, we need not neglect the intimate links shared by myths and folktales, both in terms of genre and function. At the helm of lore is always the player, the folk, the emic, while the myth(ology) or systematized mythological structure comes pre-folk by the creative production of the game developers, or later as a system distilled via latent analysis, the etic; a dispassionate mythographic compendium. In my own terminology, I liken the efficacy of the designer's input to the operation of *mythopoeia* or the artistic and synthetic production—very often this mode yields amplified worlds typical of high fantasy that draw attention to themselves as "mythical." Mythopoeia, as we will repeatedly see, can refer to a "ready-made mythology," of artifice and conscious construction. In adapting the definition of myth as a storyworld involving deities, the supernatural, and origins, we must then ask, how do we define the authenticity of deities as they are portrayed across storyworlds, literary works, gameworlds and traditional cultures? Where is the line drawn between the depiction of traditional and artificial mythologies within a game? Thus, the fieldwork may contest or support such theoretical positions and lines of inquiry. *EVE Online* will serve as the main virtual world field-site, since it is, in my view, a fascinating experiment in the co-creative practice of storytelling and world-building: the confluence between Homo Faber and Homo Ludens.

Chapter 5: Homo Narrans: How We Build What We Say

Infinite players are not serious actors in any story, but the joyful poets of a story that continues to originate what they cannot finish.
—James Carse (*Finite and Infinite Games* 149)

The video game medium is significant in that it affords the ability to create participatory worlds. This presents considerable challenges to the conventional notions of myth, if it is to carry much meaning as a separate category. Narrative and story are not always the focus or the message behind the game world. However, storytelling remains an important facet of the game developer's mission in many cases. In this chapter I turn to the conventional medium of transmitting myths: narrative and storytelling, the activity of *Homo Narrans*. John Niles define Homo Narrans as:

that hominid who not only has succeeded in negotiation the world of nature, finding enough food and shelter to survive, but also has learned to inhabit mental worlds that pertain to times that are not present and places that are the stuff of dreams. It is through such symbolic mental activities that people have gained the ability to create themselves as human beings and thereby transform the world of nature into shapes not known before. (3)

Considering the narrative as an integral feature of video games requires that we reconsider fundamental elements like poetics, that is, *poiesis* in its traditional use as “making,” insights drawn from literary (and myth) criticism, and the adjacent secular branch of narratology. To analyze video games with such tools implies that, to some degree, the medium utilizes a literary mode of exposition and of story-driven content. As early as Plato we read, “Is not everything that is said by fabulists (*mûthologon*;

mythologies) or poets a narration (*diēgēsis*) of past, present, or future things? [...] Do not they proceed either by pure narration (*diēgēsei*) or by a narrative that is effected through imitation (*mimēseos*), or both?” (*Republic* 392d; Shorey). In modern times, literary and cinematic mediums rely on these core techniques to deliver and reveal storyline and plot. But unlike oral tradition, literary texts and film, video games unify storytelling strategies by fusing representation (*mimēsis*) and narration (*diēgēsis*) in efforts to create a world for a player to *participate*, in both the sense of *methexis* or *metalypsis*. My understanding of what it means to *participate* and the the concept of *participation* comes from two major thinkers: One, is Eric Voegelin whose philosophical approach situates the Platonic term for participation, *methexis*, in relation to the In-Between, or *metaxy*. Plato also used the term *metalypsis* as it pertained to *idea* and *eidos*; participation in the *idea*, or Platonic form (*Parmenides* 130a) Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* 987b14-17 summarily discerns Plato’s category of *methexis* as the participation in *ideas* and *eidos*, from that of the Pythagorean argument that things exist by *mimesis*, or imitation, of numbers. The other thinker who influences my understanding of participation is media theorist Henry Jenkins. His use of the term “participatory media” underscores that it empowers the user. Applied to video games as part participatory media, it empowers fan culture, implicating them in the circulation of content, shifting them beyond the category of passive consumers and spectators (see *Convergence Culture*).

Metalepsis is a curious narratological term that could apply here as well, since it involves a breaching of the extra-diegetic into the diegetic; that is, players can interrupt the scripted sequences through extra-diegetic means, e.g., emergent behavior. World-building is indeed the task of storytellers across a wide variety of media traditional and

novel. From epic poetry to the literary novel, singers of traditional tales and authors of books seek to fashion a fictive world born of the imagination.

The categories of “mythos” and “narrative” have often coincided, but have remained distinct. It is often a misstep in analysis to relegate myth to the sole mode narrative. Aristotle left the matter rather ambiguous:

We now come to the art of representation (*mimētikēs*) which is narrative (*diēgēmatikēs*) and in metre. Clearly the story (*mûthous*) must be constructed as in tragedy, dramatically, round a single piece of action, whole and complete in itself, with a beginning, middle and end, so that like a single living organism it may produce its own peculiar form of pleasure. It must not be such as we normally find in history (*historíais*), where what is required is an exposition not of a single piece of action but of a single period of time, showing all that within the period befell one or more persons, events that have merely casual relation to each other. (*Poetics* 1459a16-26; Fyfe)

A far deeper theoretical tension has been discussed between game and narrative that drew much attention in the formative years of game studies proper. A (mythical) “debate” was said to have occurred involving schools of scholars trained in narratology (Espen Aarseth, Jesper Juul and Markku Eskelinen, Gonzalo Frasca) and scholars with various backgrounds of training (Janet Murray a drama theorist, Henry Jenkins a media scholar, and Marie-Laure Ryan a literary scholar) often characterized as narratology

contra ludology.³⁷ Jesper Juul has offered a concise summation of the core issues: “The early years of video game studies were often conceived as a discussion between *narratology* (games as stories) versus *ludology* (games as something unique). This discussion tended to alternate between being a superficial battle of words and an earnest exploration of meaningful issues (*Half-Real* 15). Ironically, so the “foundation myth” goes, the scholars trained in narratology found their position willy-nilly on the side of “ludology,” while the “narrativist” scholars became the leading figures on the side accused by said ludologists of subverting games to the whims of storytelling, and storytellers. The “debate” is not one to ignore, but it is important to realize that the categories are not mutually exclusive, nor are they antagonists. They remain conversational and analytical for discerning and describing boundaries and overlaps.”³⁸

Narratology is still an invaluable discipline for discussing the storytelling elements in video games. However, I argue not to send narratology back to its native grounds, but to deflate the ideology of *narrativism* as applied to games and myths, and to reject *pan-narrativism*, a stance that demands that everything can only be understood through narrative, or as an extension thereof. Furthermore, the debate still offers much heuristic value for our purposes, both in broadening myth beyond unnecessary narratological constraints and simplifications (i.e. mythos = back-story). For instance, a standard narratological definition of myth reads, “A traditional narrative, usually associated with religious belief and ritual, that expresses and justifies an exemplary aspect of the way things are” (Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* 56). Myth, as we have

³⁷ “Ludology” remains a term of ambivalence for some, but can be simply understood as a neologism derived from an essay by Gonzalo Frasca for “the study of games in general, and the study of video games in particular,” and can sometimes be used synonymously with “game studies” (222).

³⁸ For a less light-handed critique of the narrativists of the “debate” with consultation of their theories, see Markku Eskelinen’s *Cybertext Poetics: The Critical Landscape of New Media Literary Theory* (209-233).

observed, has many more dimensions that are only hinted at in this definition. In this way, I argue that myth is an autonomous third party and overlooked factor in the conversation about ludological and narratological concepts. In other words, between games and narratives, therein remains the *tertium quid*, myth.

The myth of the debate may be deemed unfounded and untenable by its contributing parties, but, nonetheless, it led, and still leads, a life of its own in discussions from academic to popular discourse. The conflict has become, in essence, a “modern myth” borne of scholarship. Like any live circulating myth, intellectual debates mirror discussions that often take place in the fan-based, grassroots, reviews and discussions of games with no central or originating author(ity) to moderate. This aspect of myth (in the pejorative) functions much like the way described by Barthes, namely, that bourgeois myths care less about validity and accountability than for sheer propagation and recounting: “Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (255-56). The myth retains its duplicity, perhaps even its multiplicity, by having some semblance of value in the circulation, for, in practice (as opposed to theory) the development team must still collaborate on how to integrate story with gameplay, while players (myth-consumers) will continue to discuss game and story. Generally speaking, gameplay and design might satisfy, but the story may falter, or vice-versa. This constitutes what some would refer to as *ludonarrative dissonance*. In this way, story must become “naturalized” by the developers in accordance with the medium in order for it not to distract or deter from gameplay. These are far from being resolved

matters, but rather an on-going creative challenge for each development team. The academic and theoretical debates reflect how deeply rooted the problem can become.

Rather than recapitulating the “myth” in full, I will instead focus on a particular instance of scholarly discussion as an entry point. In the formative years of game studies the theoretical and pragmatic tensions between games and narrative came to the fore in a series of articles in the inaugural issue of the first major peer-reviewed journal, *Game Studies*. Three of the featured articles explored core issues at play in our present study and chapter, namely, the use of mythic structures, narrativity, and their (in)significance to a (clinical) study of games.

Marie-Laure Ryan, in her article “Beyond Myth and Metaphor: The Case of Narrative in Digital Media,” states the limited scope of mythic and folkloric engagement in video games:

The thematic and structural repertory of ontological/internal interactivity is quite limited. Adventure and role-playing games implement the archetypal plot that has been described by Joseph Campbell and Vladimir Propp: the quest of the hero across a land filled with many dangers to defeat evil forces and conquer a desirable object. The main deviance from the archetype is that the hero can lose, and that the adventure never ends. In most action games, this archetype is further narrowed down to the pattern that underlies all wars, sports competition, and religious myths, namely the fight between good (me) and evil (the other) for dominance of the world. (n. pag.)

Here, I am in agreement with Ryan, especially on her observation of the perceived limited repertory. Propp's proposed function 16: The Hero and the Villain join in direct combat, according to Ryan, is the central agonistic function that informs most action games, while dragon-slaying, according to Campbell's monomyth (*Hero* 352-53) is a critical event in the life and career of the mythic hero (*Hero* 352-53); it remains a central motif in our most recent role-playing games like *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

A student of myth, or students familiar with theories of myth, will undoubtedly find in Ryan's assessment a narrow conception of myth by limiting it to the works of Joseph Campbell (generally, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*). The issue goes beyond game studies, and has also occurred in major works of media studies as well. Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, further cites Joseph Campbell's *Hero* in much the same vein (186). Murray also attempts a suggestive reconciliation of continuity between the "functions" of Vladimir Propp's analysis of the Russian wondertale and Albert Lord and Milman's oral formulaic theory of epics with a vision of a "cyberbard" orchestrating "bardic algorithms" (188-197). She describes the "awakening" of the cyberbard as "a future digital Homer...who combines literary ambition, a connection with a wide audience, and computational expertise" (213).

Perhaps it is because the category of "myth" carries too much baggage of "the sacred" and is associated too easily with the grand theories of 20th century mythologists that speaking about issues of "narrative" is a safer secular alternative. Games can go well beyond metaphor, but that does not mean that they are beyond myth—they are merely beyond the Campbellian notion of "myth as metaphor" (*Inner Reaches*). Though casting

some doubt on the limit myth as metaphor, Ryan remains one of the key proponents for keeping narrative present in game studies, Ryan states:

The main reason for using narrative concepts in game studies is to come to terms with the imaginative dimension of computer game—a dimension that will be overlooked if we concentrate exclusively on rules, problem-solving, and competition...the major innovation of computer games compared to standard board and sports games is to allow a combination of strategic action and make-believe within the same environment. (*Avatars of Story* 203)

Again, I agree with Ryan's sentiment in that it keeps present the notion that the theorist, whether rule-bent or story-bent, is dealing with a hybridity inclusive of both. Video games are a synthesizing medium. Concerning virtual reality, virtual worlds and fictional representations of them, Ryan has argued, citing historian of religion Mircea Eliade, for deeper mythic and shamanic implications (66, 120; *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 72, 293). Ryan has also argued for the inclusion of a deeper engagement with 'myth' as a category of Truth as opposed to our fictional worlds: "while our modern fictions establish truth for a world that is ontologically not ours (we must transport ourselves in imagination to regard it as actual), myth concerns the most real of all worlds, the very center of the believer's ontological system" (55). Thus, Ryan has cogently argued for the continued need for "post-modern skepticism" in order to keep apparent the analytical categories of science, fiction and myth (58). Scholar of religions Robert Geraci has also done extensive textual analysis and fieldwork in virtual worlds, intimating a reassessment of Eliade's work on space, time and eternal return (*Virtually Sacred*).

Jesper Juul, again, makes a case for determining “distinctions” between games and narrative in “Games Telling Stories?” He concludes: “I would like to repeat that I believe that: 1) The player can tell stories of a game session. 2) Many computer games contain narrative elements, and in many cases the player may play to see a cut-scene or realise a narrative sequence. 3) Games and narratives share some structural traits” (n. pag.). Juul immediately follows with the divergent traits of narratives and games, but, first expresses their congruencies. As condense as this discourse appears, it is rather expansive in its implications and applicability; thus, we will treat the passage in two parts for clarity and elucidation. On the whole, I am in agreement; especially on his first three points of congruence between games and narratives (or if you like, stories). Narrative constructed to frame a game experience carries with it all of the signifiers of a mythical journey. The more otherworldly the game content and structure the more extraordinary the claims. As the second point of this set implies, there is an embedded feedback loop to a story-heavy game, whereby “narrative sequences” or, for our sake, “mythic sequences” can be participated from within by the user. This naturally leads to some inherent structural similarities. On the morphology of games and folktales, folklorist Alan Dundes dedicated an article in 1964 for *New York Folklore Quarterly* to investigating this very question: “Are children’s games, a form of non-verbal folklore, and folktales, a form of verbal folklore, structurally similar?” (“On Game Morphology” 156). Although the similarities are apparent in regards to their structure and form, the perspective and engagement with them differs. A folktale, offers a one-dimensional perspective on a linear, one-way sequence (the hero fights/overcomes villain), while a game is two-dimensional in so far as it is two opponents (1 vs. 1, each a hero in their own self-

perception) each fulfilling or attempting to fulfill the heroic progression of a folktale simultaneously, aimed at the “other/villain/opponent” (156). In this way, the two seem to still be at odds: “In folktales, the hero always wins and the villain always loses. In games, however, the outcome is not so regular or predictable: sometimes the Hare wins, and sometimes the Hounds win” (157). This distinction will be fruitful for our later discussion of heroic mythology and Campbell’s monomyth. If we “elevate” or transpose the forms into sacred concepts, one finds a similar dialogue/play between ritual and myth. On this point, Dundes states:

The morphological similarity between game and folktale suggests an important principle which may be applied to other forms of folklore. Basically, these different forms derive from the distinction between words and acts. Thus, there is verbal folklore, and non-verbal folklore. The distinction is made most frequently with respect to myth and ritual. Myth is verbal or in Bascom’s terms, verbal “art.” Ritual, in contrast, is non-verbal folklore or non-verbal art. Myth and ritual are both sacred; folktale and game are both secular. (Whether all games evolved from ritual is no more or less likely than the evolution, or rather devolution, of folktales from myths.). (160)

As Dundes acknowledges that not enough emphasis has been placed on these analogical relations (i.e. myth:ritual::folktale:game::verbal:non-verbal; sacred (myth:ritual):secular (folktale:game)) at least not admittedly by the folklorist using structural analysis beyond the verbal. This is Dundes’s very thesis of the brief article. It would be a mistake to impose such binaries in a strict and static way. Instead, I argue, that it is best to keep

them vulnerable to coercive strategies. By this I mean that the status of a myth can depreciate in authority and credibility or migrate to become a folktale, or settle and gain currency, credence and authority, and become myth again. The same holds for games. In ancient Greece and ancient Rome this happened to their sacred games, *agôn* and *ludi*, respective terms used for competitions consecrated by, or held in the honor of a divinity or local hero. Furthermore, I would argue that a similar neglect, consciously or not, takes place in game studies, insofar that the ritualistic and mythic forms have yet to be situated into the discussion in a compelling, comprehensive or meaningful fashion. Such is the case for a thorough-going analysis of games by the mythologist. This perspective can only be touched on here, but deserves further analysis and investigation.

Let us continue with Juul's second set of statements regarding the divergent factors of games and narrative from "Games Telling Stories?" He states:

Nevertheless, my point is that: 1) Games and stories actually do not translate to each other in the way that novels and movies do. 2) There is an inherent conflict between the *now* of the interaction and the *past* or '*prior*' of the narrative. You can't have narration and interactivity at the same time; there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story. 3) The relations between reader/story and player/game are completely different - the player inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game *and* undertakes a role inside the game. (n. pag.)

On the first point, Juul does not make the staunch argument for non-translatability between games and narratives, but only that if such a case were made it would not be the

same as the migration of content to and from novels and movies. Transmission and adaptation are far from being simple matters, for each form of media changes the user-experience of the content to such a degree that pure translation does seem rather naïve. The issue is compounded when dealing with contemporary franchises (the stuff of novels and films) that head the discussion into the problems and byways of intellectual properties and creative use. At this point, one can easily make the argument for the use of folkloric and mythic material since they are not confined within the bureaucracy of creative industries and franchises.

Juul's second point ("There is a conflict between the *now* of the interaction and the *past* or "prior" of the narrative...") deserves its own separate treatment since it addresses the issue of time in story and in game. As he claims, narrative is stationed in the modes of "past" and "prior" since a narrative can only speak of reports on events that have happened; even a live event requires the distracting mediation of commentators, instead of participants who are too active in the event to comment. Games deal with a synchronous occasion, the act of *doing* and *playing*. As conventionally understood, myths describe events of the remote past. However, the function of a myth goes far beyond trying to entertain an audience with stories of far-away places; i.e. fiction or folktales. A myth brings the past to bear on the present; it is a *believed* tale. It is not a claim on what life *ought to be*, but *how it is*; it is not subject to truth or falsity, but in reality and the actual. As Juul claims, cinematic and novelistic narratives do not translate to the interactive medium of the game. I agree. However, that is not to say that any and all forms of narrative is non-translatable (a claim Juul does not openly assert). When Juul claims "there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story," I would counter and

say that there is: myth. The difference is the *type* of account that manages to translate itself. Myth is the story that veils its fictive nature from its audience; If, as Barthes famously asserts, myth converts history into nature, that is to also say that myth garbs its fiction as non-fiction; its diachrony as synchrony. Here, I would argue that it is the mythic account that remains the most applicable and habitable, since its very function in non-ludic contexts is to *actualize* and reassert an event (cf. Eliade). Myth is not as a significant event of the past memorialized (the domain of history and legend); it is not a fiction although it can wear the dress of a fictional tale (folk tale); it is, rather, an account asserting itself onto a constant *presencing* (*synchrony*) that has been veiled by the passage of time (*diachrony*). The “continuously interactive story” is actually a rather succinct definition of engagement with a mythic account, indeed, a suggestive definition of a *living* myth. One can easily slip into a mystical attitude under these conditions and proclaim, “This did not happen, but always is,” a sort of mystagogic dictum in favor of the eternal over the temporal. Such are the claims of myth, which remains subject to the articulation of humans, our lives and our histories. This is perhaps one of the better arguments for a critical *and* comparative study of myth. Myths and games play with story and narrative. They are not story-media that tell, but story-forms for playing with. In his later 2005 book, *Half-Real*, Juul expands his argument with the significant addendum of the co-participation in “fictional worlds” that rules, games, and story share.

With these particular arguments in mind, I suggest that there is still much to be learned from the foundational works on story-structure, composition, formal analysis and narrative: Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the work of Gerard Genette (particularly *Narrative Discourse*), Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, and Joseph Campbell’s *Hero*

with a Thousand Faces. Amidst these seminal works, I draw particular attention to the varieties and types of narratives in games, moving us towards the analytics of formalism with *mythos* (Aristotelian), *fabula* and *sjuzhet* (Bal, *Introduction* 5; Propp, *Theory and History* 76). I have found the lexicon of narratology to be most efficient, precise and effective in describing the diverse and complex array of storytelling methods and techniques in general, and in gameworlds in particular.³⁹ For example, we may distinguish between the story narrated and told from within by a narrator as *diegesis* (narration), while the events enacted or represented as *mimesis* (imitation; representation) (Halliwell, “Diegesis – Mimesis”). *Diegesis*, in modern usage by narratologists, also denotes the fictional world as it appears to the characters of a story, as opposed to the way the fictional world is perceived by the reader through representation, or *mimesis*. The distinction is slight, but enough to yield such analytical stratification of the diegetic level of a myth *as factual history*, and the extra-diegetic level of a myth *as alternative history*. That is to say how the *mythos* (actual), as it is lived out by the fictional characters, informs, communicates and governs their behavior. Fictional world (diegetic level) of the characters surpasses its fictive status and permeates their self-image and worldviews as a myth would.

Such a distinction between the mimetic and diegetic was laid down by Plato in his *Republic* (3.392-393), when discussing the *mimesis* of Homer, Hesiod and the poets, while his successor Aristotle put forth his own divergent theory of *mimesis* and *mythos* in terms of human necessity and compositional structure, respectively. For modern approaches to *mimesis* I take up Paul Ricoeur, René Girard and Northrop Frye whose

³⁹ We can work within the framework of Bal’s definition: “*Narratology* is the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story.’” (*Introduction to Narratology* 3)

insights on *mimesis*, mimetic desire, literary criticism and the archetypal approach to texts. Also I consider Frye's development of genre studies to navigate the different genres and styles of video gaming. It should be noted that *mimesis*, has a complex history of its own in the Western tradition; one drawing on the artistic, philosophical, literary and technological all with aims of somehow imitating the nature of Nature, or celebrating the imitative nature of our human nature.⁴⁰

Mimesis is either positively translated as *representation* or negatively as *imitation*. It has held a central place in the Western imagination since Plato, and even in Homeric epic itself as Havelock has thoroughly demonstrated in his *Preface to Plato* (1965). Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953) remains a classic in the field of literary theory and beyond.

Tanya Krzywinska, drawing on the weaving contest between Minerva and Arachne from Ovid's poem *Metamorphoses*, presents a cogent strategy for thinking through and applying mythological rhetoric to the narrative design of games ("Arachne Challenges Minerva"). Her approach draws from the mimetic and artistic challenges faced. Although Krzywinska employs the Ovidian afforance of ludo-mythic storytelling, we might also consider the more natural and earthy myths of Pindar's *Epinikia* that in a sense capture *myth as traditional story* in action and application through Pindar's careful use of contestation and agonistic relations between myth and game. As Walter Burkert was once careful to discern:

We may state how in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* myth comes quite close to 'Maerchen,' though elaborate poetic skill combines with a quite

⁴⁰ See Auerbach's seminal *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought* ; Walton *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundation of the Representational Arts* (1990)

general reference to extreme human possibilities and the merging of man and nature. But contrast Pindar, where myth is alive by virtue of immediate reference and relevance to all aspects of genealogy, geography, experience, and evaluation of reality. (*Structure and History* 24)

In *Plato the Myth Maker*, Luc Brisson argues that narrative is but one way of mediating and transmitting a myth, which he approaches as an effective method/technique for communicating the memorable. A myth is not a myth if it is not easily remembered and communicated in its locality. It remains the most conventional, but not always the most innovative or perceptive technique of verbal transmission generally, and the transmission of myths particularly. Folklorist Lauri Honko discusses the transmedial paths through myth can be communicated:

Myth can be brought to life in the form of a ritual drama (enacted myth), a liturgical recitation (narrated myth), in which case both verbal and non-verbal media (sermons, hymns, prayers, religious dances) can be utilised. Similarly myth can be manifested in religious art (ikons, symbolic signs). In addition to these codified forms we also have the way in which myth is transmitted in speech, thought, dreams and other modes of behaviour. A religious person may in the course of his experience identify himself with a mythical figure. Myth may totally dominate his behaviour, but it need not be verbalized. (50)

As Honko highlights, the common association of myth with verbalization is an unnecessary constraint. Myth need not be dominated by any one technique of mediation.

Myth-theorist Henry Murray once proposed that there might be four “channels of representation”:

- (i) An imagined (visualized) representation of a mythic event: a *mythic imagent* (imagined event). [...]
 - (ii) A verbal (visualizable) representation of a mythic event in speech or writing: a *mythic narrative*.
 - (iii) A quasi-actional (visible and audible) representation of a mythic event: an *enacted myth*, a *mythic drama* or *rite*.
 - (iv) A material (visible) representation of a mythic situation or of one or more mythic characters or moments of a mythic event: a *depicted myth* or *mythic icon*.
- (“Possible Nature” 320)

Throughout the case studies, I utilize each of these “channels” to decipher or coerce mythic material from the game world.

By way of Barthes we can at least posit and theorize a semiology of myth that ranges from the oral to the visual. Of all forms of communication, a myth is stubborn and able to adapt through any means, as long as the message takes. Narrative structures can also impede the understanding of the various nuances of a myth, reducing it to mere formulae and rigid sequencing. To utilize a myth, means more than merely executing an algorithm. This is, indeed, the great reductionist move that occurs when developers, screenwriters, and narrative designers rely too heavily on “mythic structures,” “The Hero’s Journey,” or Aristotelian “plot” in making efforts to infuse a given medium with the qualities of myth. Even within scholastic discourse the student of myth may create a

“myth + footnotes” (Lincoln), or impose a narrative structure onto myth itself (Monomyth). These are not eschewed attempts entirely, but merely singular techniques in applying myth through narrative.

At the same time, structural analysis of narrative remains a powerful tool for approaching myth. For instance, Lévi-Strauss’s basic unit of a myth, the *mytheme*, can find its way into other intersemiotic translations.

Wendy Doniger has stated that “all myths are stories, but not all stories are myths.” I would go further and argue that any story made pliable through the video gaming medium leans more towards myth than narrative or story. As a slight amendment to Doniger’s terminology, I prefer myths as *accounts* at the base rather than story or narrative. The economic connotations are well intended here, since each telling of the account is a re-counting adding to the accumulated enumeration of variants. The more a myth is recounted the wider its currency is felt, but the more sacred, hidden and esoteric it is, the higher the value it purports to reveal.

As we progress through this study, it is important to reiterate that myth is not just the fictive back-story made explicit on the level of representation (*mimesis*)—such a level tends to dominate a literary analysis of oral telling, written text, and film (*Implied Spider* 2). Myths, if living and vital, are the accounts that govern and inform cultural life, values and behaviors because of their “transparency,” as Doniger emphasizes (80). The transparency enables myths to be retold, reinterpreted and re-applied within the changing ideas of culture. Instead of committing to a single idea (ideology) the transparency of myth—or what Liszka prefers to call the ambivalence of a myth (219)—allows myths to be participatory (*methexis*) both for application in real life and in the digital game

medium. This characteristic of the participatory is inherent to games in general, but amplified by digital or analog contexts. When a mere story or body of lore takes hold of the individual or the collective, it may transcend the fiction and its distance from the real. This is the moment it is “translated” or transformed into a myth. The mythos of the gameworld, thus, moves myth beyond metaphor and the literary, and towards the metaxic, liminal, virtual and cybernautic—i.e., where myth is made, mediated and controlled. Behind these assertions is the implicit case that video games participate in and inflect the myths they recount; or, if we follow Doniger closely, a video game’s rehearsal of the myth can be properly termed a micro-myth (“Minimyths and Maximyths” 116-118).

Story Structures to Functional Game Models

Propp’s structural approach to the Russian wondertale is still a viable and practical tool for the narrative designer of video games, since it allows the designer to play with the various functions and cast his or her *dramatis personae* as they see fit. In a sense, it allows for more play than Campbell’s monomyth, while also being scrupulously extracted, demonstrated and applied by Propp. Both find their agreement in the ritual basis of their plots; that is to say, the wondertale and the monomyth find common structurate in initiatory rituals and the phases of Van Gennep’s *rites de passage* (Propp, *Theory and History* 118; Campbell, *Hero* 10). The triadic division of the *rites de passage* not only provides a frame through which a plot can be traced, but remains a core concept of the triad as process in narratology: 1) virtuality, 2) actualization/nonactualization, 3) achievement/nonachievement (Prince 102).

Other comparable initiatory structures have also been found in specific literary genres like the *Bildungsroman* (“novel of formation”; “coming-of-age”), where the

protagonist undergoes trials and hardships in tension with his society whilst cultivating his spiritual life, character and intellect (Abrams 255-56; Meletinsky 263-64).

Prototypical antecedence of the *Bildungsroman* can be found in the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes in the life-careers of knights, while a later vivid rendition was crafted by Wolfram Von Echenbach's 13th century epic-romance *Parzival*. A conventional cases stem from the novels written during the height of Romanticism like Goethe's 1795 novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.

Ritualized forms of the narrative are far from being exclusive to myth and mythic structure, and can be found intimately woven into the cross-cultural category of near-death experiences and conceptions of journeys to an afterlife or other world (See Shushan 157-161; cf. Smith, *Hero Journey* 454).

Functions and Moves

Though Propp was well known mainly for the formulation of his functions, he also envisioned the possibility of articulating analysis through the language of a game:

Morphologically, a tale (*skazka*) may be termed any development preceeding from villainy (A) or a lack of (*a*), through intermediary functions to marriage (W*), or to other functions employed as a dénouement. Terminal functions are at times a reward (F), a gain or in general the liquidation of a misfortune (K), an escape from pursuit (Rs), etc. This type of development is termed by us a *move* (*xod*). Each new act of villainy, each new lack creates a new move. One tale may have several moves, and when analyzing a text, one must first of all determine the number of moves of which it consists. One move may

directly follow another, but they may also interweave; a development which has begun pauses, and a new move is inserted. Singling out a move is not always an easy matter, but it is always possible with complete exactitude. However, if we have conditionally defined a tale as a move, this still does not mean that the number of moves corresponds exactly to the number of tales. Special devices of parallelism, repetitions, etc., lead to the fact that one tale may be composed of several moves. (*Morphology* 92)

From Propp's basic formulation of functions, moves and the morphology of tales, we may consider two important attempts at revisions of the Proppian system.

Classicist Walter Burkert in his *Structure and History of Greek Mythology and Ritual* has offered one of the soundest and modest definitions of a myth that avoids theoretical excess: "*a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance. Myth is traditional tale applied*" (23). This is, in no small part, a major shift in Burkert's revision of myth itself as so defined not by a reliance on content (e.g. an account of immortals as opposed to lesser spirits or mortals), but on social and collective sanction and consensus. A myth's traditionality highlights the continuums or continuations, using the past to justify a present. He has also proposed an approach to the structure of a traditional tale: "*tale structures, as sequences of motifemes, are founded on a basic biological or cultural program of actions*" (18; see 14-18). A natural addition could be extended when we approach myths not as metaphors, but as programs or sequences of action. This suggests how myths and traditional tales are easily adaptive to a

video game, especially if the genre provides surface-level motifs that cue and orient the player in relation to the mythological models they enact.

Second, literary theorist Thomas Pavel picked up on Propp's line of thinking and sought to incorporate an interdisciplinarity by turning to the field of game-theory:

My own solution, which rests on notions derived from game-theory, suggests that plots as strategic clashes cannot be reduced to sequences of anonymous actions; a proper understanding of plot includes knowledge of the person or group who performs an action, the reason for it, and its effect on the overall strategic configuration...to understand a plot involves not only relating actions to one another and to the characters who perform them, but also to a group of general maxims that define the meaning of 'raw' actions and give them a cultural and narrative status. (14)

Accordingly, Pavel offers the following definition:

a *Move* is the choice of an action among a number of alternatives, in a certain strategic situation and according to certain rules...Naturally, not every action of the characters constitutes a *Move*. The main criterion for an action to be considered as a *Move* is its impact on the overall strategic situation. An action is a *Move* if it either, directly or indirectly, brings about another *Move*, or if it ends the story. (*Poetics of Plot* 17)

By working within this framework, the structuration of plot becomes more malleable to the rules of game rather than the dictation of narrativism.

If we apply Pavel's concept of '*Moves-grammar*' as a ludic theory of fiction, then we can approach and re-interpret myths through the language of games, strategy, and decision-making (i.e. a game theory of myth). For example, we can approach Hesiod's relating of the Succession Myth in *Theogony* as the development of strategic moves by the male god in securing sovereignty. Zeus "wins" by formulating the best strategy of mating with mortal women, learning from his father and grandfather, and applying it to his own reign. Beyond the weakening of his off-spring, Zeus and his brothers Poseidon and Hades are apt combatants for the Titans, and Zeus learns to approach challenges through cooperation and delegation. Instead of being an absolute monarch, Zeus is more like the head executive of a corporation.

Through the ludic lens, it comes as no surprise that the Titan Trickster Prometheus was able to "game the system" of Zeus's hegemony by concealing fire from the Olympian and secure it for distribution among mortals. He "democratized" the tyrannical political structure of Zeus. Prometheus's *move* reveals a weak link in Zeus's hegemony; which adds poesy to Prometheus's subsequent binding by the chains of Hephaistos.

Understanding myths through the language of Pavelian *moves* might also entail that we return to the treatment of time as it relates to myth; that is, time as it is presented through mythic discourse and through the changing conditions of moves, or ludic activity.

Time is not quite a settled concept in the theory of myth, nor in the complex structure of games and the playing thereof. By this I mean that myth conventionally communicates a primordial time (*in illo tempore*) in the strictest sense of its content as so defined by the categories of folk-narrative genres. But, when myth is understood as a

mode of thought, it is approached as, more or less, a living social charter (à la, Malinowski), through which primordial time enters actual time: this is what Eliade referred to as mythic and sacred time. However, it also speaks to the ideological imperative that the myth thrusts upon the individual in a contemporary society. Roland Barthes's theorizing of myth as it occupies the social mind of bourgeois society is not a primordial or remote past, but a filter of the everyday life of signs, translating a history in a nature. But, to begin, we can turn to Saussure's famous formulation of *synchrony* and *diachrony* as he formulated them for linguistic analysis. He remarks thus about the two projects of analysis:

Synchronic linguistics [is] concerned with logical and psychological connexions between coexisting items constituting a system, as perceived by the same collective consciousness.

Diachronic linguistics on the other hand [is] concerned with connexions between sequences of items not perceived by the same collective consciousness, which replace one another without themselves constituting a system. (*Course in General Linguistics* 98)

Synchrony deals with moments in time as frozen states, while diachrony deals with the passage of time either through retrospect and prospect trajectories, and a general evolution. Synchrony is ideal for comparative analysis of structures and universals, while diachrony describes historical developments of particular features. To assist in describing his concepts, Saussure used the analogy of a game of chess. Any pause in the gaming session would reveal synchronic a state of the board, while each move represented a diachronic transgression (87-89).

Already in the *Enneads* of Plotinus, we have a sophisticated understanding of myths and their relation to time and narration:

But myths, if they are really going to be myths, must separate in time the things the things of which they tell, and set apart from each other many realities which are together, but distinct in rank or powers, at points where rational discussions, also, make generations of things ungenerated, and themselves, too, separate things which are together; the myths, when they have taught us as well as they can, allow the man who understands them to put together again that which they have separated. (III.5.9; Armstrong 201)

One can almost hear the prefiguring of Saussure's semiology and Lévi-Strauss structural analysis of myth behind such a passage: "mythological time...is both reversible and non-reversible, synchronic and diachronic" (211). On the first lines regarding the laying out of ranks and powers through temporal accounts, Luc Brisson offers an insightful and summarily reading: "myth translates the synchrony of a system into the diachrony of a narrative" (*How Philosophers Saved Myths* 74). Brisson's succinct reading of Plotinus can be carried forward as a kind of axiom for the analysis of myth. Sallustius, a proponent of Neoplatonism, in his remarks on the nature of the Attis myth says "All this did not happen at any one time but always is so: the mind sees the whole process at once, words tell of part first, part second" (9) It is important to note that for Sallustius this does not apply to all myths, but certain myths that are tied to solemn rites and the seeking of union with the gods. The preoccupation with power, hierarchies, and ranks seem to echo in Bruce Lincoln's definition of myth "as ideology in narrative form" (*Theorizing Myth*

147). With Lincoln's later elaborations: "always this concern to rank (or to recalibrate the rank of) human groups is present, and this is the most consequential aspect of any mythic story" ("Early Moment" 243).

James J. Liszka has argued along similar lines through a semiotic approach to myth as transvaluative; that is to say, myth narrates and recalibrates rules, rank and values, imposing them on their respective cultures, stating thus: "At the core of the myth lies a hierarchical crisis which displays an ambivalence concerning the hierarchies represented. The asymmetries created either biologically or culturally are transvaluated in the context of the myth. The question of their legitimacy is played out again and again" (215-16). The ambivalence of the myth is the essential trait that does not simply treat myth *as ideology*, but instead places the ideological agenda onto the interpreter who turns myth's ambivalence into "univalence" (219). In this regard, I tend to agree with Liszka's assessment that myth *as such* sustains a neutrality from one variant (i.e., it keeps a certain ambivalence about it), while each mythologue/ideologue will inevitably point the myth towards a targeted reading and interpretation with the agenda of controlling the myth's reception. Doniger, in a revisioning gesture towards retaining the value of comparativism argues too for a similar approach referring to myth as "a neutral structure," and "a narrative that is transparent to a variety of constructions of meaning" ("Minimyths and Maximyths" 119). Thus, the neutrality of myth also makes it an ideal vessel to reflect on and depict deeply conflicting oppositions; that is it "allows paradoxical meanings to be held in a charged tension" (119).

Beyond the core tensions of myth itself are changes in and among its existents (the mythic characters) which Barber and Barber have also discerned a pattern of change

in a deity's status and rank as a distinct restructuring feature which they call the "Diachronic Power Principle" (250). As we have mentioned above, the Succession Myth in Hesiod's *Theogony* is a clear illustration of such a principle, namely as a change of the celestial hierarchy (Ouranos > Kronos > Zeus) narrated as if it had transpired through time. As we shall see these issues of "rank-recalibration," diachronic power principles, and the like, could apply to many of our case studies of the dynamics of video games, but perhaps the mythic qualities will be made most apparent in the case of god games in the later chapter 11.

Applying these insights to the function of myth, heroic models, and games we can quite easily conceive a theory of how to impact player-experience. The competitive and cooperative dynamics of games inform the discursive delivery of mythical speech, and vice versa. For, each game (or round) undertaken is a rank-changing event; so too with mythic accounts. Each player is situated in the *rôle* of hero-deity, and so is called upon to recalibrate the situation, or fail to do so. The genre of "role-playing" is a bit of a misnomer, since every game places the players in a role vying for an upgrade in rank. Even in the elementary game of Tic-Tac-Toe, each player dons the garb of either X or O, in a mythic struggle. As pure structures, games and myths are neutral, until signification and participation (how is it happening and who is playing) heightens the register through which the occasion may be recounted and made memorable. These are at least the certain social dynamics that can take over any game or any account circulating and accruing collective significance.

The Worldliness of Myth

In the previous chapter I focused extensively on the *otherworldliness* of myth, but the spatial dimensions that a myth-oriented video game provides gives myth a kind of “worldliness” to its construction and preservation. Unlike a world of fiction, the video game encroaches on, penetrates and immerses its consumer. Our virtual worlds and worlds assembled by the advancement of our media have made concerted efforts to bring fictional worlds into a realm that we might all the mythic. Thomas Pavel has offered one of the more thorough meditations on the differences and quasi-affinities between our fictional worlds and bygone mythologies:

As long as the users strongly adhere to their myths, mythological religion offers a considerable advantage over other world views: non-mythological religions or scientific models, since it organizes the world in a remarkably detailed and durable way. As we have seen, when the adhesion to mythological constructions begins to weaken, the withdrawal of community support removes from myths its absolute truth, and what has been the very paradigm of reliability changes into fiction. But the ontological structure displayed by myths does not vanish; in particular, the hierarchic division of salient universe and the differentiation of the notion of existence remain essential features of the myths turned into fiction. Fiction speaks of worlds that, without belonging to the real cosmos, use it as their foundation. Like the sacred universe, the world of fiction is separated from the real (or profane) world; the nature of the distance, however, has changed. While the

sacred worlds enjoy a plenary reality that does not allow for questioning and needs no explanation, fictions dwindle to a secondary reality. Even if fictions continue to provide explanatory models of chains of events, the users of fiction can claim the right to assess their pertinence and appropriateness. One does not measure the truth of a myth; rather the truth of the world is measured against the myth. (132)

Our virtually assembled worlds of mediated content continue to become more and more participatory, but also still avoid what has been imagined as “mythic time.” As these worlds continue to develop, the “older” mode of fiction in the novel and film will no doubt find its way.

Richard Bartle has offered the following three types that situate “the influence of fiction on virtual worlds”:

- *Direct*: The virtual world is an implementation of a familiar fictional world such as Robert Jordan’s *The Wheel of Time* or Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld*.
- *Partial*: The virtual world is inspired by a particular work of fiction or a genre that is derived from one. It might have the same ‘mutant academy’ idea of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby’s *X-Men*, but lets you create your own superheroes.
- *Indirect*: The virtual world implements or is inspired by some other work which itself is an adaptation of a book or comic series. A virtual world design team might decide to adopt the *Dungeons & Dragons* magic system without necessarily knowing that E. Gary

Gygax and Dave Arneson (authors of *Dungeons & Dragons*)
themselves adopted the idea from the novels of Jack Vance.

(*Designing Virtual Worlds* 63)

Along similar lines, the mythologist can discern the degrees through which a mythological tradition informs, shapes, or influences the fiction and lore of games and virtual worlds. In so doing, it may take more than mere subject matter to determine the consequences of the lore on the existents (the inhabitants) of the fictional world. Instead, the analyst would want to look to the way the lore is discussed or treated by, for instance, the NPCs (Non-Player Characters) or the main story arcs: these are particular clues that tend to manifest in the context of role-playing games (RPGs). In other words, the context through which the lore is presented matters just as much as the content and subject matter. Another essential determining factor is the *type* of role the player ends up being cast as. Typically and conventionally, one of the most effective ways to entice the player is to place them into the role and model of a heroic personage.

Chapter 6 Heroic Mythology and the Promiscuity of Genre

If there is to be an absolute line drawn between the ‘hero in myth’ and the ‘epic hero’ (a line that may very well be forced), it will usually separate that area where gods and their overarching ‘cosmic history’ operate, and that zone in which man ostensibly stands alone in his unique story, or history, responsible for it and for himself.

—Dean Miller (*Epic Hero* 31)

The Heroic Pattern

One of the most well adapted figures of epic and myth has been the semi-divine hero, that being of two worlds: the mortal and immortal. Heroes have, since antiquity, served as models of human aspirations. Strabo (*Geography* 1.2.8), who discerned fear-inducing and pleasure-inducing myths, already noted the powerful and pleasing qualities of heroic tales:

Most of those who live in the cities are incited to emulation by the myths that are pleasing, when they hear the poets narrative mythical (*mûthodē diēgoumenōn*) deeds of heroism (*andragathēmata*; lit. “manly deeds”), such as the Labours of Heracles or of Theseus, or hear of honours bestowed by gods, or, indeed, when they see paintings or primitive images or works of sculpture which suggest any similar happy issue of fortune in mythology (*mûthodē*). (Jones 69; parenthetical references mine)

As Strabo attests, not only have culture heroes and the heroes of cult served as exemplary models, but their deeds were and continue to be enshrined in verbal and non-verbal art, mythological accounts and graphical representations.

Vladimir Propp in his extensive and close analysis of *skazka* wondertales came to the following practical and measured definition the hero:

The hero of a fairy tale is that character who either directly suffers from the action of the villain in the complication (the one who senses some kind of lack), or who agrees to liquidate the misfortune or lack of another person. In the course of the action the hero is the person who is supplied with a magical agent (a magical helper), and who makes use of it or is served by it. (*Morphology* 50)

In our own time, popular discourse on the hero relates to the abstract idea of the “mythic journey” and the heroic potential of *each individual*. Jungian analyst and theorist Eric Neumann states it thus:

The hero is the archetypal forerunner of mankind in general. His fate is the pattern in accordance with which the masses of humanity must live, and always have lived, however haltingly and distantly; and however short of the ideal man they have fallen, the stages of the hero myth have become constituent elements in the personal development of every individual. (*Origins* 131)

This point was made accessible to the popular imagination through Joseph Campbell’s pervasive and influential concept of the monomyth as proposed in his 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell, with some ingenuity, synthesized van Gennep’s tripartite structure of the rite of passage with his own version of *separation – initiation – return*, acquired the namesake of “monomyth” from James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, arriving at his “nuclear unit of the monomyth”: “*A hero ventures forth from the world of*

common day into a region of supernatural wonders: 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” (Hero 30). Since its endorsement by cinematic titans like George Lucas—who discovered and applied it throughout his Star Wars films; especially 1977’s *Star Wars (Epside IV: A New Hope)*—Campbell’s *Hero* has generated, and continues to generate, its own genre of heroic mythology in modern media, the industry and popular culture. Tertiary sources of the monomyth and mythic story structure are readily consulted like Vogler’s *Writer’s Journey*, and has very recently been formulated even further for use amongs narrative designers and game developers in Even Skolnick’s *Video Game Storytelling* (27-37). Matthew Winkler has been one the latest individuals to offer an animated rendition of the monomyth for a mass-audience in his “What makes a hero?” for TED-Ed in 2012.

Prior to Campbell Lord Raglan traced a common hero-pattern in his 1922 *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*. Like Campbell, Raglan had already observed such a connection between the hero’s life-path and ritual ties: “If we consider that the hero cycle is, at its core, really the story of a culture hero’s transition through the rites of passage, then we can understand that “the story of the hero of tradition . . . is the story of his ritual progress” (Raglan 152; cf. *Archetypes and Motifs* 12-13).

In Campbell’s own terms, there was a difference in register and scale between the hero of fairy tale and the hero of myth:

Typically, the hero of the fairy tale achieves a domestic, microcosmic triumph, and the hero of myth a world-historical, macrocosmic triumph. Whereas the former—the youngest or despised child who

becomes the master of extraordinary powers—prevails over his personal oppressors, the latter brings back from his adventures the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole. (37-38)

Out of these two cycles, Campbell posited the monomyth wherein “the basic elements of the archetypal pattern” only carry limited variations and omissions from culture to culture (38, 245-47).

Reducing myths, folktales and legends to types and sequences has always been a rather difficult task in both theory and practice. Alan Dundes cautions “it is always dangerous to use ready-made patterns since there is the inevitable risk of forcing material into the prefabricated Procrustean pattern” (“From Etic to Emic Units” 91). I would modify the language slightly and situate it in relation to interactive media and say that the hero’s journey pattern, the monomyth, can easily be co-opted into *an algorithm of “mythic experience.”* But, like the talented oral epic singer performing within a tradition, as a tradition bearer, the mythic experience can still be managed and allowed to unfold within “variation within the same.” The creative myth-maker and myth-teller seem to persistently constellate around the generational tensions of traditionality and innovation; convention and invention; the time-honored and the novel.

When we consider this problematic from the perspective of interactive media, I would argue that it can be approached from the bottom up, rather than the top down, where discrete instances emerge not so much from ready-made patterns, but organic player-driven events, stories and personal narratives. It would not necessarily stand over and against the dictation of the story content and structure itself constructed by the narrative designer; such a reduction would negate the opportunity for co-creative

practices. And yet, there is a clear distinction between giving players the tools for story-building, and packaging the mythos for them.

Storytelling or Story-selling?

Media theorist and scholar Henry Jenkins has cogently summarized the situation in the entertainment industry in which it has become conventional to draw on the Campbellian reading of epic and ancient myth:

The idea that contemporary Hollywood draws on ancient myth structures has become common wisdom among the current generation of filmmakers. Joseph Campbell, the author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), praised *Star Wars* for embodying what he has described as the "monomyth," a conceptual structure abstracted from a cross-cultural analysis of the world's great religions. Today, many screenwriting guides speak about the "hero's journey," popularizing ideas from Campbell, and game designers have similarly been advised to sequence the tasks their protagonists must perform into a similar physical and spiritual ordeal. Audience familiarity with this basic plot structure allows script writers to skip over transitional or expository sequences, throwing us directly into the heart of the action. (120)

As expedient as these techniques are for world-building, myth becomes less than what it can be, and only tends to reach a pale likeness of its traditional, cultural and historical contexts. The use (and over-use) of the monomyth as the go-to for mythic treatments of

story and structure, seem to induce a “mythism.”⁴¹ “Mythism” is an ambivalent term in its own right. I use it here on the basis of a shared connotation with the folkloristic concept of *Folklorismus*, first attested by Hans Moser in two essays from 1962 and 1964, in the field of folkloristics, which is spurred by a dominant group leeching folklore from the folk-group and re-contextualizing it for aesthetic appeal (Bendix 176-187). Although the issue of authenticity, and the concept of folklorism has become *passé* and challenged in contemporary discourse, mythism is applied here to keep apparent the concept that myths in video games, i.e. in their “products-of-commerce” status, can only achieve enough myth-like material of meaning-making to heighten the experience for the consumer/user/player but not convert or shape their worldview. This is only to say that mythism is never cosmic in claim or consequence, but a social construct authorized by consensus. This does not mean that authentic experiences cannot occur, but that such experiences derive from the user’s personal and cultural history, rather than being delivered by the product itself and the myths it depicts.

It would be advantageous at this level of mythic applicability to have a set of terms for myth-like elements that would clearly connote and classify instantiations of myth-stratagems in mediated form: I suggest *mythode* and the *mythodic* for *strategic uses of myth as method for storytelling structuration or adornment*.⁴² Another possibility might be “mythoid,” which derives from the Platonic *eidos* (shape or form), and so it follows that a *mythoid* presents the idea of the myth without conveying its full meaning.

⁴¹Consider a closely related concept in Lévi-Strauss’s *The Naked Man* on the conditions need for “mythic status.” Marcel Detienne renders it thus: “The individual works are all potential myths, but it is their collective adoption that, in particular cases, actualizes their *mythism*” (*Creation of Mythology* 40; cf. Doty 38).

⁴² “Mythode” is a term used in various contexts within ancient Greek thinkers and writer, such as Plato (*Rep.* 522a), Thucydides (*Pel. War* 1.21), and Emperor Julian derived from μυθώδης (having the semblance of myth); the mythodic as in the meaning of the Greek μυθωδικός: ‘connected with mythology’ (Liddell and Scott 1151).

Rudolf Kurt uses the German term *kunstmythen* to designate artful or artificial myths, which raises interesting problems regarding authenticity and the impact of extensive creative elaborations (*Gnosis* 54). Further still there is “mythoplastic” as derived from the Greek μῦθοπλαστικός, meaning “fabulous and/or fictitious” (Liddell and Scott 1151). Such critical terminology would assist in distinguishing between the cosmic from the cosmetic uses of myth.

Another challenge is presented in heroic story-structures, namely, that the mythical speech attached to its effectiveness spreads as a self-fulfilling propagation. This is not only applicable to the reverence of a manual for story-treatments, but in the individuals who attach to movements. Barber and Barber in their *Principles of Myth*, describe a process of compression/conflation that occurs gradually over time called the “Principle of Attraction”: “Once the stories around something (e.g., a hero) achieve sufficient mass, that thing (or whatever) attracts yet other stories to him/her/itself, via any ‘significant’ point of resemblance. Points of attraction include the same type of event, same place, and same name or clan” (248-49). Barber and Barber contend that the representation and the referent begin to blur as the fusion they call “Metaphoric Reality Principle” (97-112, 248). In relation to the hero’s journey, these cognitive principles seem to have attracted much attention to the monomyth structure itself as a soteriology, translating it into its own mythos blurring and conflating the referents (in this case the wide body of literature Campbell drew from) and have used the synthetic structure as a myth-story solution. As re-use and circulation continues, this conflation and compression may gradually diminish the power of the hero, since the player will know and anticipate the pattern. In terms of the effect on video games, the issue is far from resolved. The

trajectory of the hero archetype remains one of the easier paths for securing an individualized “mythic experience,” but poses some problems for a critical approach to myth-analysis.

The issue is compounded by not only heroic patterning, but of archetypes. As Jenkins points out, a similar attitude of self-conscious usage prevails in applying “archetypes” when creating engaging and compelling characters:

Similarly, if protagonists and antagonists are broad archetypes rather than individualistic, novelistic, and rounded characters, they are immediately recognizable. [...] This reliance on stock characters is especially important in the case of games where players frequently skip through the instruction books and past early cut scenes, allowing little time for exposition before grabbing the controller and trying to navigate the world. (120-21)

“Archetype” here remains rather ambiguous, but Jenkins seems to employ the term as a consciously or socially constructed type; whether this means the Jungian archetype (or more precisely), or something more akin to Frye or Eliade’s concepts of the term seems to be more likely. If a Jungian reading were gleaned from Jenkins’s statement, it would seem to align more with Jung’s latent conception of the “archetypal image.” In a way, the collective agreement implied in the passages suggests that the archetypes reside in a collective conscious, rather than a collective un-conscious. Ease of access and orientation make the ready-made plots (*mythoi*) and characters (archetypes) particularly enticing for designers and storytellers wishing to reach out to a wide audience—afterall, the archetype is an assumed aggregate based on the model of a supposed “psychic unity,” and a

“collective unconscious.” However, the heavy-handed use of such models and theories of character- and world-building, especially in the ecology of interactive media, risks reducing user-experiences into predictive patterns devoid of *meaning*—the very task they seek to induce. The depth and implications of the archetype are flattened and muted. One is left to wonder if Jung would have been content with the deployment and treatment of archetypes in such contexts:

[S]ince so many people have chosen to treat archetypes as if they were part of a mechanical system that can be learned by rote, it is essential to insist that they are not mere names, or even philosophical concepts. They are pieces of life itself—images that are integrally connected to the living individual by the bridge of the emotions. That is why it is impossible to give an arbitrary (or universal) interpretation of any archetype. It must be explained in the manner indicated by the whole life-situation of the particular individual to whom it relates. (*Man and His Symbols* 96)

Jung’s point is not wholly lost in the context of storytelling, but it makes certain demands on the developer’s part to create scenarios within, say, the fictional world of the video game, that can render or simulate the complexity of an archetypal experience. The video game *Catherine*, the focus of a later chapter, is one such example of a conscious deployment of Jungian theory on the part of the developer to simulate the context and “life-situation” that causes an archetypal encounter.

It follows that the “archetype” as a concept has had its own share of critics outside of their uses in the entertainment industry. Mythologist Marina Warner has succinctly voiced some of the potentially harmful tendencies:

When history falls away from a subject, we are left with Otherness, and all its power to compact enmity, recharge it and recirculate it. An archetype is a hollow thing, but a dangerous one, a figure or image which through usage has been uncoupled from the circumstances which brought it into being, and goes on spreading false consciousness. An analogy—a harmless one—occurs in metaphors of sunrise and sunset, familiar metaphors which fail to represent the movement of the sun or the relation of the planet to it. (*From the Beast to the Blonde* 239)

The “false consciousness” spread by the archetype (or “archetypal image”) and its use seem all too appealing to an industry wanting to reach the mass appeal through harvesting collective representations and imaginaries. I would add to Warner’s remarks that the history (i.e. the diachronic) drops away from myth, hiding the conditions and contexts that gave rise to it in favor of an always accessible, spontaneous, synchronous universality. This is a dangerous assumption when the material originates in the myth-accounts of other peoples’ emplotted values and religious beliefs. At its worst, the appropriating act is done without mention of the original context and the myths and archetypes *work because they work*, i.e. through a blind tautological acceptance. Anthropologists Melville and Frances Herskovits have also voiced bold stances in opposition to Jung:

The *mystique* of the archetype falls into that large body of theoretical formulations that explain universals in human behavior without the benefit of empirical proof; formulations that...must be taken on faith or not at all. The “proofs” offered are those which fall within the framework of the theory; the exceptions, the complexities, the inexplicable elements are disregarded. The vitality of all such theories is due in part to the fact that they represent attempts to explain fundamental problems in human behavior and to account for recurrent themes in the creative efforts of man. But in part, also, they tend to be well received because they give simple answers to questions that remain to challenge those willing to face the complexities of objective enquiry. (*Dahomean Narrative* 103)

This strict tendency towards the *assumed* efficacy of the archetype and mythic structure renders what literary theorist Thomas Pavel has referred to as *mythocentrism* (*Fictional Worlds* 4-6). As for the recurrent and typical beings that inhabit these environments, we might posit that they are the byproducts of *archetypalism*; pseudo-myths and stereotypes. It seems almost to fulfill a tactical move against myth itself: “Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth?” (Barthes, *Mythologies* 246-47). In no small part, myths applied and used within the ludic context of video game can be robbed of their traditional meaning. Video games “mythify” myth through *interpretatio ludi*.

Personal typology has ludic as much as psychic value to the game designer seeking to create appealing molds for players to step into. Richard Bartle strove to do just that in his influential formulation of “player types” in the context of early multi-user dungeons (MUDs), the antecedents of the contemporary massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs). Bartle proposed four main types of players: killers, explorers, achievers and socializers. The types would be all but overly simplistic if not for Bartle’s ingenious mapping of the types along a four-way axis of two poles: Player-World, and Action-Interaction. Through these poles a type could be situated not just through personal identity, but in orientation to a world and fellow players; i.e. environment and characters. For example, a killer tends towards Player/Action alignment, while an explorer tends towards World/Interaction; an achiever is World/Action; and, the socializer is Player/Interaction. Bartle goes another step further and formulates sixteen combinations of ways each player-type engages with the types. Bartle’s player-typology has striking parallels with Jung’s own major contribution of types in his 1921 *Psychological Types*, based on the core four traits of Introvert-Extrovert, Feeling-Thinking. Such a typology has entered into the colloquial through the widely recognized Myers-Briggs personality types of Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother Katherine Briggs. This particular facet of Jung’s (indirect) contribution to game development and player psychology is fascinating and deserves further attention. Recourse to the problem of “myth” in this context would perhaps be superfluous.

Prior to our current state of the “given” strength of the monomyth’s efficaciousness in popular media, there was already a significant body of criticism in the reception of depth psychological, textualist and Campbellian interpretations of myth.

Richard Dorson, a founding figure in the study of folklore in the United States, drew attention to the problems raised by modern theories of myth in general, but with depth psychology in particular:

Toward the new symbolism of the psychoanalytical schools, the folklorist of today takes a position similar to that held by Lang and his fellows of yesterday. *The language of the unconscious is as conjectural and inconclusive as Sanscrit, when applied to myths and tales.* The tortured interpretations differ widely from each other; which is right? The psychoanalysts, like the philologists, come to the materials of folklore from the outside, anxious to exploit them for their own a priori assumptions. The folklorist begins with the raw data of his field and sees where they lead him. *He can admire the symmetrical structure reared by Joseph Campbell from many disparate materials, but the folk literatures that occupy him cannot all be prettily channeled into the universal monomyth.* (“Theories of Myth and the Folklorist” 83; italics mine)

As Dorson and other scholars from folklorists to classicists have suggested, the modest approach to myth *as a traditional tale* is the primary objective of the scholar; theorizing about myth (or a myth) should remain a cautious secondary procedure. The danger of the monomyth structure is its tendency towards its self-fulfillment that, furthermore, cannot be demonstrated by the *prima materia* from which it was sewn, but rather that structure through which sows. One of the more outspoken critics was folklorist Alan Dundes who argues thus:

Campbell's pattern is a synthetic, artificial composite which he fails to apply in toto to any one single hero. Campbell's hero pattern, unlike the ones formulated von Hahn, Rank, and Raglan, is not empirically verifiable, e.g., by means of inductively extrapolating incidents from any one given hero's biography ("The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus" 187).

Like Dorson, Dundes' main critique of the monomyth is its "hybridity," its artificiality. It is this very hybridized artificial (re)structuring that is shaping our "mythic" and "heroic" stories of popular culture and media.⁴³ Dundes goes so far as to question the major theorists of the hero pattern (Raglan, Rank and Campbell) who tend to designate the hero story as "myth" when it would be more suitably placed within the folkloristic category of "legend," as so defined by William Bascom's standard 1965 essay, "Forms of Folklore." This is because in hero tales topics as historicity come into question, while myth is fairly standardized as "a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form" (180). While Propp's morphological method is demonstrably verifiable and applied thoroughly to the Russian *skazka* ("wondertale")—it so happens that a method grew out of it that proved advantageous to bodies of folk literature beyond the *skazka*.⁴⁴ Campbell's monomyth, on the other hand, was not applied to a single heroic life (cf. Raglan's proposed 22 traits of a hero's career manifested in a survey of heroic tales).

⁴³ See Dundes' "Folkloristics in the Twenty-First Century (AFS Invited Presidential Plenary Address, 2004)," for one of his most staunch critiques of Campbell's work and its impact on the popular reception and perception of folklore and myth in commerce (342-401).

⁴⁴ It should be mentioned that Propp intimated the possibility of the wondertales' compositional origins in myth: "It might also be pointed out that a similar construction is displayed by a number of very archaic myths, some of which present this structure in an amazingly pure form. Evidently this is the realm back to which the tale may be traced. On the other hand, the very same structure is exhibited, for example, by certain novels of chivalry. This is very likely a realm which itself may be traced back to the tale. A detailed comparative study is a task for the future" (*Morphology* 100).

Campbell explicitly states the universalist intentions of his “composite hero”: “The following pages will present in the form of one composite adventure the tales of a number of the world’s symbolic carriers of the destiny of Everyman” (*Hero* 36). Stories (and games) shaped and influenced by the monomyth will naturally continue to perpetuate the composite hero of “myth,” ignorant of its unverified universality, and, thus, self-fulfill its claims in the way explained by Barthes. In this way the Everyman is given Eternal justification. For Campbell, the life and poetry of a myth depends on its link to the eternal and the avoidance of being slain by biographical, historical or scientific interpretations (*Hero* 249).

Returning to Jenkins’s own views, in bringing together the old (myth and epic) with the new (film and other new media), he hesitates to ennoble the contemporary culture by attributing to its products the depth or significance of classical myths:

When I suggest parallels between *The Odyssey* and *The Matrix*, I anticipate a certain degree of skepticism. I do not claim that these modern works have the same depth of incrustated meanings. These new “mythologies,” if we can call them that, are emerging in the context of an increasingly fragmented and multicultural society. While *The Matrix* films have been the subject of several books linking them to core philosophical debates, and while many fans see these films as enacting religious myths, articulating spirituality is not their primary function, the perspective they take is not likely to be read literally by their audience, and their expressed beliefs are not necessarily central to our everyday lives. (121)

What seems to be needed is a return to the texts and traditions along with a fresh reading and application of the myths. Recent scholarly efforts on the hero have come out like Dean Miller's *Epic Hero* (2000) that attempt just that. Miller surveys the grand theorists of 20th century mythography and puts them into perspective while critiquing, retaining and refining the comparative method and figure of the hero. For instance, he distinguishes between the hero of myth (a pawn of the gods and cosmic history) and the epic hero (the extraordinary individual of human history) (*Epic Hero* 31). However, he does not hold back his critiques of his fore-runners:

Campbell's appeal to a wide (and perhaps unselective) audience, along with the enthusiasm shown him by certain propagandists for a "popular" narcissistic psychology, rasps the nerve ends of any number of scholarly specialists, from historians of religion through students more adept in the various specific mythologies Campbell plundered in his career. (68)

In contrast, the comparative method used by Miller confines its textual sampling—"selection"—to balance brevity with depth.⁴⁵ Rather than relying on a synchronous structure and pattern (e.g. monomyth) for hermeneutics, Miller keeps within the Indo-European tradition (mainly European, with some excursions into Indo-Iranian) to develop frameworks that can maintain attention to context and close comparison; that is, it builds towards the theory while testing the framework against the originating sources and data

⁴⁵ For a general overview of his selection, Miller lays out a table of "Heroic Narratives," designated by their specific genres: Epic, saga, folktale and romance (*Epic Hero* 49-52). In his final remarks on this section, Miller posits a perspective on the genre of myth: "Where myth and the mythic fit into this creative scheme is worth a moment's reflection. Probably myth feeds all, providing the sustenance for the first efforts of epic, saga, and folktale heroism (and, of course, some large part of Greek tragedy), and remaining as a potential nutrient, a sort of universal possibility, at any point and in any genre" (52).

of a single hero's career and culture. His scaling of sources harkens back to the pioneering work of Austrian scholar Johann Georg von Hahn, who first presented the heroic pattern and formula of "exposure and return" as markedly "Aryan" (von Han; see Segal, Introduction vii; Dundes, "Folkloristics in Twenty-First Century" 394). The result is a demonstrative shift away from "armatures" and structures, and towards discrete "constellations" and "grids" of each hero within the respective epic, romance, or song. Miller's study does not reach for demonstrating universality of the hero; instead he demonstrates how very traditionally Indo-European the heroic tale, heroism and the hero of epic is (345).

Poet and scholar, Frederick Turner in *Epic: Form, Content, and History* has offered a similar approach by focusing on the genre of epic and its use amongst a wide range of cultures beyond the Indo-European hero. In his own approach, Turner takes time to acknowledge the importance and significance of Campbell's *Hero* and his work of myth (9-12), while arguing for a more controlled and demonstrative method moving forward:

The focus of [*Epic: Form, Content, and History*] is both narrower and wider than that of Campbell's [*Hero with a Thousand Faces*]. It is narrower in that it concentrates on epic as such, rather than on mythic elements in tales, narrative fragments, exegeses of ritual cycles, and stories of all kinds. Epic is what very conscious and thoughtful people have made of large bodies of myth from different sources once they have the equivalent of a city of their own to do it in, records in the past, and ways of recording their syntheses for the future. (12)

It would be a mistake to negate the efficacy of the monomyth as structure and structuration—it has already accrued and garnered an eponymous appeal of its own with a mass-audience of supporters, storytellers, creators, and artists. Like the Oedipus legend, it has gained a certain mythic cultural currency, and so too the non-mythic material assembled by Campbell has been transposed from their attested genres of folktale, legend, epic, and romance to myth. Outside of storytelling in the entertainment industry, the mythologem of the hero's journey has given vitalizing psychological and spiritual support to individuals in applied personal myth. That such a school of thought shapes a person's self-image (as a hero or heroine) and image of the world (as a mythic landscape) suggests that for a select international group in the West, the monomyth is their myth. It offers a powerful structure—a paradigmatic technique of categorizing experience—to quell the ailments of those who find a contemporary life to be a wasteland. In this way it would be, instead, advantageous to mark off media that explore myth through a non-Campbellian lens, whilst acknowledging pro-Campbellian methods for the study and application of heroic models. The self-conscious use of Campbell's monomyth (i.e. its poesis) will continue to produce "mythic" content and seek to induce "mythic experiences," but they are a category onto themselves. The monomyth was a myth-maker's—or, more precisely, a lover of myths, i.e. "philomythist's"—assemblage that crossed boundaries of established folk, religious and literary genres of European folklore studies as well as religious narratives of non-Europeans in order to construct a heroic cycle he saw that was mimetic of cosmogonic (mythological) cycles (*Hero* 265-69, 289; cf. Guyker).

A prime example of mythic storytelling used explicitly in video games is the *Elder Scrolls* series, which not only names its ready-made characters “archetypes,” but features in-game books of lore like “The Monomyth” manuscript in homage to Campbell’s work, and features the cosmogonic myths from various in-game cultures. In wikia entries dedicated to the *Elder Scrolls* one can easily find a break-down of the “monomyth structure” as it is graphed into the main heroic plotline of installments in the series. This aspect of *Elder Scrolls* lore remains only a fragment in the greater world of Tamriel, and does in no way impede on other elements of myth, mythopoeisis and mythic thought. These aspects bear mentioning in relation to our current discussion, but will be returned to in a later chapter.

The above critique (and compilation of critics) of Campbell may seem rather asymmetrical, but such measures are meant to destabilize the centrality of the monomyth and its claims to universality in mythic discourse, mythic engagement and creative storytelling; it simply is not the only myth/game in town. In this way, this is not a critique of Campbell per se, but in the reception of his monomyth in popular media. The pervasiveness of its usage has made it fall prey to its own mythical speech and over-signification. This is not to say that the monomyth cannot persist and unfold of its own accord only that it does so alongside other myth-types as a separate type or unique register of personalizing heroic story-telling and story. Campbellian approaches and techniques belong to a certain discourse and practice, and so are both works *of* and *on* myth (Blumenberg). For all of the critics of Campbell’s theory, I am in basic agreement with Frederick Turner: “Campbell’s work (like all coherent and useful works of scholarship) is built upon a paradigm that both constrains and empowers its meanings.

That paradigm is basically psychological, and the psychology is basically Jungian, taking on something like that valuable but risky assumption, the human collective unconscious” (11).

What seems to be occurring in our present reliance on—and overly signified use of—the monomyth and the (mainly Jungian view of) archetypal echoes an aesthetic and cultural shift reminiscent of a decay that occurred in Athenian Greek tragedy. Early playwrights Aeschylus and Sophocles kept the patron deity Dionysus (the plays were performed in honor of the deity at the Dionysia) well hidden and implicitly coached in the form and experience of the play, while the latter tragedian Euripides cast the deity as a performer in the waning years of tragedy; Aristophanes, a contemporary of Euripides, was already capitalizing on the situation with his comedies. Such hyper-awareness of the art form, of momentary deities, of ritual and of structure does little to advance the creative power of myth; instead, these are signs of dissolution from *form* to *content*, and “business as usual” models of mythifying, of mythism. The patron deity to discern—at least in the Western tradition— and see through popular culture, media, commerce, the creative industry, and game culture is not Dionysus but Hermes. James Hillman, Neo-Jungian thinker and founder of archetypal psychology, made concerted efforts to advance an archetypal perspective on this very issue:

A great question haunts me: If my mythical diagnosis is correct and Hermes is the god in the disease, then could Hermes be playing a computer/video game with the whole world? Is the future necessarily electronic, the New Age an information age of media, e-mails, spin, infotainment, virtual reality, cyberspace? Or could we be caught in a

Hermes game...I do not mean the games the computer plays, but is
Hermes, by means of the silicone chip, playing games with our human
civilization? (*Mythic Figures* 266)

Hermes-like tricksters may be at work in the wires of our networked worlds; but, with the hermetic distortion of bringing seemingly separate worlds together, there still remains the issue of time.

Concluding Remarks

The heroic pattern, whether so-called “universal” or mythic in essence, leads some discourses on myth in popular culture and media. It is a powerful tool for instrumentalizing, personalizing and orienting the mythical worlds of video games for each player. It should not be overlooked that the video game is, in any final analysis, a commodity and so subject to the logic of markets. Storytelling is implicitly linked with story-selling. This also entails that the selection of myths in a video game are used to appeal to certain audiences. In the Platonic sense, any developer that takes on a myth or creates one from the poetics of their medium will traverse a spectrum of myth-telling and mythmaking.

Though some theorists would have it that video games usher in a post-metaphoric and post-mythic era of mediation (Ryan, “Beyond Myth and Metaphor”), I would tend to argue that metaphor is being challenged, while myth and mythmaking are still very much present in the structuration of video game worlds. This is a result of the direct user-ship and interactivity that video games advance. The stream of events in a video game, generally speaking, unfolds in sequences of direct relations and, thus, contiguity, rather than through similarity. It is, in this regard, the replacement of metaphor with metonymy

that instigates the modification to myth and the consumption of narrative in the video game environment (See Jakobson). The other factor is the shift from voyeur to voyager, spectator to participant, that also continues to modify the reception and configuration of content for and by the user; I refer to this as a shift from the metaphoric to “methexic.”

Chapter 7: Homo Cyber: How We Steer Story, and How Story Steers Us

The [Science Fiction] imagination is appropriately called the Promethean imagination. It is the rebel consciousness destroying our present understanding of reality, stealing the fire of awareness from the gods, and uniting Mythos and Logos in a momentary explosion of new understanding.

—Patricia A. Warrick (*The Cybernetic Imagination* 87)

A shift away from the monotonous use of pre-determined paths is a focus on creative solutions, the ergodic possibility of video games, and the empowerment of the player to steer the world's unfolding lore. These are not new tactics in video game design, but rather elements where myth can still offer a perspective that does not rely on the monomyth. It is, however, tempting to interpret the monomyth cycle as a cybernetic feedback loop; the combined synthesis of speech and deed (*mûthos* and *ergos*) on a determined path (*hodos*) translate relatively smoothly into the Campbellian *road of trials* along the hero's journey. The concept of ergodics and the methexic means, however, that ascendancy to heroic status is not easily *given* but *earned* through effort. Unlike the protagonists of oral tales, the novel or film the video game protagonist (the player) *can* fail. Although this might entail a singular hero, the path may involve two heroes who must cooperate to succeed, like the Hero Twins of the southwestern regions of North America and of Mesoamerica. Building on Aarseth's concept of the *ergodic* (a text that can be traversed and worked through), I have proposed *synergodic*—synergistic pathways—for gameplay that emphasizes co-heroic (co-operative) mechanics to achieve major quests (Guyker 342). This cybernetic perspective is a basic stance where we can develop the shared bond between two paradigmatic human behaviors at work in gaming culture (and perhaps beyond): Homo Ludens (Player) and Homo Faber (Designer). It is at this level that a high degree of human-to-human communication is controlled and steered.

The cybernetic perspective is not determinism, but an exercise in asking the question of who's in control; who's steering? Is the game controlled by the player or the designer? Does the myth-teller control the myth-consumer or does the myth-consumer implicitly steer the selectivity of the myth-teller?

Cybernetics and the Governing of Myth

With that said, we must first acknowledge the work of mathematician and philosopher Norbert Wiener who conceived and developed the field of cybernetics (from the Greek, *kubernētēs* 'steersman') in the 1940's and 50's. Defining cybernetics as both "the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal" (*Cybernetics* 11) and later simply as "the theory of messages" (*Human Use* 15), it has become a recurrent topic of interest in my interviews with players that the feeling of *control* over a game's story makes the video game medium unique. It is also significant and directly pertinent here that Wiener had trans-disciplinary concerns even as a renowned mathematician by training. He explored Erich von Neumann's game theory—the study and analysis of strategic decision making—with his own pioneering formulation of cybernetics, while even branching out into the religious implications of cybernetics in his 1963 book *God and Golem, Inc.* (35).

In the previous chapter I introduced a key stance of human proclivity, *Homo Narrans* or *Homo Fabulans*: the human being as storyteller, fabulator and inhabitant of mental worlds (Niles, *Homo Narrans*). Narrative within a game world presents a particular challenge from both the perspective of design, scholarship and gameplay. Tensions can arise between the shaping of an intentioned story by the development team, and the drive to let players shape their own story—in a sense, to fashion living lore. We

may ask, ‘who really *owns* the story?’ Who steers its unfolding?’ and, ‘who is the storyteller?’ To be sure, the answers ultimately vary from game to game, genre to genre. In my case studies, I explore these questions and the spectrum of conditions that determine how the story or stories manifest and impact the gaming experience. Indeed, it has been useful to think of the relationship between games and stories as either intricately interwoven or differentiated antagonists. It would be overly idealistic to assert that each product fulfills a perfect harmony each time, but it nonetheless is the aim and mark of good game design for some harmony to exist between the two.

For the magic circle to generate its own properties, it is necessary that it is endowed with all of its complexity. Narrative can be easily used to guide a player along a particular path. Furthermore, it can be the most explicit way to recount a myth. But with the multiplicity of genres and types of gaming situations, the theory of *emergent* properties must be included in this discussion, for not all manifestations of myth are necessarily tied to linearity. Complexity theory, a multi-disciplinary field in its own right, suggests an approach to many aspects from crowd-organization, social bodies, natural phenomena that attempts to challenge the paradigm of linearity and reductionism championed in the sciences of the 18th century through the 20th century; vestiges of it can still be felt today. It can be viewed as, say, the shift from mechanistic thinking to systemic, or machine to system; both, however, convey interconnectedness. Computation and algorithms are two viable ways in mathematics for understanding complexity. Both may also serve as ways of grappling with a game world, wherein initial conditions are manipulated for an advantageous outcome. In mythical language, it is a game of order versus chaos. Further, is not gaming itself a dialogue between player and system? More

still, is gaming not itself an activity which cultivates adaptive skills to systemic circumstances? Some games present this model more clearly than others (e.g. *Portal*), where the player must develop a literacy for algorithms in order to succeed. In other scenarios, players must learn the hidden systems to unlock the next key door, such as in the popular adventure puzzle game *Myst*.

The dialogical exchange between the environment and the player, especially in non-persistent worlds, can perhaps best be understood and approached through the language of cybernetics and the closely related field of game theory. Derived from the Greek *kubernētēs*, ‘to pilot or steer,’ the term was later transliterated into Latin as *guberno*, *gubernatus*, where in turn it ultimately became the root of our English *to govern* and *government*. Behind the term lies the root metaphor of seafaring, navigation and nautical expertise: mastery of the ship.

Enter Cyberspace

It is not surprising then that we have come to express our activities across information, communication, and computer technologies and networks as existing within *cyberspace*, coined by the forerunner of the literary genre, cyberpunk, William Gibson in his 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*. Ripples of the prefix *cyber-* and its metaphoric undertones are readily heard in our every-day speech (mainly discourse around the rise of the Internet in the 1990s) like Web surfing, Netscape Navigator, navigating the Sea of Information to our still prevalent and growing *cyberculture* in general (the Monday following Thanksgiving in the U.S. is now traditionally called Cyber-Monday in reference to special sales offered through online vendors). Espen Aarseth, as we have seen, has utilized the prefix to forward his theory of the *cybertext*.

In his introductory essay, "Fiction as Information" for the anthology *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative*, George Slusser keenly observed that with the advent of the electronic den and users as "extensions of experience" of media become pilots navigating cyberspace: "Video games become performative theater in which we are both audience and actors, indeed we must learn to move effortlessly between these stances if we are to function at all" (1). Further, in a recent interview in the *Paris Review* William Gibson revealed when seeking out an "arena for [his] science fiction" his main source of inspiration was watching young kids transfixed by the old first generation ply-wood video games, and in ruminating over the illusory space generated by the graphical interface, found his arena and his neologism, "cyberspace" (Gibson). In a 2010 interview with Steve Paikin, Gibson emphasized the physicality of the relationship between the kids and the arcade video game, and he imagined the yearning of the youth for wanting to be on the other side of the screen ("William Gibson: The New Cyber/Reality"). He envisioned all arcade video games tapping into a single shared universe. The profound implications of his epiphany brought into focus an image of an interactive participatory world enjoyed by his future readers of fiction and played by users of computer and video games. Outer space (an Other World) was transmuted from above and beyond, to within the inner cosmos of computers; a notional space with players and users at the helm of controllers, keyboards, and joysticks.

The connection between arcade games and cyberspace is not just expressed by Gibson as a metadiscourse on the term, but is also quite clearly revealed and voiced by the Hosaka computer in an oft-quoted passage from Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*:

The Matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games [...] in early graphics programs and military experimentation with cranial jacks. [...] Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts...A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding... (51)

In a sense, Gibson supplied an *ekphrasis*, i.e. an image of the world—a verbal representation of the visual/virtual—of the then non-existent realm of a mass-distributed networked society. This gap would come to fruition with the advent of MUDs (Multi-User Domains/Dimensions/Dungeons): “text-based virtual realities, which means your environment is described in words” (Benedikt and Ciskowski 10).

Though in many ways a brief literary movement in the 1980’s to early 1990’s, cyberpunk enjoyed much success as, and developed into, a coherent subculture, counter-culture and sub-genre to Science Fiction with Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992) serving as the threshold text ushering in “post-cyberpunk,” introducing his own take on a cyberspace *ekphrasis* with the Metaverse. In so doing, *Snow Crash* maintains and amplifies the vestiges of cyberpunk’s occupation with the congruencies of technology, information, lore, myth and the occult, having Hiro Protagonist, the main character, converse with the library database on Ancient Mesopotamian mythology, the Biblical myth of the Tower of Babel, and the priestly classes formative roles in narrating the basis for structuring the world *as information* and *through Ur-language*. That is, Stephenson

brings together the idea of the verisimilitude between the language-power of ancient Sumer's priesthood and modern computer programmers and hackers; it does so with ambivalence towards the typical figure of the hero, reflected in the main character's name: Hiro Protagonist.

As his name suggests, Hiro is a deconstruction of the narratological category of hero-protagonist. Like the "console cowboys" and hacker-protagonists of Gibson's cyberpunk fiction, Hiro fulfills the *actual* function of an antihero. In cyberpunk works, the traditional or conventional models of the hero are challenged in order to emphasize the turn away from the authoritative demands of a megacorporation, a totalitarian government, or any hegemonic institution or organization that seeks to govern and control space, earthly space, psychical space, mindspace and cyberspace. In this way, the prefix *cyber-* becomes the semiotic clue and glue that focuses the core set of societal tensions, values and philosophical tenets that generally constellate around the cyberpunk genre whether in novel, film, or video game, while the suffix *-punk* signifies the proclivities and attitude of the (anti)hero-protagonist-turned-antagonist of authority.

The genre was readily adapted into other forms of media like video games, film, music and the visual arts. It is perhaps most known in popular culture through films like the Wickowski's *The Matrix* (1997), and lesser known through *Johnny Mnemonic*, a 1995 adaptation of William Gibson's short story of the same name. A trickster like Prometheus the Philanthropist could be retrospectively interpreted as a hacker who exploited the hegemony Zeus sought to establish over mortals.

Cyberpunk has gone well beyond Western cultures and has a major presence in the popular culture of film, manga, animé, and video games of Japan. The *Megami Tensei*

(Atlas 1987-present) world, and Katsuhiro Otomo's highly influential 1988 anim  film and six-volume manga (1982-1990), *AKIRA*.⁴⁶ The anime film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) also stands apart as a highly acclaimed achievement in the strength of anim  storytelling, cyberpunk (or post-cyberpunk) discourse, aesthetics and philosophical exegesis on the boundaries between life and the artificial. *Serial Experiments Lain* is also a profound examination and presentation of a character succumbing to dissociative symptoms from information shock, where the lines between the actual and the virtual identity blur and ego-conscious merges with collective mind.

A common mythic motif in works of cyberpunk and her next of kin is the discovery of spirits and deities of various mythological traditions in the wires and worlds of cyberspace: *deus ex machina*. Gibson's characters throughout his Sprawl Trilogy (*Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) discovered a cyberspace matrix rife with *loa* of Haitian voudun depicted as fragmented AI's. Legba "master of roads and pathways, the loa of communication" reaches out to the protagonist Bobby Newmark in *Count Zero* (115). In the (post-)cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, the author intimates a syncretism between the hacker-programmer of the Metaverse—Stephenson's variation on cyberspace—and Enki of Ancient Sumerian Mythology and the priests who speak through the Ur-language of *me*, while also drawing on the Hindu concept of the *avatar* (i.e. the *avatara*, lit. "descent" of Vishnu) as the digital body of the human in the Metaverse.⁴⁷ The avatar is now a common-place term for the graphical and

⁴⁶ For a recent study of the Japanese branch of cyberpunk and its reception into visual and popular culture, see Steven T. Brown's *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*.

⁴⁷ The term "avatar" has had a now long-standing life in the imagining and formation of virtual world inhabitants. For more on the traditional and sacred roots of *avatara* lore and their connections to Vishnu, see Dimmitt and van Buitenen (*Classical Hindu Mythology* 67-71) and Madeleine Biardeau's article "Avatars" (75-78).

digital representation of users and players of virtual worlds first used by Richard Garriot in the ludic context of his 1985 game *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*. As Kimberly Lau and other researchers of virtual worlds have found, a person's avatar is a kind of virtual self, a liminal nexus and "just as gaming is always both play and work, and time is always both compressed and concrete, avatars are always both virtual and real" (381).

The motif of the deity in/of cyberspace is also present in Japanese cyberpunk. As was briefly mentioned earlier, the "demon summoning program" featured in the *Megami Tensei* universe does not simply conjure demons (as the name seems to imply), but rather functions as a gateway for a plethora of deities, spirits and demonic entities from around the world. Lain, the female protagonist of the 1998 Japanese anime *Serial Experiments Lain*, discovers her own identity as the True Goddess (Japanese, *shin megami* 真.女神) through her encounter and confrontation with Eiri an "acting stand-in deity" (Japanese, *dai-ri no kami sama* 代理の神様) in the Wired—the cyberspatial variation of the *Lain* mythos—who argues for the superiority of disembodiment but remains deeply entrenched in information technology (*Serial Experiments Lain* "Layer 12: Landscape") (Brown). There was not, nor does there appear to be, a single cyberspace across cyberpunk, no single hermeneusis, and no central deity governing and steering its course. Even if there were, the descending anti-hero of cyberpunk often rails against such tyrannical, corporate or totalitarian forces in their Promethean ambitions and Hermesian devices.

Furthermore, the cyberspace of literary imaginings of the 1980s and 1990s, though seemingly immanent in our contemporary era of the Internet and virtual worlds, live on more as vestiges of future-memories than imaginaries made manifest. The aspirations—spiritual and utopian—imagined, built up and constructed during the

cyberspace decade of the 90s, has become a much more mundane aspect of everyday life; a *Second Life* (Wertheim; Davis; Chu). The cyberspace of our imagined futures seems to be caught in a liminal state between nascence and nuance; communitas and complexity: “Like all great mythic images, cyberspace suggested more than it explained, and while it concealed ironies its many enthusiasts would miss, it also provided a conceptual handle for the emerging hyperspace of digital communication” (Davis, *TechGnosis* 228).

Significant games spawned out of the aesthetic milieu of cyberpunk like Origin Systems’ *System Shock* (1994), which featured a methodical A.I. antagonist, SHODAN (Sentient Hyper-Optimized Data Access Network). During hacking sequences in *System Shock*, players immerse themselves not in coding and cryptic computer languages, but a graphical representation of a cyberspace replete with nostalgic vector graphics in homage to cyberpunk literature and the hallucinatory experience of cyberspace. Indeed, one of many diffusionary bridges between science fiction and high fantasy comes to a nexus in Origin Systems which was also the same studio that developed the influential and innovative addition to the *Ultima* series, *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* (1992). Although briefly mentioned, *Ultima Underworld* would go on to later inspire major cyberpunk-themed games like *Deus Ex* (2000). Long-standing cyberpunk storyworlds have remained popular ever since, like *Shadowrun* (1989-present) which originated as a table-top board game with subsequent video games and novels.

The ludic *topos* of cyberspace has since become a mainstay of popular imaginary stock, and has made appearances in recent video games beyond *System Shock*, like the classic rail-shooter inspired game *Rez* (Sega: United Game Artists 2001), the cybernetic game that reached for synesthesia merging music, rhythm, vector-esque graphics inspired

by Kandinsky, and taking musical inspiration (and the namesake) of the 1990 electronic band Underworld's song "Rez."

Echoes of a (re)translation from ludic to mythic provides the foundation for more recent popular fiction like Ernest Cline's 2010 novel *Ready Player One*. Cline draws from Massively Multiplayer Online games and immersive virtual reality to create the pervasive program The OASIS (Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation), but structures his plot as a synthesis of Arthurian quest literature: specifically, the legend of the knight Parzival-Perceval-Perlesval. Wade, the protagonist of *Ready Player One*, takes on the user-name of Parzival—because "Percival" was already taken! The structure and narrative consequences of Wade's quest demonstrate the initiatory patterns common to Arthurian literature, the *Bildungsroman* of Von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, and later novels of German Romanticism centered on male initiation rituals.

Eve prior to Gibson's conception of cyberspace, virtual worlds had been explored in literary works. From the confluence of technology and magic (later portrayed in cyberpunk aesthetics), we might note the important 1983 novella *True Names* by Vernor Vinge. The opening prologue of the novella reveals the significance of True Names in the traditions of magic and the occult; in knowing another warlocks true name, one has a significant power and advantage over that individual. In *True Names*, Vinge develops a virtual world named the Other Plane, which functions both as a parallel world for the hackers and as a synthesis of the magical quality of computer programming. Being that hacker culture, or later cyberculture, is built on a language (programming), the line

between fantasy and reality blur. The protagonist, Roger Pollack, takes on the alias Mr. Slippery to safeguard his identity in the Other Plane.

The fictive use of virtual worlds has become increasingly popularized in part due to the cyberpunk genre's descriptive, crystallizing, romanticizing and catalyzing of hacker culture, but in game culture close offshoots of Alternate and Augmented Reality Games (ARGs) have made possible the performative (versus the descriptive) use of virtual worlds. ARGs use our ubiquitous communication and networked technology to view real-world spaces in interactive ways to create a persistent narrative experience for users. This, in many ways, has coincided with the distribution of mobile phones and smart phones quipped with GPS. MMOARGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Alternate Reality Game) like *Ingress* (Nantic Labs 2012 - present), —which remains in beta-development as of the time of this study—utilize iOS and Android devices to create a coterminous ludic environment made viewable through the *Ingress* app, where players engage in faction conflicts all the while drawing players to “portals” located by real-world public spaces like monuments, historical sites, art installations and other locales. GPS navigation helps users find each other and the portals. At its core the game-style of *Ingress* is similar to capture the flag, and instead of distancing one's presence through a constructed avatar, the player/user of the *Ingress* app must physically travel to portal locations veiled only by a user-name.

Coinciding with these major developments in player-to-player interaction through technology has been the development of and fascination with Artificial Intelligence, or AI. Video games have served as a sort of test-lab for experimenting with believable, or passible, A.I. in the form of non-player characters (NPCs). One of the earliest

contributors to this notion was the pioneering scientist Alan Turing and his influential 1950 article, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence.” In the article, Turing elucidates on his concept of the Imitation Game, by which he pursues the basic question: “Can machines think?”

Projects in simulation and AI have yielded significant programs that have sought to present a Turing-esque Imitation Game of sorts. One such example is the computer program ELIZA first discussed by Joseph Weizenbaum in his 1966 article, “ELIZA – A Computer Program for the Study of Natural Language Communication Between Man and Machine.” ELIZA acts as a substitute conversation partner and psychotherapist in the tradition of Carl Roger’s humanistic psychology. The program would imitate the nature of a dialogue by parsing key words out of the human user’s typed responses and either probe for elaboration or offer questions.

The ability to program AI entered the common parlance of video game culture as the key innovation to incorporate believable Non-player Characters (NPCs). NPCs inhabit single-player worlds, or single-player experiences, and manifest in different contexts of on- and off-line gameworlds. They do not strictly reside in offline worlds, and can assist in populating massively multiplayer online games as key quest-givers, merchants, enemies, guards, bosses, any number of roles needed to contribute to world-building. A notable breakthrough in video game AI for its time was the creature/avatar in Lion Studio’s 2001 god game *Black & White*, which the player could teach through a rudimentary system of reward/punishment to get the creature to perform and remember tasks such as watering a field for villagers, or remembering not to eat the villagers.

In discussing Artificial Intelligence, it may be productive to return to our notion of *mimesis* as a philosophical concept that investigates the relationship between the natural and the artificial, the authentic and the imitative. In Plato it was seen as lacking in the real, and so *mimesis* was a cheap imitation. Aristotle approached *mimesis* as something essential to human nature (*Poetics* 1448b4). One could even see in his *Poetics* the idea of *muthos* being a *mimesis* of the organic—that is, taking nature as a model for constructing story (*Poetics* 1459a23). Can we then ask: do video games produce a natural or artificial mythology?

In cybernetics, the means facilitates the ends, and the best cybernetician is the one who can configure the present most effectively to bring about the greater end (*telos*); to know the entire systemic is ideal for engineering the process all together and placing restraints on the player in order to ensure efficiency. Von Neumann's game theory would be a natural addendum. We may move one step further and put the terms of cybernetic systems alongside the Aristotelian conception of *muthos*; key correspondences can be inferred between the morphology of the non-persistent, finite, and linear game paths and the story-arc structure. For both morphologically consist of a beginning (*arche*), middle (*meso*) and end (*telos*). Thus, as Bremond has shown, a particular logic resides in triads: virtuality (or possibility); actualization/non-actualization; and, goals attained/not attained (388; cf. Prince 102).

The theory of cybernetics may then assist us in distinguishing the reader/audience of a story and the user/player of a game story. A reader-viewer is guided through the ready-made plot in a passive condition (autopilot), while the player must bring forth energy into the plot/scenario, altering the unfolding and outcome—that is, to be the pilot

of the story from voyeur to voyager. This general bifurcation has multiple divisions in between, since one could argue that games may simply have one outcome or several, one entry-point or several roles. Further, simple rules may lead to complex emergent behaviors and unexpected outcomes. But for simplicity's sake, we can assume that the player of a game seeks to (re)configure his or her participation, i.e. strategize, to achieve the optimized outcome (*telos*): Win.

There is room, however, to consider the cooperative and the community driven dynamics that are heightened by the space carved out by the digital technology. Since the introduction of Gibson's term "cyberspace" into the popular lexicon, cyberspace has entered the societal level as more than a literary imaging of "data space" for rogue hackers and agents, and instead has developed more and more into a domain of social discourse and communication (Wertheim, *Pearly Gates* 232). Online and casual games occupy a major portion of this space wherein strategies can be shared, alliances can be made, and games can be played. As Margaret Wertheim asserts, "world-making" power of language has been widely presented and vividly articulated through our world myths and sacred stories, with cyberspace evolving as a new emerging "pragmatic instance" of cosmopoeisis (302-303). The pertinent point to be made here is that these conceptions of space that we tend to create and occupy present pathways for translating and refiguring older models to meet the demands of contemporary interest; *contemporary* taken here quite literally as a spatio-temporal marker for the recurring present.

The cybernetic model is a perspective on myth within games that focuses on "control and communication," but is not exclusively tied to the modern conception of Wiener's cybernetics. Instead, it looks at the history of cybernetic themes (control,

communication, nautical imagery, feedback, restraints, and determinism). For our purposes, the cybernetic model treatment of games has been extensively demonstrated in Espen Aarseth's *cybertext* and *ergodic literature*. I put the theory of the cybertext and the ergodic in relation to texts eliciting mythological stories, themes and motifs: *mythic texts*. It is, in a sense, a move akin to "...a translation into myths of the cybernetic path" (Lem 52). Such a relation functions as both intertextual (how texts interact externally in reference to each other) and intratextual (how a text behaves internally within reference to its own form and content). On the level of myth-analysis, the video game medium attempts both avenues either to play within the framework of a meta-mythology, with referents extending to other explicit usages of the body of myths, or internally within the gameworld's mythos.

My case studies represent and reflect both closed cybernetic systems (single-player, offline) of rudimentary story patterns, feedback loops and cycles along deterministic paths (e.g. *Portal*), as well as open systems (multiplayer, online accessed) presenting "sandbox" worlds—worlds that are open-ended for players to explore and create their own identities and scenarios—on the furthest end of the spectrum (e.g. *EVE Online*). We can then develop and extrapolate a spectrum of classifications and begin to intimate a typology. Naturally, these systems in themselves reflect the very video and computer games—the data set—I have chosen for analysis. We are most interested in the mythic discourse of each case, and in working towards the methods employed by each game in cultivating its respective lore and mythos (in the Aristotelian sense of a *systasis ton pragmaton*), that is, myth's ability to orchestrate a *combination of events*.

Mimesis is hardly fixed and monolithic category of representation. It is not the only method for revealing events of a story either. Instead, we, at least, break representation into two major branches of the verbal and non-verbal. To complicate matters, verbal means of *description* can attempt to bring to the mind's eye a work of art through the technique of *ekphrasis*. James A.W. Heffernan defines *ekphrasis* as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (3). The prototypical model of ekphrasis comes from “The Shield of Achilles” episode in the book 18 of Homer’s *Iliad*. Within the context of Homer’s epic, Hephaistos’s handiwork and the description of its elaborate design provide a brief and powerful moment of respite away from the battlefield. The shield essentially portrays the spectrum of human life and activities in a binary set of a feuding province beside a peaceful one. It is as if Homer seeks to present the audience with a god’s eye view of mortality and the human condition. It is perhaps not an accident either that the *theos* of artifice reveals the tension between the artificial and natural fallout of human conflicts.

The visual representation of animated artwork, or put in other words, the conscious use of storytelling through visual works of art, will become most apparent in my chapters on the fantasy adventure games *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Okami*. Here, however, we may point out that each videogame utilizes artifacts of the visual arts and crafts to narrate visually core episodes of the storyline. Both works suggest a predilection with ekphrasic-like methods and digressions of visual and verbal storytelling. The player of *Skyrim* will encounter Alduin’s Wall, and the observant player of *Okami* will notice that the visual cinematography of brushwork art was produced by none other than *Okami*’s artist companion, Issun. Indeed, like the Shield of Achilles episode in the *Iliad*,

moments of pause, known most commonly as cut-scenes in a video game, offer the player a chance to rest and reflect to take in the big picture, backstory and the magnitude of the mythos as it unfolds.

Beyond *mimesis* and Metaphor and Towards *metaxy* and *methexis*

Previous scholars have begun to resolve this issue through the *metaxic* nature of the quest, and the *methexic*, or “participatory” possibilities that our modern media allows. It is not surprising that myth and myth-makers are apt to utilize the participatory affordances when targeting youth and youthful individuals for social cohesion or education. Strabo, again, had already discovered this link (*Geography* 1.2.8):

In the first place, I remark that the poets were not alone in sanctioning myths, for long before the poets the states and the lawgivers had sanctioned them as a useful expedient, since they had insight into the emotional nature of the reasoning animal (*logikoû zoōu*); for man is eager to learn, and his fondness of tales is a prelude to this quality. It is fondness of tales (*philomûthon*), then, that induces children to give their attention to narratives and more and more take part in them (*koinōnein*). The reason for this is that myth is a new language to them—a language that tells them, not of things as they are, but of a different set of things. And what is new is pleasing, and so is what one did not know before; and it is just this that makes men eager to learn. But if you add thereto the marvellous (*thaumaston*) and the portentous (*teratōdes*), you thereby increase the pleasure, and pleasure acts as a charm to incite learning. (Jones 68-69)

And so, myths—a touch of “mythness”—can serve as a stimulus (as a means) to encourage pedagogic ends. Of course, here we may also trace this back to Plato’s discussion book 3 of *Republic* on the need for censorship of traditional tales (*mythoi*) to be administered to youths by the nurse.

Eric Voeglin committed extensive re-readings of Plato and Aristotle. Voeglin focused on the story of the quest for truth as “a movement of resistance to the prevalent disorder; it is an effort to attune the concretely disordered existence again to the truth of the It-reality, an attempt to create a new social field of existential order in competition with the fields whose claim to truth has become doubtful” (*In Search of Order* 39). Voeglin later states “for the story of the quest can be a true story only if the questioner participates existentially in the comprehending story told by the It through its creative epiphany of structure” (41).

A key aim to our exploration of mythological narratives, motifs and themes in video games, is to bring forth the distinct role that media/mediation plays in the transmission of myth across various cultural complexes. On the level of *mimesis* (and *semiosis*), the analyst may parse out a seemingly indefinite quantity of motifs, allusions and types; the mimetic reading brings to focus the polysemic trajectories. And from that catalogue comes the process by which such formal characteristics translate into the level of *methexis*, which as I had discussed earlier refers is a Platonic term meaning *participation* in general and in the Platonic *idea* in particular (Liddell and Scott 1090). Taken on these terms, the gameworld can be viewed as user-experience and participation in the ideas and content of the video game. In other words, there is a critical metaxy that emerges between mythic *mimesis* (representation of the mythological) and *methexis*

(participation in it). More simply stated, it is not enough that a video game *imitates* mythological structures, motifs or themes, rather that the video game can transform such material into an experiential model. If the game design empowers the player with interactive/interruptive tools, inflection comes not only from the storied level of *diegesis* (the story as presented), but in the *praxis*, activity, of the player (the story worked out). This schema is not a static taxonomy that applies with equal force from case to case. Instead, modulations to each level changes who or what instigates the inflection.

On this point Frans Mäyrä offers an insightful concept of the “dual structure” of games when approaching them for analysis which he refers to as “the two elementary senses or ‘layers’ in the concept of game:”

1. core, or game as gameplay; and
2. shell, or game as representation and sign system

To this he adds further remarks:

While the core, or the gameplay layer concerns everything a player can do while playing the game, and also game rules that govern these actions, the shell includes all the semiotic richness modifying, containing and adding significance to that basic interaction (*An Introduction to Game Studies* 17).

To further emphasize this critical distinction, we may address it as it occurs during research and analysis of a video game. To extrapolate formal characteristics (the narrative, storyline(s), lore, and motifs) featured in a gameworld, the analyst can simply remain in the position of spectator and watch the gameplay through an online video walk-through. Such orientations are not inherently invalid, since a research project could be

based on the observance of participants. Indeed, the inherent and relative fallacy here lies in overlooking the very essence of the unique qualities of the medium and a deeper relation between representation layers, or semiotic significance, and the ludic elements. For our purposes, it is important to stress myth *as applied* just as much as represented. On the one hand, the myth in the game can be treated from the mimetic layers of cinematic, dramaturgic, or literary allusions, while on the other hand myths close ties to ritual offer a perspective on the traditional method of ritual as the enacting of myth. To follow through on these two modes, the analyst must engage directly with the gameworld (i.e. play and interact) from within as an active participant to fully apprehend the value of mythic and ludic discourses to ascertain *embodied* and *performative* aspects of the video game medium. There is a fundamental shift of myth from being enmeshed solely in the fictional universe of the game and the narrative mode of the word, and allowing it to re-engage with participatory elements, imagistic significances and paradigmatic models.

As a point of entry, I argue for a shift beyond the representational (*mimesis*) and towards the participatory (*methexis*) in order to counter a flat reading of mythic and ludic elements in games, and to bring attention to the unique qualities of their methods of mediation; that is, how they function as media in general, and how they inflect the mediating process. Here, we can return to Juul's "real rules" of games, and how they might reconnect the mythic with aspects of ritualized embodiment, agency, activity and participation. When the analyst demotes myth to fiction, it ignores the importance of the actual play itself and makes myth a dead letter. As I have argued, living myths are not relics or objectified stories to be read/heard (though antiquity supplies us with ample libraries and mythographies), but multi-vocal transparencies able to be interpreted and

applied in changing contexts. Myth overcomes the distance of other modes of narrative, since it is not a fiction to its believing audience. This is not due of its truth-value, but to its ability to impede on our perceptions, conceptions and ideas about the world and our place in it. A myth can only function—that is come alive—if one participates in it.

Roland Barthes attempted to bring out new dimensions of myth (or more precisely *mythical speech*) through semiology. In essence, Barthes argued that myths persist in the world around us and through an understanding of semiology—the study of signs and signification—one could begin to ascertain the myths being fed to them as “myth-consumers.” Although he defines myth as a type of speech/discourse, he also claims that the pictorial can serve as a vehicle for mythic significations as much as the verbal:

We are no longer dealing here with a theoretical mode of representation: we are dealing with *this* particular image, which is given for *this* particular signification. Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness that one can reason about them while discounting their substance (*Mythologies* 218-19).

The tendency towards signification in mythical speech (or mythic discourse) curiously adds a layer of distance from myth and its content, but that is only to say that myth retreats into the form of the media it embeds itself in. As I have stated previously, myth persists through participation rather than mere representation alone.

Taken together, I argue that there is a second distortion made to myth as presented by Barthes. According to Barthes, myth is a second-order semiological system that interacts and distorts the first-order semiological system, language. Language consists of words (signs) which can further be broken down into *signifiers* and *signified*. A basic example would be the English word ‘tree’ which arbitrarily stands in for the physical object. No distortion is introduced since the *sign* points directly to its object. Once an artist steps in to paint a tree, the word “tree” no longer carries the same direct connection to the language-object, and so the artist’s inflection particularizes and manipulates: the word “tree” of the artist becomes the signifier, while signified (its meaning) can change according to context and reception. Myth supplants this semiological system by taking the sign (signifier and signified) and treating it as a signifier with an empty meaning (signified) in the second-order semiological system (see Barthes, *Mythologies* 224).

I propose that video games can create a third-order system that does not necessarily rely on *semiosis*, but the rules of *ludosis*—the above dual-structure discussed according to Frans Mäyrä. The act of playing can hack the entrenchment of myth’s second-order semiotic system. Under some conditions, the *ludosis* can subvert the processes of legitimation, justification and the turning of “history into nature,” as proposed in Barthes’ theory of myth. It does not necessarily uproot myth, but offers a third layer of distortion in the form of *configuration* over interpretation and interaction over consumption. By entering into and out of a mythological schema of signs, the user is in the position to discern the distortions of the second-order semiological system, i.e., the myth, and can deny its naturalization, by rendering the myth an artificial and ephemeral construct. To better understand and visualize this process, see Figure 1 (App. B).

Figure 1 emphasizes how video games heighten the semiotic systems of language and myth—they lift both language and metalanguage into hyperreal virtuality. The cosmic significance of a myth might be simulated within a gameworld, and so scaled down, as it were, to a microcosmic model within the diegetic plane. It also suggests that the video game belongs to a certain class of affluency within a culture of ludic and mythic consumption—what Barthes referred to specifically as the bourgeois and petit bourgeois levels of society. Thus, the video game as a product is vulnerable to the re-establishment of a Barthesian myth in the sense that it conveys “naturalness” and becomes an object to be discussed as much as acted. If this is the case than a duplicitous *alibi* can arise within the video game: first, within the mythic and semiotic level of the video games’ fictional world or in the deeds and actions done by the player where an ideology can be passed off as trivial; second, on the outer level of the video game as a product of commerce. In either case, the alibi shifts responsibility away from what is represented and what is acted by virtue of a *virtual* distance. The ideology hides behind virtuality, which avoids the ramifications of the actual. Cultural symbols can be repurposed and robbed of their authority and value from the originating source-culture, all in favor of a mytholudic agenda. In other words, the problematic content of the video game is given a back-door to any reproach that might fall on the studios or developers.

Ludosis, the gameplay and game mechanic core of a video game, have cultural histories that pre-date the video game medium. But in order to determine these elements, it requires an even deeper constituent unit: the *ludeme* as discussed and elaborated by David Parlett. Parlett defines such a unit as follows: “A ludeme or ‘ludic meme’ is a fundamental unit of play, often equivalent to a ‘rule’ of play; the conceptual equivalent of

a material component of a game. A notable characteristic is its mimetic property – that is, its ability and propensity to pass from one game or class of game to another” (“What’s a Ludeme?”) This may bring to mind the structuralist tendency to affix the suffix “-eme,” thus, Lévi-Strauss was able to theorize the mytheme as “gross constituent units of a myth” (“Structural Study of Myth” 211); and so it follows that a collection of myths constitute a mythology. The interaction of a ludeme and a mytheme may well be as conceivable as the relation between myth and game, or mythology and (if we permit such a usage) “ludology.” There remains much to be held accountable for the structural approach, while also being one of the more easily translatable and reconcilable theories of myth in the mediated world of a video game. Since the video game medium is rightly a *multimedia* platform, it is not advisable to relegate it to semiology exclusively, but to recognize that it is an intersemiotic translation. With any translation, a degree of interpretation (*hermeneusis*) is involved.

In the introduction and in the previous chapter I suggested a re-reading of Campbell’s corpus that moves away from the conventional, monistic applications of Campbell’s theory of myth solely through the monomyth story-structure. Howard’s emphasis on the quest model in Campbell’s later writing has already intimated such a stance in order to suggest a reassessment of the Campbellian reception in video games. Howard’s own use of the quest remains a core nexus for new developments in the polyfunctional application of myth in game design and gameplay, and the polysemic readings of myth in games. To this extent, later case studies like *Dante’s Inferno* (allowing players to “save” or “punish” souls in Hell), *Okami* and *Skyrim* stand out as

marked instances of the quest model and its ability to allow freedom within limits, while *Catherine* presents multiple means and ends—i.e., storylines—for the player to explore.

In concluding this chapter, what I have sought to add here is that the cybernetic and cybernautic possibilities of video games—i.e., what Aarseth has effectively referred to as their cybertextuality—offers a fundamental shift and translation from metaphor and similarity to metonymy and contiguity. The next chapter addresses such a shift.

Chapter 8: Epic, Mythic and Heroic Traditions in Adaptation

Kai men ergo kouketi mûtho ‘Indeed, now it has passed from word to deed.’

—Prometheus (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 1080; Smyth)

We have just discussed at length a theoretical framework that attempts to liberate the narrative constraints of myth. In other words, I have argued that narrative is but one mediating method for communicating mythic content. Narrativity is a method at the disposal of the mythologist, but only insofar as it does not restrict mythic content to strict adherence to narratology. It remains our task to investigate the implications of this theoretical framework as it relates to certain games. For this chapter we will continue the thread on the hero, specifically the hero of epic, as an instance of taking mythic models into new directions of participation and simulation.

World-building, or what I also refer to as cosmopoetics, finds an acute expression in the tradition of epic. However, it is important to be clear by what epic means in context. Epic as poetry proper separates into two major strains that we can loosely categorize as the oral and the literary. Literary epics stem as far back as the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of our oldest stories committed to text. Epic in relation to myth is succinctly described by Lowell Edmund: “The word ‘myth’ can be taken to refer generally, in relation to epic, to the background of traditional oral storytelling, available to the poet in written versions in some cases, from which epic derives” (31).

Aristotle (*Poetics* 1451b20-25) presented a similar case by categorizing epic (and tragedy) as a medium for repurposing and recontextualizing traditional tales (*paradedomenon mûthous*), while poetic license and inventing (*pepoietai*) of stories were also allowed in tragedy. However, if the poet or tragedian wished to use traditional tales,

Aristotle (1453b24) also advised they not tamper with tradition too much. Between tragedy and epic, he differentiated them by the amount of myths they could handle in proportion to their scope and scale (*Poetics* 1456a11): epic structure (*epopoikòn systema*) a polymythic (*polymûthos*), multimythic infrastructure, while tragedy generally followed a single story-arc structure (*archē-meso-telos*), i.e. “mono-mythic,” following a single day’s story. However, each was unified by a single cohesive action (*praxis*). In accord with this perspective on the epic-mythic relation, I view epic as a medium that inflects myth with the interests of the poet and constrains, for good or ill, myth to strict narrativity and metre. Sometimes, it is all the analyst has to delve into the details of a myth, but myth is not restricted to epic; epic is but one way among several ways of recounting myth.

In the following analysis of three video games, I propose that epic tradition is not only viably represented, but applied through the medium as it constructs a framing for the player as epic heroes. Beyond the representational genres and literary elements of the video games’ aesthetics, the three cases in this chapter are also unified by the genre of third-person action-adventure with key game mechanics that showcase simulations of mythic-epic actions of superhuman ability. The video game *God of War* begins our analysis, since it was instrumental in establishing the combination and style.

To demonstrate this particular pathway of the translation of myth into the game world, let us turn to a comparative assessment of the “epic” genre of games as they are presented in the games *God of War*, *Dante’s Inferno*, and *Asura’s Wrath* giving an account of the epic tradition explicitly translated into the hyper-ludic medium. As accessible texts of recorded versions of myths, epic literature, that is the literary epic, provides one of the more cohesive and unified expressions of mythological events; epic is

one method for shaping and relating myth through metre and narrative. Indeed, epics also offer primary sources for a culture's direct engagement and modifying of their mythological tradition.

It should be understood that any articulated body of myths channeled through a medium invites modulation, modification, invention, and elaboration; the storyteller resides in the metaxy of convention and innovation. In this way, the epic poet reinforces the linearity of storytelling (Aristotelian 'plot'), which is quite apparent in the case studies of this chapter. It is, however, not a simple exercise since many of the epics cited and sourced are themselves translations from an oral tradition into a written language. The core issues in the study of oral tradition are these very topics, namely, the textualization of verbal art and the reconstruction of ancient oral traditions like Homeric epic. The pioneering work of Milman and Parry, along with their successor, Albert B. Lord, has demonstrated that the long-held literary approach to epic was in need of a new proposal: Homer's epics were the product of an oral tradition long before being committed to text. This very process of *epopoeisis* (epic-making) can further be explored in the "epic" gesture of certain contemporary video games. In other words, the genre of epic and the idea of epic has changed and entered into the pragmatic language of games. What is lost and what is gained by this translation? How does the game rendition speak to the traditional culture, and how close to the source material does the game abide by? What are the characteristics of their modifications and modulations to source material?

In large part, the following case studies build on the theoretical implications introduced in chapter 5 on Homo Narrans. Specifically, I will continue to apply the relationship between *mimesis* and *methexis* as they play out over the storylines of the four

video games. Each video game uses the unified action of an epic hero as its vehicle for structure; however, the referent material is well situated in culture-specific traditions of epic (mainly literary) and myths. To conceive of epic as a single genre and single mode would be to misrepresent the variety of ways epic poets have explored the medium. For instance, I follow Heda Jason's thorough distinction of ethnopoetic genres that fall within the cultural areas of Euro-Afro-Asia epics.⁴⁸ Jason lists several sub-genres of the main category of "Epic," but firstly defines epic generally as "a confrontation between societies, human or fabulous, in the form of physical struggle or a magic contest; both are performed by warrior-champions" (143). *God of War* and *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron* can be said to meet the criteria for a "Universal Epic"; the Italian poet Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* and the subsequent video game follow "Romantic Epic" and aspects of a "Universal Epic"; and, lastly, *Asura's Wrath* tends to take on the cosmic and creative scope, scale and scape required of "Mythic Epic." To help clarify, prior to each case I will provide Jason's passage on each sub-genre of epic.

Case: *God of War*

Kratos, a mythical general of the Spartan army, called upon Ares god of war at the near-end of his life at the hands of the enemy in battle. Ares, answering Kratos's pledge of devotion, bestowed on him the Blades of Chaos forged within the depths of Hades. The blades were woven and bound onto Kratos's arms, as if in an allusion to the chains that bound Prometheus atop Mount Elbruz of the Caucasus. From that time on leading to the events of *God of War*, Kratos had served under Ares until driven into

⁴⁸ Heda defines Euro-Afro-Asia as a "cultural area...encompassing Christian Europe, Moslem North Africa, Near East and Central Asia, and (non-tribal) India, Hindu and Moslem (9-10). *Asura's Wrath* features motifs and elements derived from Buddhism (in particular Japanese Buddhism), and so could be argued to feature some elements of Far East Asian influences via Japan.

blood-thirsty madness that resulted in him sacking a city and accidentally murdering his wife and child. As the Oracle/Narrator of *God of War* recounts, Kratos's sin and curse, the ashes of his murdered wife and child, were to be scorched onto his flesh giving Kratos his signature pale complexion.

As the player discovers over the course of *God of War*, Kratos seeks vengeance not against a fellow mortal, but Ares himself. With the aid of the Olympians—especially the goddess Athena—Kratos is called upon to save Athens from being sacked by Ares. And so, the major mythological motif of the conflict with a god, *theomachy*, unfolds.

Constructing the mythologically minded world of *God of War* required the consulting of various sources by the creators and writers of the video game and supplementary material in the form of novelizations.

The material of *God of War*'s lore ranges from the primary sources of classical antiquity to modern mythographic handbooks of Greek mythology. It not only helped shape the world of the video game, but the novel based on it. In a 2010 interview with the UK magazine, *PLAY*, author of the *God of War* novelization was asked about the amount of research required or need to bring the project to fruition:

The mythology of GOD OF WAR is based on traditional Edith Hamilton Greek mythology but has added trials, tribulations and motivations. The Olympians are still venal and heroic and self-centered and high-minded, with all human traits vastly magnified, but there are stories not found in conventional Greek mythology. Think of the GOD OF WAR universe as the accepted mythology on steroids.

Though the response by Vardeman offers some insight into the vernacular consulted, *God of War* and its protagonist derive from very specific material from primary sources.

One of the few instances of a personified Kratos occurs in *Prometheus Bound* by the Athenian tragedian Aeschylus (ca. 525-455 BC). Aeschylus's Kratos acts as an agent of Zeus's will, antagonizing the divine craftsman Hephaistos, who hesitates to shackle the Titan Prometheus to a rock atop the highest peak in the Caucasus—identified elsewhere as mount Elbruz. As the myth goes, Prometheus had stolen fire from the Olympians. Hesiod describes him as concealing “tireless fire” in a fennel stalk (*Theogony* 565); Plato has the titan stealing from Hephaistos's and Athena's workshop (*Protagoras* 321c-322a). Nonetheless, Aeschylus opens his tragedy with Kratos giving the following speech:

POWER (“Kratos”): To earth's remote limit we come, to the Scythian land, an untrodden solitude. And now, Hephaestus, yours is the charge to observe the mandates laid upon you by the Father – to clamp this miscreant upon the high craggy rocks in shackles of binding adamant that cannot be broken. For your own flower, flashing fire, source of all arts, he has purloined and bestowed upon mortal creatures. Such is his offence; for this he is bound to make requital to the gods, so that he may learn to bear with the sovereignty of Zeus and cease his man-loving (*philanthropou*) ways (*Prometheus Bound* 1-11; Smyth)

Though Kratos seemingly plays a small in the greater system of classical mythology, his function as a personified abstraction is potent. Though an opponent or member of the prosecution, Kratos will end up having more in common with Zeus and Prometheus as both Olympian and Titan are distinct strategists of one impulse: ascension to power. They

differ only in the means and use of power. Zeus seeks to maintain hegemonic power, while Prometheus (Aeschylus's especially) seeks democratized power. I emphasize that Aeschylus's Prometheus, because no other source of the Titan brings forth his quintessential role as a culture-hero, first inventor or *prōto heuretēs* (Zhmud 36-38).

As Aeschylus's Kratos attests, Prometheus was bound to a cliff in Scythian land. Legends of Prometheus-like mythological figures still persist in folk legends of the Caucasus region (Hunt 330-333), especially in the Nart sagas amongst various ethnic groups (See Colarusso). A key motif of the Prometheus legend as it manifests in Hesiod, Plato and in the later folk legends of the Caucasus region, is the conflict or challenge made to a god by a god, or theomachy (A162 *Conflicts of the gods*)—the theomachy will remain a leitmotif in our discussion of epic and in subsequent chapters. I would emphasize in relation to *God of War*, that Kratos's development as a character becomes more and more Promethean as the series progresses beyond the first *God of War*. Kratos not only challenges and defeats Ares, but would subsequently turn against Zeus and his assault on Olympus (*God of War 3*), thus fleshing out the theomachy motif to its mythological conclusion. On this point, Aeschylus's Kratos is both distant and near to the Kratos of *God of War*.

Kratos's theomachy is aimed towards different deities of the Olympian Pantheon throughout the series. By the end of *God of War*, Kratos competes and defeats the former god of war, Ares, in his own rise to power. As previously mentioned the source of their conflict lies in Ares's destructive spell placed on Kratos who in turn made a vow of servitude to the god. The fit of rage that possessed Kratos caused him to sack a town devoted to Athena. Upon entering one of the buildings, Kratos, in his fit of rage,

slaughtered everyone including, unbeknownst to him, his own wife and child (compare Euripes's Herakles who slaughters his first wife Megara and three sons under a fit of madness spurred on by Hera). This very deed sealed Kratos's tragic path, having the ashes of his wife and child scorched onto his flesh. It was then that Kratos set his revenge on Ares, fixed on slaying the god. In order for Kratos to fulfill his quest, he must go through a road of trials, much like the heroic careers of Theseus on the Road to Athens, and Heracles and his twelve Labors.

The acquisition of Pandora's Box from Ares is a rather telling moment. When Kratos finally opens Pandora's Box, he is given the favor of the gods with his physical body transformed to match the size of Ares. The game does not go into much detail on the exact contents of the box, but with the plague of Ares well underway, and the disapproval of the Olympians, one can posit that the box's essential content supplies Kratos with the means of stopping the plague and stopping Ares. According to Hesiod *Works and Days* (90-69) after being created (*WD* 69-82) by Hephaistos with the assistance of Athena and Hermes, along with other gifts from the Olympians—hence, her name Pan-dora, “All-Gift”—was given a box (or jar) and upon opening it released sufferings and sorrows upon mortals with Elpis (translated as “Hope” by West and “Anticipation” by Most) catching the lid and not fleeing. If we take this in relation to Kratos's encounter with the box's content, it is likely that Kratos is given the strength of Elpis, or Hope, in order to restore the principle to the city.

The end scene features Kratos taking the throne as the new God of War. Accompanying the scene is a montage of striking visions with imagery of modern day warfare. As the Oracle/Narrator attests:

...And from that point forward, through out the rest of time, whenever men rode forth to battle for good cause or for evil, they did so under the watchful eye of the man who had defeated a god. They were driven forward by Kratos, the mortal who had become the new God of War.

By games' end Kratos's apotheosis and character-arc follows quite clearly the model of Barber and Barber's Restructuring Principle, replete with the two sub-categories of the Power Principle, and the Diachronic Power Principle. *God of War* can be interpreted as a modernized restructuring of Classical mythology on the one hand, and a compelling allegory of the fate of the old god, Ares, demoted to a "primitive," defeated war-god and replaced by Kratos, the abstract figure of "power." And, as the montage of images indicate in the cinematic apotheosis of Kratos, he comes to symbolize the cross-cultural impulse of power that fuels politics, war, and cultural hegemony.

Among the various layers of Kratos as an amalgamation of Greek heroes, I would like to focus on one particular element drawn from Homer's *Iliad*, specifically in the figure of Diomedes. It is important to reiterate that it was Athena who guided and mentored Kratos during key elements of the game and story of *God of War*. A tellingly instance is the invitation to Olympus delivered by Athena upon defeating Ares.

In book 5 of Homer's *Iliad*, the poet narrates a theomachic episode wherein Ares has entered the battlefield, causing war-crazed madness and bloodshed. Appaled, Athena and Hera devise a plan to stop Ares. They petition to Zeus who agrees and Athena descends down to Diomedes who has been on a battle-streak against the Trojans for much of the book. She joins Diomedes on his chariot and gives him a motivational speech to not fear gods and set his sights on Ares himself. With Athena's guidance,

Diomedes is able to mount a successful assault on Ares, dealing a lethal blow (again, guided by Athena) from his spear to Ares's belly. The war-god cries out in pain and flees the battlefield and protests to Zeus that he shows unjust favoritism to his daughter Athena in allowing a mortal to assault an immortal by another immortals' intervention. Zeus, in rebuttal, lectures Ares that he is a wretched plague and represents the worst aspects of divinity. He is only saved by being his son.

This episode of the *Iliad* tells us much about theomachy and its various forms. It can feature mortal vs. immortal(s), and immortal(s) vs. immortal(s). In Book Five's encounter, mortal Diomedes is backed by immortal Athena against immortal Ares. No detail is by accident, and this episode reveals that Athena knows Ares's weakness. If we relate this back to *God of War*, we find that it is Athena who advises Kratos and provides him with the necessary insights into defeating Ares, who, like in the *Iliad*, was exceeding his due measure of power and plague on Athens, the City of Athena.

This comparative assessment, for the sake of due measure, only features the elements of *God of War* and does not venture into the greater mythology of the series; though many fascinating developments occur in the career of Kratos in *God of War 2* and *3*, along with explorations into his origin story and history prior to *God of War*. The first installment sets up many of the core motifs and typical traits further elaborated through the mytho-logic of Kratos's character and growing abilities: he strives further and further in his contest with the gods (each becoming an opponent at some stage) until Kratos is driven to challenge Zeus and mount an assault on Olympus itself by *God of War 3*; in so doing the trilogy introduces the player to many more mythic figures and fabulous creatures of Greco-Roman mythology. The first installment, however, depicts a

fascinating perspective on the concepts of conflict, war and power in relation to deities and heroes. Kratos, the hero-named-Power, demonstrates the ambiguous nature of conflict and contest, as the ancient thinkers (e.g. Heraclitus's justified Eris-Conflict) and poets (e.g. Hesiod's bifurcated Eris-Good/Bad Strife) can attest.

To open the comparanda out to the series would cause an imbalance alongside *Asura's Wrath* and *Dante's Inferno*. In other words, comparison has been determined and measured by the epic arc of the epic hero achieved through a single game.

Case: *Dante's Inferno*

Game designers have long recognized and used space as described by imaginative works of literature. In so doing, they strive to take such inspiration as a point of reference for constructing virtual worlds; in effect, to translate descriptive worlds into participatory experiences. One such "architext" has been Dante Alighieri's (ca. AD 1265-1321) *Commedia* which has supplied visual artists with a rich descriptive language of a medieval vision of Hell, Purgatory and the Heavenly Paradise. Such influences may include the hellish imps and demons depicted in the classic computer game *Doom* (id software 1993). Echoes of Dante-esque themes and motifs can be found in the 2009 video game *Demon's Souls* where the player is placed in the Nexus and must collect and redeem souls in order to advance, though the actual use of souls in the *Demon's Souls* franchise, along with other internal motifs, point to it being just as much occupied with Faustian themes at its core.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that Dante also drew upon a many visual and poetic canons ranging from the Classical tradition to the intricate connections with previous epic poets and also the profound transformation in the representation of the

afterlife—not to mention the transformation of social, cultural, religious and artistic that was the eve of the Renaissance. In her excellent anthology, *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante*, brings together a host of primary sources tracing the immediate antecedents of Dante, situating him convincingly in a tradition of visionary literature. The visual artists that brought *Dante's Inferno* to fruition demonstrate a deep knowledge of the history of visionary art from the past two millennia. An art historical approach to the video game would reveal such traditionality. The issues that befall the video game lie more on the side of

Beyond the mere imagery of the three planes painted by the words of Dante the poet, has been his imaginative constructions of space and cosmography through language—what Margaret Wertheim effectively calls “soul-space” (Wertheim 44-75). When translated into the ludic context, the soul-space of the *Commedia* has supplied the game developer an imagined world worth elaborating on and exploring. Richard Bartle credits Dante's work as a formative and pervasive model for the designer who seeks to think and work spatially:

The level system of virtual worlds is like Dante's description of the nine circles of Hell, the nine cornices of Purgatory and the nine spheres of Heaven: Players advance in the experience and understanding until their ultimate ascendance to wizardhood (Richard Bartle, *Designing Virtual Worlds* 618)

The transmission of the text is most explicitly represented in EA's 2010 video game *Dante's Inferno*. Some writers on religion and video games have drawn broader similarities between *Dante's Inferno* and classics of world literature:

Dante's Inferno is loosely based on the fourteenth-century Italian poem of a journey to the Christian heaven, and *Enslaved* is a retelling of a sixteenth-century Chinese story [i.e. *Xiyouji* 西游記 or *Journey to the West*] of a similar trip in a Taoist and Buddhist context. (35; parenthetical reference mine)

I would slightly modify this interesting connection. Dante the Pilgrim and Monkey, both in their literary and ludic incarnations, are far from being comparable; one could conceive of comparative assessments between Dante, poet/pilgrim and Xuanzang, the historical and literary monk-pilgrim of *Journey to the West*. In the case of *Dante's Inferno*, it would be perhaps fascinating to compare it with other video games that explore Dante-esque environments, like *Demon's Souls* (Atlus 2009), which itself carries other themes of infernal dealings and Faustian undertones with the protagonist-player using souls for currency; or, compare adaptations of Dante's world and characters to video games beyond *Dante's Inferno* to the looser kind, like *Devil May Cry* series (2001 - present). In a similar fashion, one could compare *Enslaved* with other attempts at adapting *Xiyouji*—or stories like *Xiyouji* that involve group quests—to the video game medium, like the 2007 MMO *Fantasy Westward Journey* 梦幻西游, or the more recent 2013 MMO *Asura Online* featuring Monkey along with direct inspiration from *Journey to the West*. Such an analysis may offer valuable insights into which video game genre best suites Dante's *Commedia* and *Xiyouji*.

On a further point, I would argue that *Enslaved* shares a deeper association with *Asura's Wrath* than with *Dante's Inferno*. In the first six books *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong is very much an antagonist of the Buddha and the Taoist gods (*shen* 神) in

Heaven (*tian* 天) in the novel. His rebellion and assault on Heaven is a famous and popular episode in its own right. Sun Wukong (at least in the first six books of *Xiyouji*) is comparable to Asura (and the tribe of *asuras*) in character, behavior, antagonism and function than Dante. Quite the contrary: Monkey is famously a rebel of Heaven's mandate, while Dante is following God's will. As for the Buddhist concepts coaxed within *Asura's Wrath*, I agree with Anthony in his assessment that it features one of the closest playful experiences of immersing in a visual canon that draws on a deep understanding of the various traditions sourced. We will pursue a closer analysis of *Asura's Wrath* in the next case study.

The phrase "going through hell," is interesting, since it has been depicted on the semiotic, or representational, level of *Dante's Inferno*, but is not quite as synchronized or in accord with the ludic elements that shape a meaningful, challenging world. Again, as a comparable example, *Demon's Souls*, on a more deeply embedded level of semiotic references, builds an aesthetic world similar to that of Dante's poem, *Inferno*. The player enters into a liminal state at the Nexus, which acts as a safe zone and hub to navigate and select Arch Stones in a gothic cathedral. Each Arch Stone leads the player into different realms where souls must be collected and used as currency for the upgrading of the players' equipment. By acquiring the souls, the player saves them from the infernal realm. However, it is the core gameplay that sets the game apart as a devilishly challenging and relentless dungeon crawl reminiscent of the classic computer games like the early *Ultima* series. Furthermore, *Demon's Souls* inherits much from its spiritual successor, *King's Field* (FromSoftware 1994).

Of the many divergences the video game takes from the source text of *Inferno*, the most consequential are the details added to Lucifer. In the poem the reader is not privy to Lucifer's defiance and exile from Heaven nor, his war against the angels. Yet, these very details are voiced by Lucifer to Dante in the video game. To this extent, the video game anticipates that the mythos of *Dante's Inferno* is not just in dialogue and descendance from Dante's poem, but from other transtextual and intertextual pathways of Judeo-Christian mythology. Indeed, Dante's poem, *Inferno*, features only a brief few lines of Dis'/Lucifer's rebellion:

If he was once as handsome as he now
is ugly and, despite that, raised his brows
against his Maker, one can understand
how every sorrow has its source in him!

(*Inf.* 34.34-37; Mandelbaum)

Outside of these lines, the reader/player would have to consult other biblical and biblically inspired works of literature. For instance, the extensive treatment and reimagining of the Satan's rebellion described by John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*.

One of the greatest (and perhaps most obvious) losses in the adaptation of Dante's poem from *terza rima* to pixel, is the untranslatability of the poetry *and* Dante's mythos. What *mythos* to the poem could be transmitted is loosely kept intact. It would seem that Lévi-Strauss's assertion that myth is translatable while poetry not, is apt and relevant to this particular case. Here, it only shows that even in the most direct of adaptations the result can be a distorted re-visioning of the Dantean material.

A central misstep is the disempowerment of Beatrice in the video game as distinct from the poem. Beatrice in Dante's poem *Inferno* is far from being a mere object of desire for Dante the Pilgrim to attempt to rescue. She becomes the embodiment of guiding love in Dante's spiritual and psychological development. This is precisely the line of divergence where the video game takes liberty and pursues the typical function of the hero having to save the distraught kidnapped maiden. In this way, Dante's descent into Hell in *Dante's Inferno* seems to share closer affinity with the myth of Orpheus descending to Hades to retrieve Eurydice than with the mythic and spiritual trajectory of Dante's poem. One is tempted to draw similarities with the poem *Sir Orfeo*, a Middle English poem that reshapes and refigures the couple as the King Orfeo in quest for his Queen Heurodis (Smith 44-47). Dante of the *Commedia* was the figure in need of guidance and salvation, not his beloved.

Case: *Asura's Wrath*

Asura's Wrath (2012) occupies what I have come to designate as an epic video game in general and a mythic-epic in particular. As a video game that works within the general frame of epic, I also have placed it alongside *God of War* ("universal-epic" rooted in Greco-Roman mythology) and *Dante's Inferno* ("romantic-epic" rooted in the epic poetry of Dante Alighieri). However, it is also entirely possible to see many other contemporary influences and genres. For instance, the combination of science fiction, space battles and cosmic conflicts involving deities of Hinduism and Buddhism are found in early novels like Roger Zelazny's 1967 novel *Lord of Light*. I will be focusing more on the ancient literature rather than contemporary influences—but, this does not negate the value of the latter's impact.

Asura's Wrath diverges from these games by deriving most of its mythos from a combination of Hindu and Buddhist sacred accounts. However, the governing emotion and leitmotif of Asura is his *wrath*: an emotion common to epic. In his extensive study of the epic, Fredrick Turner relates the qualities of it:

Wrath is the emotion most deeply associated with the establishment and preservation of the self [...]. Wrath...is the emotion perhaps most closely concerned with the greatest mystery of organic life, the self itself – that is, the subjective center that is to itself the focal point of the universe, with its motivational system that makes possible action, the dead, as opposed to mere happening. Wrath is the inner force that maintains against the pressure of the external environment the internal world of the organism. Wrath is what mans the city wall of the cell, the immune system, the individual animal. (*Epic* 91-92)

Although Turner's text came out the same year as *AW*, the above passage highlights the epic emotion of "wrath," much like the wrath of Achilles; *mênis* the first (emotive) word of Homer's *Iliad*.

Compounding the combinatory nature of the *Asura's Wrath* world is the complex set of characters and the protagonist himself, Asura. In a move that I would deem as metonymic (i.e. *part for the whole*), Asura, the character of *Asura's Wrath*, is himself a composite figure of a race of primordial beings that first appeared in Vedic texts, and descended through *Purāṇas* with modifications, and eventually migrated into Buddhist traditions. As the Barbers' have pointed out, the consolidation and attribution of a tribe of beings to a single leader is common in mythic accounts, which they refer to as the "Class-

Action Corollary” (126, 250). To refer to Asura as a single individual would be like referring to Titan in the singular without noting *which Titan*. Although it is well exaggerated in *Asura’s Wrath*, the historical development of “asura” has had its share of consolidation and distribution, serving as both a title (approximate to “Lord” in the Vedas) to the demonization of the entire asuric race by the time of the Purāṇas and itihāsa.

On the genre of “myth” it would be more precise to initially situate *Asura’s Wrath* story within the milieu of the Vedas, Upaniṣads and Hindu stories of cosmic and epic events from the two major genres of traditional literature: *Purāṇas* and *itihāsa*. *Itihāsa* (“story of events”) is the designated genre of the “epics” Mahābhārata and Ramayana, while the *Purāṇas* (from Sanskrit *purana*, meaning “belonging to ancient times”) feature most of what could be called mythological stories of the Hindu divinities (Dimmitt and van Buitenen 3). Prior to these literary genres, figure and title of *asura* makes its oldest appearance in the Vedas. Here, I have drawn mainly from the Rg Veda. The sixteenth book of the *Bhagavad Gita* (itself, the sixth book of *Mahabharata*), *Daivāsura-Sampad-Vibhāga yoga* (“The Distinction between the Daivic and the Asuric Destinies”), is dedicated solely for distinguishing types of psychological manifestations that can be cultivated by the aspirant towards the path of the *devas* or *asuras*.

The main thrust and source of Asura’s “wrath” is the murder of his wife Durga and the abduction of his daughter Mitra, by Deus. This basic plot of the storyline sets up the essential Vedic and Puranic image of the wrathful and antagonistic traits of the *asuras* as they remain in eternal conflict with the *devas*. The essence of the deep story comes from the characters’ names themselves. *Deus* is the Latin term for divinity, but also shares deeper etymological roots in other parent Indo-European languages, religion and

myths going back to the Vedic Sanskrit *Dyaus Pita*, with cognates in Greek *Zeus pater*, and Latin *Jupiter* and *Dispater*. *Deus* in and of itself stems back to the Proto-Indo-European **deiwo-* coming from **dyeu-* meaning ‘sky, day,’ and so gives the sense of the Divinity Light of the Sky, or Celestial One (Mallory and Adams 408-11; cf. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion* vol. 1, 30-31; West 166-173). Its Sanskrit cognate is *deva*, *daiva*. Over and against the Celestial Sky god stands the rebellious antagonists of the heavens known as the Terrestrial Ones, be they Asuras, Titans, Giants, or other primordial beings, these groups make it their mythic task of tasks to challenge the reign of the Sky god. As M. L. West states, “We must wonder if this is not ultimately an Indo-European myth, whatever its original form. It would have a clear purpose: to emphasize by means of a paradigmatic story, that the division separating the Celestials from the Terrestrials is unbridgeable” (165). “Asura” can both refer to a title like our “Lord,” or to a tribe. In Vedic sources, *asura-* was a title that could refer to “Lord” Agni. In this sense, the term has a neutral origin, but over time came to refer to a race of mythical beings who sided against the Suras, or Devas, the Celestials. As for how this impacts or relates to core themes and motifs in *Asura’s Wrath*, comparative linguistics reveal some suggestive and relevant traces. Watkins presents it as “lexical set relating to an aspect of symbolic culture in the semantic realm of power and authority is the group of words including Vedic *ásura-* and Avestan *ahura-* ‘lord’ (usually divinized), Hittite *ḫaššu-* ‘king’, and the group of Germanic deities known in Old Norse as the *Æsir*, Germanic **ansuz*” (8). Furthermore, he relates the following root metaphor:

The metaphor of the ruler as driver...permits us to return to our words for ‘ruler’, ‘lord’, ‘king’ in Vedic *asura-*, Germanic **ansuz*, Hittite

haśśu-, and to propose they may be related to the technical term for the chariot driver's means of guiding and controlling his horses: the 'reins', Greek and Irish **ans-io-* from the same Indo-European root **h2ns-* or **h2ans-*, which we discussed above. The designation of the reins rests squarely on a metaphor: the 'reins' are the 'rulers'. It is just the inverse of the metaphor which calls the ruler 'charioteer', 'helmsman.' (9)

Using Watkins's proposal as a starting point, I would also add that "reign" and "rein" are suggestive correlates/cognates. Further, I would also propose that there must be a significant link and continuum in the English *author* and *authority*, as having some root in *asura*, *ahura*, etc. With such a connection the metaphor (mythic one at that) would run as follows: Authors are terrestrial figures of power who contend with the Deities/Celestials to bring them down, to bridge their plane and ours, in a mythological story that never fully captures, conveys or reveals all of the aspects of the divine, only a glimpse. The struggle remains everlasting. It is the struggle that Asura in *Asura's Wrath* faces when he first takes on the leader of the Eight Guardian Generals, Deus and will eventually find that there is an even greater 'authority' behind Deus: Chakravartin, ruler of Naraka and god of Mantra.

As for the Buddhist sources, the tribe of *asuras* becomes much more complex and integrated into the teachings of dharma. One tale from the *Mahāvastu* tells the story of "the conversion of the Asuras," whereby the antagonistic tribe gives praise the Blessed One and are thus welcomed and converted to the dharma, warmly received by even the *devas* (*Mahāvastu* vol. 3; Jones 133-36). In the same source, we find the mentioning of *cakravatin* referring to a "universal king," or, what Jones notes as literally "a 'wheel-

turner,'generally the title of a king ruling over the four continents," (*Mahāvastu* vol. 1; Jones 1).

In *The Records of Linji*, the asuras are rather interchangeably referred to as a tribe occupying one of the six states of being or a single individual in combat with Indra (19-20). In a revealing passage Linji states:

‘You say, ‘A Buddha has six supernatural powers. This is miraculous!’
All the gods, immortals, asuras, and might pretas also have
supernatural powers—must they be considered buddhas? Followers of
the Way, make no mistake! For instance, when Asura fought against
Indra and was routed in battle he led his entire throng, to the number
of eighty-four thousand, into the tube in a fiber of a lotus root to hide.
Wasn’t he then a sage? Such supernatural powers as these I have just
mentioned are all reward powers or dependent powers. (Sasaki 19-20)

Other sources range from the Theravada branch with mentioning of *asuras* in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon: here, one may find brief passages of the battle between *devas* and *asuras* from the *Samyutta Nikāya* (Connected Discourses of the Buddha), while the Mahayana sutras like the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sutra* (or *Lotus Sutra*) offer some mentioning of the specific team of guardians of whom *asuras* are members of (Kubo and Yuyama). In Japanese sects of Buddhism, the term used is *hachi bushu* 八部首 (lit. “eight legions”), and they traditionally consist of *devas*, *nagas*, *yaksas*, *gandharvas*, *asuras*, *garudas*, *kimnaras*, and *mahoragas*. Indeed, although the Asura of *Asura’s Wrath* is a highly condensed metonymy of the *asura* tribe, Asura the character still resides within a team of The Eight Guardian Generals in the *Asura’s Wrath* universe. It is his

very rebellion from the team of guardians, with his main antagonism focused on Deus (“Indra-Sakra” of the traditional Eight Guardians of Buddhism) that propels the plot of the story and leaves it in a rather Vedic-Puranic clash between Deus (as the *deva*) and Asura (as an *asura*). At this stage, the standard video game storyline ends. However, with the expanded storyline added on by the downloadable content (DLC), the story takes an extra step forward with Olga (another member of the Eight Guardians) poised to avenge Deus’ death by attempting to slay Mithra, Asura’s daughter. The Golden Spider intervenes, killing Olga, revealing his true identity as Chakravartin “Lord of Creation” and entering the body of Mithra. This sets the stage for Asura’s true opponent and final boss, Chakravarim. This turn of events in the DLC ending shifts the mythos of *Asura’s Wrath* from the Vedic-Puranic inflection into a more Buddhist-oriented vision of the workings of dharma. Golden Spider-Chakravartin, a Buddhist figure in many ways, presents Asura with a challenge that echoes in the writings of Buddhist literature:

Followers of the Way, if you want insight into dharma as it is, just don’t be taken in by the deluded views of others. Whatever you encounter, either within or without, slay it at once. On meeting a buddha slay the buddha, on meeting a patriarch slay the patriarch, on meeting an arhat slay the arhat, on meeting your parents slay your parents, on meeting your kinsman slay your kinsman, and you attain emancipation. By not cleaving to things, you freely pass through.

(Linji, *Records*; Sasaki 22, 236)

The transition from Vedic, Puranic to Buddhist traditions cannot be covered in any great detail here. In a three-part blog series entitled “A Buddhist’s Guide to *Asura’s*

Wrath,” Richmond Lee has provided a brilliant fan-based monography replete with visual material that celebrates *Asura’s Wrath*’s team of artists, the creative director and their fidelity to traditional iconography.

The “epic” quality of *Asura’s Wrath* that gives it the potential for correspondence with *God of War* and *Dante’s Inferno* is the stylized gameplay, meant to *empower* the player and endow them with superhuman, demigod abilities. Like the hero of epic poems, Kratos, Asura, Enoch and Dante are given centrality and are the driving agents of the plot. The situation differs greatly from the world of a massively multiplayer online game, or even an online multiplayer that involves fewer players, since the one heroic figure is not each player but the model through which they aim to achieve: name and fame. Although the “epic” games strive to provide the experience of being a hero, the heroic traits and goals can really only come about when the player has to actually *work* for his or her *name* and *fame*. The hero is one who, like Achilles, is “a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.”

Interpretations of Vedic scripture, the asura tribe, lore and legend within Japanese popular culture are not an entirely new project undertaken by *Asura’s Wrath*. Running from 1990 to 1996, CLAMP produced the manga *Seiden: Rigu Veda* (聖伝 RG VEDA) featuring Ashura 阿修羅 as the main androgynous protagonist (portrayed as a female princess in the anime OVA adaptation), whose father Ashura-Ō 阿修羅王 is slain and so catalyzes Ashura’s avenging quest and coming-of-age as the Black Star of the Six Stars. I argue that we are, once again, perceiving the process of diffusion reflected in the products of commerce.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ In the *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, a Daedric quest called the Black Star, is centered on the Daedric divinity Azura and her/her Shrine near Winterhold. The main quest item is the acquisition of either Azura’s Star, or the Black Star. Furthermore, Azura’s gender, like Ashura in *Seiden RG Veda*, is ambiguous with titles

Asura's Wrath is very much steeped in Vedic, Puranic and Buddhist sources. So much of the iconography retains fidelity with the visual canon as much as the scriptural. The cinematic stylization and depiction of Asura as an epic figure are conveyed through his extraordinary displays of deeds. He punches devas a thousand times his size and survives the most outlandish of assaults by divine figures. His suffering, however, is for something simple and pure: he wants his daughter back. The simple and human core of *Asura's Wrath* teaches that some attachments are necessary. Like the asuras of Buddhism, Asura's deeds are "atheistic" or "theomachic" in the sense that he battles the celestial authorities, but asuras also provide a sense of balance and measure to the otherwise excessive use of authority.

Case Study: *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron*

El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron (2011) tells the story of the Biblical figure of Enoch as he is called upon by God to descend to earth to stop the Flood. His main guide and counsel for the journey is Lucifel who narrates the backstory, offers save points, and carries on conversations with God over a cell phone to update Him on Enoch's progress. The video game is set in the general mode of action-adventure with heavily stylized aspects and an intuitive combo-attack control system. One could argue for *El Shaddai*'s inclusion with our previous case studies since it features epic and mythic qualities, with Enoch "translated" as an epic hero of sorts. In this way, *El Shaddai* takes some liberty with the originating source material and presents it as epic in form and content, whereas *God of War*, *Dante's Inferno* and *Asura's Wrath* are unified in their mode of gameplay, style, and representation of epic traditions. From another viable perspective, *El Shaddai* is also simply a ludic interpretation of the testimonies and claims of the legends and texts that constellate around the figure of Enoch, his visions and his role as the prototypical scribe.

Why, then, might we include a game whose story, setting, characters and plot elements are derived from Biblical and Apocryphal material? Is this material mythological or mythic? In some cases I would use more strict criteria, but in the case of *El Shaddai*, I would argue that the developers were not seeking to evangelize scripture; nor follow a dogmatic interpretation based on Mishna or exegetic practices. Instead, the Japanese developers and creators of *El Shaddai* have done something more complex: they have exercised a creative license that explores a collection of texts that (mainly) fall outside of canonical (that is, acknowledged) sources of Biblical personages; exceptions

that follow include certain passages of Metatron attested in Talmud. It should be noted that the Enochian texts are considered pseudepigraphic and Apocalyptic in genre. By taking such material into the creative mode, many of the dogmatic elements are bereft from the video game. However, this opens up the opportunity for mythologizing and mythopoetic liberties; Otherness enters in and becomes the leitmotif.

Discussing and analyzing the Enoch material within a study predominately engaged with mythological traditions may cause pause and have its detractors, since some Biblical scholars would question applying the term “myth” to Biblical narratives and would rather have it connote “false” and “pagan,” i.e. non-Biblical (Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination* 18-19). As a general remark on juxtaposing Biblical material with myth, I would highlight the fact that the sourced material presented in *El Shaddai* takes its cue from the more myth-oriented and themed elements of scripture that find corollaries in international myths and mythological motifs. On the whole, *El Shaddai* does exercise extensive artistic license with canonical and non-canonical texts and stories for its basis. In biblical tradition the apocryphal literature attributed to Enoch (*1 Enoch* or *Book of Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, *3 Enoch* or *Hebrew Enoch*), are not acknowledged as canon, i.e. they are considered pseudepigraphic. They fall outside of strict dogmatic teachings, and so have been the subject of countless interpretations from ancient mysteries, conspiracy theories, angelology, and other extravagant accounts, because the Enoch texts present extended passages on such fabulous beings as the Giants and Nephilim who are only briefly mentioned in the Hebrew bible. These beings offer suggestive parallels to other giants of Greco-Roman mythology and Mesopotamian myths, with myths of divine or primordial beings copulating with mortal women.

In this way, Enoch is indeed more mythic, because his body of texts and him, as a character and conduit, is a navigator of the Otherworld. *El Shaddai*, in its style and mode of gameplay, could easily be placed alongside *God of War*, *Dante's Inferno*, and *Asura's Wrath*, because it “translates” Enoch-Metatron into a mythic-epic character in a ludic mode and context. As Dean Miller states: “Fame and specific remembrance now give way to a more central aspect of the hero considered as type: his mediation between one zone and another, between this world and an Otherworld” (6). The fame of Enoch is his very otherworldly journey and vocation as a chosen one. And the paradigmatic pathway of Enoch's otherworldly journey tends to follow a similar trajectory found within *hekhlot* literature and without in shamanism (Davila 296-300). The lines of Genesis are ambiguous enough to generate a wonder for who he was, what he did, and where he went.

To claim that the material culled for the storyworld of *El-Shaddai* biblical is not enough. It is, instead, traceable to key biblical sources. To begin with, the very title situates the narrative trajectory and structure of the game's story: “El Shaddai” is a very specific name and title of God that has come down to popular English renderings as “God Almighty.” In Exodus 6:2-3, God-Elohim reveals Himself to Moses thus: “God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the Lord [*Elohim*]. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name [YHVH]” (*Jewish Study Bible*). Enoch, on the otherhand, is only mentioned passingly and remains a rather enigmatic figure in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In Genesis 5.21-24 we read, “When Enoch had lived 65 years, he begot Methuselah. After the birth of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years; and he begot sons and daughters. All the days of Enoch came to 365 years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God

took him” (*Jewish Study Bible* 20-21). Why he was chosen, where he went and what he saw lead to a rich tradition of texts that constitute a substantial body of Apocalyptic literature. In *The City of God*, Augustine mentions Enoch’s translation association with the events that lead up to the Flood, and Enoch’s role, but denies the books attributed to Enoch (XV.19-23; Dyson 673-84).

As the title of *El Shaddai* suggests, Enoch’s journey and process of translation that sets him on the path to his appointment as the “Angel” Metatron. Metatron is entirely absent from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, but finds mentioning in the Rabbinic writings of the Talmud, and Jewish Apocalyptic literature: *1 Enoch* (*Book of Enoch*), *2 Enoch*, *3 Enoch* (*Hebrew Book of Enoch*), and the *Book of Jubilees*. However, the video game *El Shaddai* seems to draw mostly from *1 Enoch* and *3 Enoch*: the former gives a detailed account of the legend of the Watchers, Enoch’s dream visions, his ascent and his translation; the latter provides a fuller account of Enoch’s promotion and identity with Metatron. In his noted commentary on *3 Enoch* 12.5, Hugo Odeberg mentions that “The reference [Ex. xxiii. 21: ‘For my name is in him.’] has been interpreted from the equal numerical value of Metatron and *Shaddai* (the name of God Almighty)” (33).

When *El Shaddai* begins, we find Enoch in his typical role as a scribe. In his extensive study of the Enoch-Metatron tradition, Andrei Orlov provides the following summary of this role:

The important aspect of the early portrayals of Enoch as a scribe is that they depict him in the capacity of both celestial and terrestrial scribe, as the one who not only records messages from his heavenly guides, but also composes petitions at the request of the creatures from the

lower realm, for example, the fallen Watchers/Giants who ask him for mediation. (51)

In a way, this passage provides the major plot and structure that informs the storyline of *El Shaddai*. Enoch must battle through various levels in the pattern of an initiation, guided by the head Angel Lucifel (spelling intended), who keeps God on speed dial and chats with Him over a cell phone. When the player needs to get to a save point, he or she will know because he/she will hear a cell phone ringing, Lucifel answering and providing updates on Enoch's progress. Other guides include the archangel's Michael, Uriel, Gabriel and Raphael in the form of geese.

The majority of other the characters/opponents mostly derive from the Enoch-Metatron tradition. *I Enoch*, as mentioned earlier, provides the full description of the Watchers who, as the Fallen Angels, are instrumental opponents that Enoch must enter into combat with (*I En.* 6-16). They include: Semzaya, Azazel, Ezekiel, and Sariel. Only Ezekiel is quite out of place (and is a female character, no less), while the other three are attested in *I Enoch*. Sariel is a rather ambivalent figure, while Azazel is a technological Watcher. In *I Enoch* he is described as the Watcher who gave humanity technology, cosmetics, armory and the weapons of war; he is considered the prime cause for the destructive activities of humanity (8.1-2; Black 28-29). In both *I Enoch* and *El Shaddai*, Semzaya is described as the leader of the Watchers who lead instigated the major transgressions against God by fornicating with mortal women. As the leader, Semzaya rallies the other Watchers/Fallen Angels and proposes a pact (*I En.* 6.2-5). A similar plot is established with one major difference in *El Shaddai*: Semzaya is given an almost Promethean-like role wherein he steals the Fruits of Wisdom from God. Overall, however,

the domain of each Watcher as described in *I Enoch* 6-7 informs the aesthetics and artistic design of each level in *El Shaddai* that ultimately lead up to the battle with their respective Watcher. For instance, the level leading up to Azazel is styled after a science fiction city akin to the genre of cyberpunk. The style visually cues the player that Azazel is the Fallen Angel responsible for technological excess.

In his ambitious article, Jason Anthony briefly comments on *El Shaddai* as video game based on “a cast of angels based loosely on the apocryphal book of Enoch, but the plot and character of the angels takes it far afield from any canonical understanding of scripture” (40). I would argue there is much more to *El Shaddai*. I will grant that there is much, much creative license taken with the source material, and that is what takes the *El Shaddai* out of the purview of being an example of a religious game *per se*, and places it instead into, what I would argue, a category of myth. Once a sacred or religious narrative leaves its canon—apocryphal or not in this case—it leaves room for the imagination and the ambivalence of the image to multiply interpretations and create room for variability. However, *El Shaddai* does not go as far afield as Anthony leads us to believe. The development team did considerable research and re-presented the material drawn from the Enoch-Metatron tradition and made some attempt to translate Enoch into an entertaining heroic figure with dimensions extending into myth and epic.

When consulting the Apocalyptic literature associated with the biblical figure of Enoch alongside the video game, I found that the creators of *El Shaddai* actually *did* do much careful research before making use of artistic license for entertainment purpose. For instance, they offered a rather comical take on the Nephilim making them appear as phallic figures with no real sense of bone structure. They have a typical stylization of

cuteness, or *kawai'i*, but their stumbling and tripping is rather close to their description in *I Enoch*: “But the *vicious* spirits (issuing) from the giants, the Nephilim—they inflict harm, they destroy, they attack, they wrestle and dash to the ground, *causing injuries*; they eat nothing, but fast and thirst and produce hallucinations, and they collapse” (15.1; cf. Gen. 6.4). All of these traits can be found in the behavior of *El Shaddai*’s Nephilim. Their Gumby-like demure is offset only by the damage they actually do afflict on the player.

Closer analysis of comparanda, i.e. scripture, the books of/about Enoch (e.g. *I Enoch*, *3 Enoch*), actual gameplay, and the storyline of *El Shaddai* itself, reveal strict adaptation and creative additions throughout. The most extravagant aspect of *El Shaddai* that goes “far afield” is the general stylization of the biblical figure Enoch and the mythologizing of non-canonical texts. The world of those texts clearly reflects some creative amalgamation with a science fiction setting and a touch of *kawai'i* aesthetic in beings like the Nephilim. However, if we consider the Apocryphal genre and its use of otherworldly journeys as core narrative structuration and constellation of motifs, *El Shaddai*’s otherworldliness is actually quite appropriate rather than a far-fetched appropriation of scripture. Its influences from science fiction and ethereal landscapes only assist in these aesthetic expressions of xenotropic themes.

The “Otherness” of *El-Shaddai* and the “alien” qualities only reflect the retainment and modification through descent of secular mythologies where the “death of God,” transforms deities into aliens.

Concluding remarks

The “Other” can be easily demonized. But, how is one able to know if he or she is indeed the demon? The video games discussed in this chapter tend to blur this distinction and challenge the player to consider *inter alia* going against a god—i.e. entering a theomachy—is conceivable, imaginable, and possible without the loss of integrity or ethos. Indeed both are edified by it. For Kratos, it was learning to, paradoxically and tragically, direct his might against the very god that gave him the strength and madness to slaughter his wife and child; for Asura, it was in seeking vengeance against the celestial powers (the supposed Higher Powers; Deus and Chakravartin) that murdered his wife and abducted his daughter by channeling his divine wrath; for Dante, it was to face God’s Adversary, (*diabolos*), Lucifer, himself who, in the mythos of *Dante’s Inferno*, stole away his beloved Beatrice. A very different Lucifer is presented in *El Shaddai*’s “Lucifel,” who functions as the life-line through which Enoch could fulfill his task in becoming the scribe, voice, and agent of God’s justice against the Fallen Angels and the Nephilim.

Epic—whether in poetic or ludic form—is one of the few genres that have the scale, stature, and structure to develop and explore the complexity of a heroic personage and mythic events. Through the accretion of tradition—maintained by epic poets and invested creators—further amplifications, innovations, and transpositions can take place modifying heroic deeds from one hero (or anti-hero) to the next. In this way, mythological and religious figures meet, mix, and mutate in epic. If we think of characters like Milton’s Satan challenging God in *Paradise Lost*, we might be reminded of the Titan Prometheus in his cunning rebellion against Zeus. The function of the rebel, mythic or epic, has proven to be a popular character to embody and participate in, if only

for the brief thrill of going against what is pressed upon the hero by a god/God. But to challenge a divinity the hero still requires a god/God behind them. The hero is the rare figure who can stand on either side of a divine conflict and contribute. Through such struggles, his/her role is catalyzed through a path where the spirit of competition is fueled and fed.

Chapter 9: *Catherine* as Modern Mythic Text

Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend.

—Mark Schorer (“The Necessity of Myth” 356)

Everything that can become the object of our inner perception is *virtual*...

—Sigmund Freud (*Interpretation of Dreams* 405-6)

This chapter offers an analysis of the video game *Catherine*. Part classic video game play, part tragic-comedy, role-playing and interactive storytelling, woven into a unified interactive experience, *Catherine* centers on the latent coming-of-age story of Vincent, a young man of 32 struggling with sudden night terrors of committing to marriage or remaining a bachelor. However unified the game world appears in the dream sequences, the story may unfold in numerous ways, because the player determines the ways in which Vincent responds to his crises and daily interactions in Vincent’s waking life—in other words, the player shapes Vincent’s life-course during a critical phase in his romantic conundrums. The game renders the next level of what Evans Lansing Smith refers to as *ludic syncretism*: “a playful mélange of mythological imagery derived from a variety of different traditions” (*Myth of Descent* 7). In part, our engagement with a strain of *ludic* syncretism runs throughout this study—one which I introduced above as being linked to the process of *interpretatio ludi*—for, it demonstrates how systems of myths coalesce, conflate and converge within the magic circle, or domain of game playing. In some cases, this may be a detriment to the sacred traditions represented, that is to say, when myth as *sacred narrative* is appropriated and subjected to exoticism entering a secular space as *parodic phantasmagoria*.

The process of an initiation ritual becomes curiously simulated in the patterned story and game play of *Catherine*, along with the layers of mythological themes woven throughout its exposition. This is ultimately spurred on by the life-crisis Vincent faces as he approaches a critical split in his romantic life. The build-up accrues dramatically in the short period of Vincent's crisis, spilling into phantasmagoric dream terrors of repressed anxieties.

Beyond our approach to *Catherine* as a text of mythological themes, we may also recognize other modes of storytelling that inform and shape the narrative. Of these, I have briefly mentioned that Vincent largely goes through dramatic life events that shape his character. This form of plot lends itself readily to the genre of literature known as the *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel. At the core of the *Bildungsroman* is typically a young male protagonist who struggles through individuation and maturation in the face of societal demands. Vincent faces such challenges as he must choose to either follow the pressures of society (marriage with Katherine), or pursue his erotic passions (affair with Catherine).

I will engage in comparative analysis from selected primary mythic and alchemical texts (e.g. the *Emerald Tablet* of Hermes Trismagistos and the Rosicrucian romance, the *Chymical Wedding* of Christian Rosenkreutz by J.V. Andreae), developing the video game's predilection for offering new levels of immersion into symbols and mythic images from a diverse array of traditions to form fittingly what Francis Yates and Theodore Ziolkowski call a *ludibrium* like the *Chymical Wedding* (Yates 43; Ziolkowski 56).

Such consciously constructed practices of mythical and alchemical storytelling may also bleed over into allegorical readings akin to influential medieval courtly literature like the French poem *Roman de la Rose* (ca. 1230) commenced by Guillaume de Lorris (lines 1-4058) and continued by Jean de Meun (ca. 1275), which features a famous extended allegorical dream vision replete with an opening speech on the significance of dream-content: “I am convinced that a dream signifies the good and evil that come to men, for most men at night dream many things in a hidden way which may afterward be seen openly” (Dahlberg 31).

More recent writers of fiction have also taken up the ludic approach to storytelling like Italo Calvino in his 1969 novel *Castle of Crossed Destinies*, in which characters discover each others’ identity not through conventional speech, but through dialogues through Tarot cards. Herman Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game* (*Magister Ludi*) depicts a near-future society of élite engrossed in games of knowledge.

A central thematic vein addressed in *Catherine* includes the typical myth of the fertility goddess and her Consort (e.g. Inanna and Dumuzi; Ishtar and Tammuz; Venus and Adonis; Cybele and Attis) featured across many world mythologies and studied extensively in Sir James G. Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. With the storyline’s exposition of gender relations, marriage and initiation, I argue *Catherine*’s peculiar case as a meditation on the inner life of our outward engagement with others (an intimate topic rarely handled in video gaming). *Catherine* presents itself as a highly sophisticated alchemical work in both content and form, if for nothing else than its elucidation of the basic alchemical tenet, “that which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing” (Linden

28). But in true alchemical form, *Catherine* reveals to the observant and reflective player the pervasive gamesmanship involved in relationships in general and courtship in particular.

Catherine represents a rich and rare case of a video game tackling complex and intimate themes, and further allows for multiple levels of reading. The mythological themes are both opaque and deeply psychological. Through a hermeneutical approach, I have attempted to parse out a few of these layers to reveal *Catherine*'s deeper meanings, while also demonstrating how it unfolds those meanings through the unique discourse of game play.

Background of *Catherine* and Situating the Storyline

The MegaTen Universe

The *MegaTen* series began as a video game adaptation of a collection of novels by Nishitani Aya in the 1980s, with the full title being *Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei*. The subtitle *megami tensei* 女神転生 can be translated as “Goddess reborn,” or “Goddess reincarnation,”—and perhaps more loosely translated as the colloquial, “Return of the Goddess”—and initially referred to the rescue of Izanami, the female *kami* and partner of Izanagi, by the main character Akemi Nakajima and his partner Yumiko Shirasagi, two average highschool adolescence. This rough sketch offers a minor slice of the *Megami Tensei* 女神転生 (often shortened to “*MegaTen*” by fans) universe, but nonetheless helps to situate the style of storytelling, themes, motifs and game play portrayed in the world of the video game *Catherine*. It is not so much that humans interact with divinities and beings of the supernatural, but how enmeshed and invested both sides become over the

course of the storyline. In a direct line of descent the *Megami Tensei* series would later spawn the *Shin Megami Tensei* 真・女神転生 (“True Reincarnation of the Goddess”) of the 1990s – 2000s, which in turn lead to the closest of kin to *Catherine*, the *Persona* series. *Catherine* is a loosely based side-story with threads going back to *Persona 3 Portable*, which features Vincent as an “anonymous man” at a bar drinking alone.

The *Persona* series, since its inception, has kept a loose engagement with the theories and concepts of C. G. Jung’s analytical psychology, as the namesake of the series indicates. In so doing, Jung’s own studies of the occult and alchemy have also come to influence the creators in various degrees throughout the *MegaTen* and *Persona* worlds, giving shape and significance to the mythos and ethos.

Catherine is not an exact continuation of the *Persona* universe in game play per se nor in the targeted age for the audience and characters. *Persona* games tend to feature high school age protagonists and characters going through a coming-of-age. They often undergo initiation and partake in nocturnal battles with the shadows of their “personas”: a direct influence from the writings and thought of Jung. The use of “personas” is one of the key differences that separate the *Persona* series from the *Megami Tensei* series of games, which rely on the Demon Summoning Program. Taken together, however, both the *Megami Tensei* and *Persona* games act as transtextual and transmedial ecologies from which the mythos of *Catherine* has emerged. *Catherine*, unlike the youth-oriented worlds of the *Megami Tensei* and *Persona* series’, features a 32 year old man who faces issues of commitment in the various intimate relationships he attempts to manage over the course of the game. The themes explored in the *Catherine* world tend towards highly mature, “adult,” PG-13 material.

There are significant continuities that link *Catherine* fundamentally, functionally and thematically with the MegaTen universe.

Ancient spirits, contemporary life

The world of *Catherine* is a loose parallel world with the *Persona* series, which is itself an off-shoot of the *Megami Tensei* universe. To understand the implementation of mythological beings, systems of divinities and their bleeding into a contemporary human life, the player can familiarize themselves with the *MegaTen* mythos in general, and may have a better understanding of the world of *Catherine* and its intertextual relation to the *Persona* series and *Megami Tensei* and *Shin Megami Tensei*. However, *Catherine* functions just as well as a stand-alone storyline and video game. It is a kind of typical stylization of the *MegaTen* universe to combine the mythological, magical and realistic modes of setting and story to match the gameplay. In an illuminating and candid interview with creative director Kazuma Kaneko, he was asked where the essential style and theme originated from, he answers:

Simply put, it's an antithesis to mainstream fantasy works, such as The Lord of the Rings and Dungeons & Dragons. Back then, all RPGs were fantasy-based, and I wondered why there were no RPGs that took place in a modern world. If there aren't any, then why don't I make one? That's how it started. Another thing that bothered me was the trend of the main character always being portrayed as someone special -- a legendary warrior, for example. It was the equivalent of saying you can't succeed unless you're from a wealthy family, and I just couldn't stand that. I wasn't born with special genes, and I'm sure

most other players weren't either. No matter who you are, if you're given a chance and have the guts to try your best, you can become a hero...That became the concept of Megami Tensei.

Gods, demons, and various events that are present in the series can be thought of as metaphors for real-life social structures. The main characters in these games employ demons to fight against powerful enemies. They mature as they overcome the anxieties and anger that they feel towards society. Resistance to society's norms and growing out of adolescence...A hard rock interpretation of Pinocchio...That's the basic style of Megami Tensei. (Kaneko, *GMR* interview)

Kaneko's statements, especially the opening line of the second paragraph, indicate a concerted effort of using mythological and religious material for myth-telling and world-building purposes. It is reminiscent of the mythical method described by T. S. Eliot where antiquity and contemporaneity converge. In another interview with Ed Moore for *The Escapist* in 2010, Kaneko also candidly expressed his deep fascination with worldwide folklore, religion and mythologies. One of his main drives in shaping the *MegaTen* universe has been to find compelling ways to integrate folklore with cutting-edge science and theory, and also to get players to think critically and morally about their interaction with the diverse array of traditions depicted in the series. When asked which mythology he found most intriguing, Kaneko answered, "For the myths...I like the Old Testament of the Bible. Many myths in the world share traits like the triad of deities, duality such as good and evil, the creation of the world, and the flood. But because the Old Testament is the most simple, it gives me the idea that it might actually be the root of

all the myths.” But in regards to other traditions, Kaneko expressed partial interest in shared traits, like thunder-god traits in Zeus and Thor, but ultimately found that their differences in attire and equipment offered better opportunities to explore creative direction and application in the gameworld (Kaneko, *Escapist* Interview 1).

At their core the innovative features of the games, starting with *Megami Tensei* (1987), was the expansion of a first-person view for navigating dungeons and locales. This was akin to the techniques of first-person perspectives advanced by Richard Garriot’s *Ultima* series. The occasion for the interview marked the release of the game *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne*, which was, in some ways, a transition title ushering in the *Persona* series. While *Megami Tensei* and *Shin Megami Tensei* games tend to grapple with societal issues, or “social structures” as Kaneko says, the *Persona* series explores more of the psychology of the characters. In particular, the *Persona* series is aimed at younger audiences, but also utilizes Jungian depth psychology to inform the mythos. Instead of working exclusively through demon-summoning to fight enemies (i.e., MegaTen style), the *Persona* games focus on awakening one’s inner power in the form of a “persona” that is then used to engage with the nocturnal shamanic otherworld, a liminal world of an in-between reality set apart from daily waking life.

With these two major conceptual worlds in mind, the *Catherine* world combines both the sociological and the psychological dimensions, as the protagonist, Vincent, faces nightmare dreams that plague him personally, while such dreams effectively impact the other local young men of his general demographic in a local province as well. In this way, the nightmare dreams—featuring the act of climbing the blocks (the core gameplay)—contribute to the personal and impersonal levels of the story and characters. Depending

on which path and which end the player leads Vincent, it is relatively maintained that Vincent functions more as an antihero than the traditional hero.

Dream as bridge to the Other World

In the *MegaTen* universe, players encounter a panoply of mythological beings, deities and demons. By way of the liminal space of dream, the player enters an Other World that runs contemporaneously with his or her character's waking life. The dreaming connects—like a bridge—the player to an Other World, similar to theories within depth psychology of the dream-bridge assimilation (Hillman, *Dream and Underworld* 1-3) . The interaction between waking and dreaming states of consciousness is a constant theme explored throughout the *MegaTen* universe. Among other things, it situates the player's character between the psychological demands of a sudden vocation or invitation to fulfill a role in societal, collective, or even cosmic events.

Creative Storytelling, Mythmaking, and Depth Psychology

Thus far, we have availed the topic of the mythic and ludic from the depth psychological approach. This, in part, is due to determining suitable analysis and perspective(s) based on the data itself. The game- and story-world of the video game *Catherine* makes explicit, like many titles from Atlus studios, the influences of psychoanalysis of Freud and the analytical psychology of Jung. In particular, the strains of each pioneers work on dreams, myth, and the psyche. By drawing from the works of Freud and Jung as they relate to the world of *Catherine*, I am also admitting their work to guide certain aspects and readings of *Catherine* alongside other methods that contradict a reliance on either of their works. Few video games explicitly use depth psychology for storytelling purposes, and by doing so, the developers of *Catherine*—I suspect—use it in

a non-conventional way to illustrate rather than illuminate. In other words, the language of psychoanalysis and analytical psychology are so opaque as to reveal the impact such schools have on a fictional character (i.e. the existent of the *diegetic* level). Whether one adopts such psychological approaches to myth is of little consequence beyond the diegetic (fictional) world of *Catherine* and like-minded video games. Rather, such approaches, techniques, and strategies become the tools of the storyteller, appropriated for their recursive mythification and gamefication of Jungian theory. The implications of this subtle gesture and usage of depth psychology suggests a paradigmatic shift away from the psychologist and towards the creative artist—myth-maker—in dictating and narrating a mythology of depth psychology, rather than having depth psychology serve as an approach to the problem of mythology. Such a feat could only be done by the myth-maker standing outside as the exogenous exotifier (signifier of the exotic); that is to say, *interpretatio ludi*: translating foreign material of cultural significance into *ludibrium*. As Doniger proclaims:

If the great mythic themes are social rather than biological (or psychological), they are not built into the brain and they can be changed. Storytellers may, like Judo wrestlers, use the very weight of archetypes to throw them, and with them to throw the prejudices that have colored them for centuries. Call it deconstruction, call it subversion, or just call it creative storytelling. (“Minimyths and Maximyths” 114)

It is also worth emphasizing on a practical level that the approach applied here is well afield from the grounding needed between the analyst and patient whose relationship and

contiguity is essential for the work and method required to fully do justice to Jungian (and Freudian) analysis properly. In other words, the video games discussed throughout this study were not used in conjunction with a proper session of Jungian analysis, but rather their analysis has been based on their usage of mythological material as discussed, informed and theorized in and through Jungian literature. Such methods of using video games in the context of analysis seems, from this students point of view, a possible and advantageous direction and opportunity to expand on Jung's methods such as active imagination and his contribution to play therapy. In this study, we are not investigating this avenue, but instead on the artistic usage (psychologizing, as it were) of depth psychology. Put in other words, we are more interested in conscious, artful and demonstrative uses, than conjecturing on their direct statements about the unconscious (collective or personal). Though similarities are made apparent and explored, we are not arguing for any substantial contiguity.

It is also worth reiterating that Jung stressed the importance of taking in the life-situation of the individual who *experiences* archetypal encounters:

Those who do not realize the special feeling tone of the archetype end with nothing more than a jumble of mythological concepts, which can be strung together to show that everything means anything—or nothing at all. All the corpses in the world are chemically identical, but living individuals are not. Archetypes come to life only when one patiently tries to discover why and in what fashion they are meaningful to a living individual. (*Man and His Symbols* 96)

As a rare case, *Catherine* elicits an attempt to simulate such an encounter and recreates the impact of the archetypal on our protagonist, Vincent.

What follows is an amplification of the mythological, religious and folkloric material as it relates to the characters of *Catherine*. In this sense, a “Jungian” approach is exercised. It is to this approach that I give most attention to within the general tradition of depth psychology. The analyst or player interested in Freudian underpinnings would find just as many enticing elements within the video game content and story *Catherine*. For instance, Vincent’s dreams alone portray in anthropomorphized forms his fears and instinctual drives that could be interpreted as symbolic of wholly personal unconscious and subconscious factors. The bosses at the end of each level do not come from the top, but from below—from the “unconscious”—and can be said to represent a return of the repressed. For example, the demon-baby or demon-Bride/Katherine both encapsulate Vincent’s personal fear of settling down (i.e. Superego claims of societal pressures), while the demon in the form of a curvaceous buttocks can be understood to represent Vincent’s primal drives of his Id. Mythologically, Freud likened these wishes of the Unconscious to the Titans (*Interpretation* 362-63). These are but cursory readings that serve to intimate that the Freudian approach resonates throughout *Catherine*. In these instances, the latent meaning of Vincent’s dreams can all be understood through cultural and personal relativity. In Jungian terms, such material may also be readily understood as manifestations of the personal unconscious and, thus, complexes as much as the collective unconscious and the archetypes. Nonetheless, the following analysis is to be understood as an exercise within the purview of concepts and theories within Jungian depth psychology. For example, the general process of amplification whereby the analyst

“deliberately raises dream images to mythic proportions” (Hillman, *Dream and Underworld* 101; cf. Johnson, *Inner Work* 59-62). Conversely, we may then understand the mythologizing of *Catherine* as the creative (and ludic) use of depth psychology for world-building and mythmaking.

Sources of Lore and Themes

Fertility

One aspect of the crisis that befalls the young men of *Catherine* is the issue of fertility. Young men begin to experience strange dreams of being shepherded into a dark and gothic cathedral that floats in an otherworldly plane. As Vincent, the player interacts with walking sheep with the voices of young men. Each person seems to be going through a dilemma of either being single, being in a difficult relationship or lacking the courage to commit to marriage. During the dream scenarios, Vincent simply wears his boxers and is adorned with a pair of sheep’s horns. These details intimate to the player that Vincent is simply a sheep among the sheepflock.

The imagery and recurrent motifs of sheep is throughout the gameworld of *Catherine*. Once the player discovers the true identity of “Boss,” as Dumuzid, the references come together. For instance, “Boss” is the bartender of the local bar, The Lost Sheep. This references clearly points to the shepherd Dumuzi of ancient Sumer. In the composition, *Dumuzid’s Dream*, we find Dumuzid being hunted by demons in a dream (Black, et al. 77-84). As it is described, “the composition exploits the powerful image of the sheepfold as a centre of warmth, well-being, prosperity, and stability (77).

Aspects of the Femme Fatale in Religion and Folklore

As the player comes to realize near the end of *Catherine*, Vincent has been sorely lead astray by the sweet, playful and seductive Catherine, only to find out that she was an illusion and projection of his imagination. Boss describes her as a *succubus*, working for him and the Midnight Venus, Trisha.⁵⁰ Sent to test the young men of the town, Catherine was the temptress.

Certain other figures of seductive females in folklore deserve a closer look. What follows are accounts of distinct gendered spirits that seduce young males. I have focused this comparison on the succubus of Christian lore and demonology, and the more ambivalent fox-spirit as it manifests in Chinese folklore and literature as the *hulijing* 狐狸精 and the still more ambivalent and liminal *kitsune* 狐 of Japanese folktales and sacred tales. Since the character Catherine is identified and described as a succubus, our analysis begins there:

First, the *American Heritage Dictionary* offers the following definition:

suc·cu·bus (sŭk yə-bəs) also **suc·cu·ba** (-bə)

n. pl. **suc·cu·bus·es** or **suc·cu·bi** (-bī', -bē') also **suc·cu·bae** (-bē', -bī')

1. A female demon supposed to descend upon and have sexual intercourse with a man while he sleeps.

2. An evil spirit; a demon.

[Middle English, from Medieval Latin, alteration (influenced by Late Latin incubus, incubus) of Latin succuba, paramour, from succubāre, to lie under: sub-, sub- + cubāre, to lie down.]

⁵⁰ F471.2.1 *Succubus: female incubus*

Notice the etymological data indicating the term succubus as a compound. According to other etymologies of the term, *succumb*, it can mean 1. *to lay or put one's self under anything; to fall down, lie, or sink down.*, and further, it can relate to a female companion: 1. Of a woman, *to lie down to a man, to cohabit with him*. Similarly, the male *incubus*⁵¹ shares a close heritage with the prefix *in-* meaning more to lie or sleep *on* than *under*. Hence, in more common parlance we use terms like *incubate* in association with sleeping or gestating. In depth psychology there is also the study of the technique of *dream incubation*.⁵²

In Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (ca. AD 560-636) we read an early attempt of comparative expansion (VIII.xi):

'Hairy ones' (*Pilosus*, i.e. a satyr) are called *Panitae* in Greek, and 'incubuses' (*incubus*) in Latin, or Inui, from copulating (*inire*) indiscriminately with animals. Hence also *incubi* are so called from 'lying upon' (*incumbere*, ppl. *incubitus*), that is, violating, for often they are shameless towards women, and manage to lie with them. The Gauls call these demons *Dusii*, because they carry out this foulness continually (*adsidue*). 104. Common people call one demon Incubo,

⁵¹ *Motif-Index*: F471.2 *Incubus*. The incubus is a male demon that comes in sleep and has sexual intercourse with a woman. For an extensive treatment of incubi lore as it relates to dreams and nightmares, see Ernest Jone's chapter entitled "Incubus and Incubation," in *On the Nightmare* (1931).

⁵² Dream Incubation was a technique practiced as early as ancient Egypt and in the Greco-roman world when a pilgrim would travel to a temple sacred to a deity of healing, whereby the pilgrim would consciously attempt to induce a dream to solve a problem or heal an ailment (e.g. Egyptian Serapis and Greek Asklepios, Roman Aesculapius. For further material on dream incubation and the heuristic, or problem solving, application of dream incubation see *Extraordinary Dreams and How to Work with Them* by Stanley Krippner, Fariba Bogzaran, and André Percia de Carvalho where they state, "dream incubation is a valuable technique...[and] it is especially helpful in addressing creative or problem-oriented questions because of the opportunity it gives to tap into the creative capacities of the dreaming process" (30).

and the Romans called him ‘Faunus of the figs.’ About him Horace says (*Odes* 3.18.1):

Faunus, lover of fleeing nymphs, may you pass lightly
through my borders and sunny fields.

(Barney et al. 103)

The erotic encounter is also a cross-cultural manifestation, especially when linked with the phenomenon of sleep paralysis. Following a brief survey of incubi and succubi, Shelley R. Adler, in her extensive study of sleep paralysis, suggests, “eroticization of the encounter is not a peculiarity of European history. The erotic form of the night-mare tradition is less easily traced than its primary features, but it is an aspect of the experience that appears in different historical and cultural contexts” (47). Though within the context of *Catherine*’s fictional world, the encounter with Catherine is considered seductive advances made by a succubus, there are also suggestive parallels in folklore native to Japan, the cultural complex from which the video game was developed by Atlus.

For instance, consider the following conclusion to a Tale 1:2 (“On Taking a Fox as a Wife and Producing a Child”) of the *Nihon Ryōiki* (Record of Miraculous Events in Japan):

‘You and I have together produced a child. Therefore, I can never forget you. Whenever I call, come and sleep with me.’ Thus, following the husband’s word, she came and slept with him. (Hence she is called a *kitsune* [meaning both ‘fox’ and ‘come and sleep’]). (Watson 15)

Another translation reads:

‘Since a child was born between us, I cannot forget you. Please come always and sleep with me.’ She acted in accordance with her husband’s words and came and slept with him. For this reason she was named ‘Kitsune’ meaning ‘come and sleep.’ (Nakamura 105)

Nakamura offers the following extension on the *Kanji*: “7. Folk etymology of *kitsune*, fox; *kitsu-ne* 来寝 means ‘Come and sleep,’ while *ki-tsune* 来毎 means ‘come always.’” (105)

The folk etymology offers striking similarities between the succubus and the *kitsune*, but the behavior, method and function in tales and literature of these two figures does not always play out the same. The succubus has obvious demonic connotations, while the *kitsune* remains fairly ambivalent. Even between the Japanese *kitsune* and Chinese *hulijing*, the latter tends to receive more slander and is used in modern parlance as a derogatory term for a slut, whore or homewrecker.

As Steven Heine relates, the Japanese “bivalent” fox-spirit had specific ties to the *kami* Inari:

Folklore vixens may be mischievous and malicious or faithful and affectionate. And in a broader spiritual sense the bivalent fox image can appear as protective and redemptive as well as deceptive and cunning. On the positive side, divine fox images representing the messenger of the Shinto rice deity, Inari, are constructively assimilated in Japan with Buddhist and especially Zen deities and shrines to the point where the sects nearly indistinguishable – thereby contributing to the tradition of *shinbutsu shugo*: the oneness of buddhas and local gods (*kami*). The fox cult that has apparently quite powerful in pre-

T'ang and T'ang China never developed a full-fledged institutional structure (26). In Japan, however, the fox known as *kitsune* has since the eighth century been enshrined and worshiped in a pervasive network of sacred associations in connection with Inari. The widespread cult – it claims more than thirty thousand shrines nationwide – portrays *kitsune* as a divine messenger of the rice god who promotes agrarian fertility as well as productivity and prosperity in a much broader sense. (26)

These deeper sacred connections and associations between the *kitsune* and Inari are striking if we turn to the use of Catherine-Katherine (the temptress-fiancé) as a bivalent split, but also in recognizing Catherine, the temptress as an agent of Ishtar, the fertility deity of Ancient Mesopotamia.

The third character in *hulijing*, *jing* 精, refers to essence, vitality, spirit and/or semen. And, according to Chinese folk belief, the *hulijing* (fox-spirit) came on as a seductive young woman, taking time to visit male individuals who were actively pursuing civil service exams or academic studies; such men were thus tucked away in their studios in prolonged solitude. Over the course of their relations with the young men, the *hulijing* gradually extracts and drains her partner of *jing* 精 and also of his vital *yang* 陽, being as she was an agent of *yin* 陰. Such traits emerged in correlation with strict practice in Taoist hygienic and alchemical cultivation of a male's retention of semen during sex, so as not to lose their vital essence to the woman. Sexuality was a sort of contest as to who would orgasm first, and so lose. Hence, in fabled form in tales and folk belief, female

beings were constructed as the temptress, seducer, and extractor of the male's essence (xx-xxiv Minford; Smyers 127-128).

One of the main collection of stories that features the *hulijing* and his/her activities is Pu Songling's (1640-1715AD) *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozai Zhiyi*), a popular vernacular collection of short stories that still finds television and film adaptations for contemporary audiences.

The tale "Lotus Fragrance" is one such account of a young man's encounter with two different breeds of spectral females: one a *hulijing* and the other a ghost. The young man, Sang Xiao, and his encounter with a *hulijing* as a beautiful young woman in the personage of Lotus Fragrance. During their chance meeting—which is structured and commentated on as a game—Sang Xiao also falls into relations with a young maiden-ghost named Li (of the Li family). Over the course of the tale, Sang becomes ensnared in a love-triangle with both supernatural women, with Lotus Fragrance taking an extended leave and Li, true to her nature as a fatal ghost, slowly draws Sang's life-energy out over several nights of sexual encounters. Both women are quick to each others' game and the plot develops as a complex and emotional meditation on trans-species relations and maintaining a harmonious polygamous arrangement. As other *hulijing* tales in Pu Songling can attest, Sang Xiao must also struggle with the cultivation and preservation of his *qi* and yang-energy when faced with not only Lotus Fragrance the *hulijing* but Li. Given its date of composition these particular tales reflect the societal dealings of male scholars maintaining relations with their wife and concubine.

In the Chinese text of dream analysis, *Wandering Spirits* (*Youshen*) by Chen Shiyuan, he offers the following remarks on the demonic and dream-intrusions:

What is meant by ‘demonic presences’? Death-dealing demons attach themselves to people as disastrous influences. Ghosts of people with grievances will seek revenge against those responsible. They appear in dreams because the thoughts of the dreamer are filled with doubts and his spirit and *qi*-energy are in a state of confusion. Then, demons take advantage of these weaknesses to let loose their strange forms of retribution. Thus do calamities and disasters arise, and it becomes difficult to pray for blessings and well-being. (Strassberg 94)

A vivid discourse on succubi comes from the *Demonality or Incubi and Succubi* (De Daemonialitate, et Incubis, et, Succubis), a 17th century Latin manuscript by Rev. Ludovicus Maria Sinistrari of Ameno. The title is self-evident, but pertains, in detail, to human intercourse with demonic beings, incubus or succubus, or demonality. According to Sinistrari, the demon transforms, that is, shapeshifts, into a succubus to fulfill one of few functions:

...the Demon is transformed into a Succuba, *et juncta homini semen ab eo recipit*; or else he procures pollution from a man during sleep, *et semen prolectum in suo native calore, et cum vitali spiritu conservat, et incubando faeminae infert in ipsius matricem*, whence follows impregnation. (33)

Like the *hulijing*, the succubus is, first and foremost, a shapeshifter and, second, a being sent to receive the semen of the male victim (*et juncta homini semen ab eo recipit*) and vital energy (*vitali spiritu*) from their male victim.

The following section sets out an extended passage on the succubi in particular, with subsequent alleged accounts:

At other times also the Demon, whether Incubus or Succubus, copulates with men or women from whom he receives none of the sacrifices, homage or offerings which he is wont to exact from Wizards [*Sagis*] or Witches [*Maleficis*], as aforesaid. He is then but a passionate lover, having only one desire: the carnal possession of the loved ones. Of this there are numerous instances to be found in the authors, amongst which the case of Menippus Lycius, who, after frequent coition with a woman, was by her entreated to marry her; but a certain philosopher, who partook of the wedding entertainment, having guessed what that woman was, told Menippus that he had to deal with a *Compusa*, that is a Succuba Demon; whereupon the bride vanished bewailing: such is the narrative given by Coelius Rhodiginus, *Antiq.*, book 29, chapt.5. Hector Boethius (*Hist. Scot.*) also relates the case of a young Scot, who, during many months, with closed doors and windows, was visited in his bed-room by a Succuba Demon of the most bewitching beauty; caresses, kisses, embraces, entreaties, she resorted to every blandishment *ut secum coiret*: but she could not prevail on the chaste young man. (Sinistrari, *Demonality* 33)

Sinistrari extends the operation of the demons not only into the work of obtaining or transmitting semen, but in to the art of love and courtship. In this passage, two men, perhaps of youth or young adulthood, fell into relations, unknowingly, with a succubus.

Menippus required the cautionary and penetrating sight of a philosopher to discern the demon before wedlock, as opposed to the anonymous, “chaste young man,” the “young Scot,” who was passionately involved with a succubus, but was resourceful enough to hold off her most fatal advances.⁵³

The following passage comes from the (in)famous text/manual used to condemn young women of witchcraft, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (“Hammer of the Witches”) (ca. 1484). This textual instrumentality does not escape even the most passive reading of these passages, which seek to shape and construct demonic beings for dogmatic sanctions:

...It may be argued that devils take their part in this generation [human procreation] not as the essential cause, but as a secondary and artificial cause, since they busy themselves in interfering with the process of normal copulation and conception, by obtaining human semen, and themselves transferring it. (Sumers 21-22)

The core twist the demonic strives for is the perversion and subversion of not only procreation, but the natural order and sanctity of matrimony. The incubi and succubi enter in precisely at the moment to thwart the sacred mystery of marriage and procreation. And later we read:

...The reason that devils turn themselves into Incubi and Succubi is not for the cause of pleasure, since a spirit has not flesh and blood; but chiefly it is with this intention, that through the vice of luxury they may work a twofold harm against men, that is, in body and in soul, that so men may be more given to all vices. And there is no doubt that

⁵³ A recent film, *Under the Skin* (2013), starring Scarlett Johansson as a succubus-like alien, preys on young Scots men by luring them to her apartment where she effectively leads them to a black void where their innards are mysteriously sucked out leaving only their skin floating in the black waters.

they know under which stars the semen is most vigorous, and that men so conceived will be always perverted by witchcraft. (Sumers 25)

As the path and crisis of Vincent's journey comes to its dramatic conclusion, the main reveal and *peripeteia*: Vincent's dreams were part of an orchestrated project ("The Great Trials") by the divine pair Ishtar and Dumuzi to put to trial the young men of the town, in order to test their fidelity and commitment to procreation and matrimony. Catherine, the young temptress, was merely an agent, a succubus, sent to administer the deed in the waking-dreaming life of her victims. She fulfills her task being only visible to her lover, and in Vincent's case, his fiancé Katherine at the episode of confrontation.

Devils can do invisibly more things which they are not permitted to do visibly, even if they so wished; but they are allowed to do them invisibly, either as a trial for the good, or as a punishment for the wicked...And it is not foreign to his nature or power to effect such an interposition; since even in bodily form he can interpose himself invisibly and without physical contact, as was shown in the case of the young man who was betrothed to an idol...It must be said that the contact of a devil with a body, either in the way of semen or in any other way, is not a corporeal but a virtual contact, and takes place in accordance with the suitable proportion of both the mover and the moved. (Sumers 26-27)

However, if we regard the "demonization" inherent in the Early Church Fathers—especially from St. Augustine onwards—we find the common trend in Catholic and Christian theology to distort and recast "pagan" spirits of the woods, waters, and springs

as demons. Augustine overtly links satyrs and fauns with those of the incubi (who themselves were often accompanied by nymphs loosely associated with succubi) (*City of God* XV.23; Dyson 680-81). The Catholic undertones of *Catherine* with the use of the confession booth (which Vincent sits in between levels to be questioned and jettisoned to the next stage), psychomachia (the constant dilemma between virtue and vice), and the Cathedral (the building in which the dreams take place), result in an engagement with major themes traditionally overseen by religious institutions, like the sanctity of marriage. Such material is presented in an open way for the player to evaluate, navigate and instigate the “moves” of the plot.

Such degradation of former traditions of folk belief were not only subject to pure demonization. Renaissance Europe saw the revival and moralizing of classical tradition in the arts, letters, and literature. As a prime example, the popular and decadent novel *Hypnerotomachia* (“The Strife of Love in a Dream”), follows the visionary dream of a young Poliphilo (one meaning: Lover of many things) as he pines after his love, Polia (literal meaning, “many things”). As a lavish text of image and word, *Hypnerotomachia* unfolds in thick descriptions of architecture and a multicultural and cosmopolitan milieu and its story borders on excess esoterica. The story, in theme and in the cluster of motifs, follows closely with many aspects of *Catherine*. The doubling (rather than demonizing) of the feminine (Nymph as temptress and guised Polia; the Katherine-Catherine play on names), the pining after the beloved in a dream, the oversight of Venus (Trisha, “the Midnight *Venus*”), all coalesce into the True Ending of *Catherine*.

In classical mythology, nymphs were viewed as spirits of various locales of nature: springs, rivers, hills, woods, etc. The Neieds are some of the high-ranking nymphs. One

type of nymph in particular is the water, which M. L. West offers the following description:

[Water nymphs] were on the whole considered friendly and beneficent, promoting fertility and growth, nurturing the young. But they could carry off children or handsome youths for themselves, or afflict a person with a frenzy that might be perceived either as inspiration or insanity. One so possessed was *νυμφόληπτος* ‘Nymph-seized’ ...

There are many stories of sexual union between nymphs and mortal men, resulting in the birth of a child or twins, or the origin of a whole family. Sometimes it is herdsmen alone in the countryside who have such encounters. (287)

Of course, Aphrodite was also apt to become enamoured with mortal men like Anchises, resulting in the birth of Aeneas, or the goddess Venus’s infatuation with Adonis. The idea of a mortal being possessed by a nymph also shares some striking parallels with the *kitsune*. As Karen Smyers points out, there are two distinct forms of what might be called the condition of *kitsune* possession: the first, *kitsune tsuki* (lit. “fox possession”), is traditionally conceived as a potent and significant form of possession where the subject must be taken to the Inari shrine to be cured of it; the second *lighter* form is *kitsune damashi* (lit. “fox bewilderment”), and results in the subject experiencing light hallucinations or being in relations with dangerous liason. As Smyers states regarding the latter: “The fox can trick (*damasu*) people into seeing things that are not really there...or it can change shape (*bakeru*) so that it appears to be a lovely woman or Buddhist priest. The classic example of shape shifting is the seduction of men by foxes in

the form of irresistibly beautiful women” (90). Smyers further comments that shape shifting foxes tend to in closer association with Inari than the trickster type. Nonetheless, from these descriptive passages, we gain a better picture of the network of associations that seem to influence and shape Vincent’s affair with Catherine—and his *perception* of the affair—as not only explicitly the result of a succubus encounter, but a broader encounter with the eroticized figuration of the feminine.

Since we are on the topic of Catherine, the succubus, and sources of succubi lore, one may also consider a certain breed of demonic female entities of the Hebrew Bible: the Lilith. We may start with this minor reference to the *lilith* from scripture. In Isaiah 34:14, translating *lilith* as that of a screech-owl, suggestive of her nocturnal activities: “Wildcats shall meet hyenas, / Goat-demons shall greet each other; / There too the *lilith* shall repose / And find herself a resting place” (*Jewish Study Bible* 851). The scholarly commentary provided by the compilers offers background information pertaining to the *lilith* of Semitic folklore as a race of demonic female spirits who seduce single men, as distinct and prior to later post-Biblical, rabbinic and kabbalistic folklore of Lilith, first wife of Adam (851).

A passage in Proverbs also portray the dangers of the femme fatale:

It will save you from the forbidden woman,
From the alien woman whose talk is smooth,
Who forsakes the covenant of her God.
And disregards the covenant with her God.
Her house sinks down to Death,
And her course leads to the shades.

All who go to her cannot return

And find again the paths of life. (Proverbs 2:16-19)

The Jewish Study Bible offers the following commentary:

The second danger is the wicked woman, the sexually predatory female, lit. ‘the strange woman.’ [...] The strange woman has been interpreted in many ways, including: (1) a symbol of folly and wicked counsels; (2) a figure for heresy, in medieval Jewish interpretation, and particularly Christianity; (3) foreign wisdom, such as Greek philosophy; (4) a foreign love-goddess (Aphrodite-Ishtar); (5) a devotee of the love goddess; (6) a prostitute; (7) the ‘Other,’ the repository or symbol of lust, chaos, and evil; (8) a human adultress, another man’s wife. (1452)

Another passage occurs in Isaiah 34:14, translating Lilith as that of a screech-owl, suggestive of her nocturnal activities: “Wildcats shall meet hyenas, / Goat-demons shall greet each other; / There too the lilith shall repose / And find herself a resting place.” And again, commentary provides background information pertaining to the lilith of Semitic folklore as a race of demonic female spirits who seduce single men, as distinct and prior to later post-Biblical, rabbinic and kabbalistic folklore of Lilith, first wife of Adam (*Jewish Study Bible* 851).

Evans Lansing Smith in his book *Sacred Mysteries: Myths About Couples in Quest* offers the following summarily description of Lilith:

Lilith...is associated with an unbridled sexuality, of a kind not submissive to masculine authority. Lilith was Adam’s legendary first

wife, who left him to breed demons of death beside the Red Sea, after Adam insisted on being on top during sexual intercourse.

She represents premarital womanhood wildly sowing her oats, in furious rebellion against all authority. She has little to do with children, preferring to murder babies in childbirth than to assist in their delivery.

If impregnated, abortion, not marriage, would be her first thought. (12)

Traditionally, the Lilith of Jewish and Christian lore might have developed out of Ancient Mesopotamian lore surrounding the female figure of the *lilitu* (male: *lilu*): “The *lilu* haunts deserts and open country and is especially dangerous to pregnant women and infants. The *lilitu* seems to be a female equivalent, while the *ardat-lili* (whose name means ‘maiden *lilu*) seems to have the character of a frustrated bride, incapable of normal sexual activity. In this way, she compensates by aggressive behavior especially towards young men.” (Black and Green 118). With these passages in mind, Catherine, the young seductress in “lillywhite,” offers similar temptations to Vincent our protagonist as he weighs the trajectory of his erotic and intimate relations as they become more and more elaborate. The video game remains a contingent system of minor and major choices made by the player whether Vincent will answer text messages, how he replies to them, or how he engages with each character through a range of responses.

Catherine and the Anima

As mentioned above, there are also creative uses of depth psychological concepts in the world of *Catherine* that deserve some attention. The basic concepts of individuation and the role of the anima are two aspects I would like to focus on especially. Jung defined individuation thus:

...the process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated; in particular, it is the development of the psychological *individual* (q.v.) as a being distinct from the general, collective psychology. Individuation, therefore, is a process of *differentiation* (q.v.), having for its goal the development of the individual personality. (CW 6, para. 757)

With consideration of the impact and implications of the “Great Trials” in Vincent’s dreams and the romantic crisis he faces in his waking life, the process through which Vincent undergoes can be interpreted as Jung’s concept of individuation. This process is often instigated by archetypal events and figurations. For our purposes, we might consider Jung’s concept of the *anima*, which can simply mean the soul in the sense of something immortal and wonderful; the anima can also take on a dogmatic form “whose purpose it is to pin down and and capture something uncannily alive and active (CW 9 pt.1, para. 55). Edward Edinger succinctly defined the anima as that which “possesses the secret knowledge of the unconscious and [serves] as a bridge between the ego and the collective unconscious” (*Ego and Archetype* 100). For Jung, the anima could also manifest and be embellished in feminine figurations of various feminine characters in myths, legends, and folktales such as a nixie, a *melusina* (mermaid) and, with particular relevance for us, the succubus “who infatuates young men and sucks the life out of them” (CW 9 pt.1, para. 53). As a general agent or catalyst, the anima may cause fantastical projections:

An alluring nixie from the dim bygone is today called an ‘erotic fantasy,’ and she may complicate our psychic life in a most painful

way. She comes upon us just as a nixie might; she sits on top of us like a succubus; she changes into all sorts of shapes like a witch, and in general displays an unbearable independence that does not seem at all proper in a psychic content. (para. 54)

This passage in particular has striking parallels with the behavior, demeanor and characterization of Catherine, the young female that Vincent has the affair with. Unbeknownst to Vincent, Katherine (Vincent's fiancée), and—perhaps—Catherine, the crisis is ultimately being overseen by a Goddess.

The Goddess and her Consort

The mythological theme of the Goddess and her Son-lover has roots tracing back to at least the Bronze Age (Barring and Cashford). Such pairings include in later mythology include: Ishtar and Tammuz; Inanna and Dumuzi; Aphrodite/Venus and Adonis; and, Cybele and Attis. The presence of Trisha-Venus-Ishtar and her partner Thomas Mutton (“Chops”)-“Boss”-Dumuzid means that, in accord with the *Catherine* and *MegaTen* mythos, greater outside influences are being alluded to with mythological and religious referents.

The conventional pattern of the *MegaTen* mythos is to retain some significant ties between ancient divinities impacting the modern life of individuals. Much further analysis might include a detailed discussion of *Catherine*'s engagement with Mesopotamian mythology. It becomes apparent with some familiarization with the cycle of hymns revolving around Inanna (Babylonian Ishtar) and Dumuzi (Babylonian Tammuz) that such divinities act as mythical and paradigmatic models through which the modern-day characters of *Catherine* either embody or encounter. The character and

constitution of Trisha is particularly complex since she is the main narrator, the voice in the Confession booth during the “Great Trials” (as her avatar, “Astaroth”), and her name is an anagram of “Ishtar.”

In this way, the creators of *Catherine* seem to be quite familiar with not only the mythologies and sacred traditions referenced, but schools of interpretation. For instance, Frazer’s basic formulation in the *Golden Bough* that rites and ceremonies revolving around Ishtar of Zela had “scripts” that Frazer famously referred to as the myths that outlived the ceremony once it died (*Golden Bough* 651). Such a formulation laid the foundation for the Cambridge myth-ritual schools. Rather than focusing on all of the possible relations in the mythologem of the goddess and her consort, I would rather focus on a particular pair and its implications.⁵⁴

As Mircea Eliade writes, “Marriage rites too have a divine model, and human marriage reproduces the hierogamy, more especially the union of heaven and earth.” (*Myth of Eternal Return* 23). The theme of the sacred marriage and the sanctity of marriage is structured deep within the lore of *Catherine*.

Trisha, “the Midnight Venus” and narrator of the events of *Catherine*, ends up being a powerful and influential character herself. As her name implies, she carries associations with the goddess Venus while her name “Trisha” can be understood as an anagram of “Ishtar.”

⁵⁴ For those researchers interested in the general topic, or for those seeking to pursue further comparative assessment, I would recommend Anne Baring and Jules Cashford’s 1991 book *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of the Image*. I am also somewhat convinced that J. G. Frazer’s *Golden Bough* was consulted by the development team and creative directors.

Cybele and Attis

The Cybele-Attis myth and cult is particularly striking in the unfolding of Vincent's life crisis. In order to ascertain its significance on shaping the storyline of *Catherine*, it is important to provide some background on the cult of the Great Mother, Cybele, and her effects on the cult followers. To do so, I rely on Frazer's interpretation of the cult, the introduction of the Great Mother from the then-"Orient" to Rome and its effect on the citizenry and religious climate. As Frazer saw it, the transference of the Asiatic Goddess into Rome marked a—dramaticized—decline in the Greek ideal citizen and hero who sacrificed private interests for the commonwealth. He characterizes the societal and religious shift thus:

The inevitable result of this selfish and immoral doctrine was to withdraw the devotee more and more from the public service, to concentrate his thoughts on his own spiritual emotions, and to breed in him a contempt for the present life which he regarded merely as a probation for a bettern and an eternal. The saint and the recluse, disdainful of earth and rapt in ecstatic contemplation of heaven, became in popular opinion the highest ideal of humanity, displacing the old ideal of the patriot and hero who, forgetful of self, lives and is ready to die for the good of his country...a general disintegration of the body politic set in. The ties of the state and the family were loosened: the structure of society tended to resolve itself into its individual elements and thereby to relapse into barbarism; for civilization is only possible through the active co-operation of the

citizens and their willingness to subordinate their private interests to the common good. *Men refused to defend their country and even to continue their kind.* (359; emphasis mine).

Though expressed in terms of a retreat from society, Frazer also alludes to the critical detriment the cult to Cybele had on male aspirants: they became effeminate and were said to have literally castrated themselves in rapturous devotion to the Goddess. The cult, scene through the eyes of its harshest critics, was an attack on masculinity, fertility, and civic duty. Here, as a point of contact, I wish to emphasize that the depiction and function of divinities in the fictional world of *Catherine* come to shed light on the crisis befalling the young men in the town. The Great Trials, we may recall, were designed to challenge the devotion of male partners to their significant others or to distract single men from having any interest in *real*, mortal women, having them become enamoured with a femme fatale or be tempted by the Goddess herself, Venus.

Before proceeding let us consider some of the mythic accounts that inform the solemn rites of the Mother of the Gods, Cybele. Here, I rely on Sallustius and Julian the Apostate. Sallustius provides a concise rendering of the myth:

If I must relate another myth, it is said that the Mother of the gods saw Attis lying by the river Gallos and became enamoured of him, and took and set on his head the starry cap, and kept him thereafter with her, and he, becoming enamoured by a nymph, left the Mother of the gods and consorted with the nymph. Wherefore the Mother of the gods caused Attis to go mad and to cut off his genitals and leave them with the nymph and to return and dwell with her again. (IV.25; Nock 7-9)

For the interest of comparison, Julian—contemporary and friend of Sallustius—tells the myth thus:

Of [Attis or Gallus] the myth relates that, after being exposed at birth near the eddying stream of the river Gallus, he grew up like a flower, and when he had grown to be fair and tall, he was beloved by the Mother of the Gods. And she entrusted all things to him, and moreover set on his head the starry cap. But if our visible sky covers the gown of Attis, must one not interpret the river Gallus as the Milky Way? For it is there, they say, that the substance which is subject to change mingles with the passionless revolving sphere of the fifth substance. Only as far as this did the Mother of the Gods permit this fair intellectual god Attis, who resembles the sun's rays, to leap and dance. But when he passed beyond this limit and came even to the lowest region, the myth said that he had descended into the cave, and had wedded the nymph. And the nymph is to be interpreted as the dampness of matter. (*Oration* 5.165b-c; Wright 461)

Ovid provides an even earlier account of the myth in his *Fasti* (4.223), referring to Cybele as the “tower-bearing goddess” (Frazer 205). The nymph is also identified as Sagaritis (*Fasti* 4.229).

A close reading of Sallustius's interpretation reveals that the Attis myth was designed to put the human individual in accord with the divine through solemn rites. He uses the myth to illustrate his own classification for the different types of myth:

“Theological myths suit philosophers, physical and psychical myths poets; blended myths

suit solemn rites, since every rite seeks to give us union [*synaptein*] with the universe and with the gods” (Nock 7). The so-called “blended myths” of solemn rites are the most relevant in this context. Identifying each character in the myth helps the initiate orient their person. It would follow, then, that each initiate is Attis and thus subject to the temptation of generative powers, depicted in the myth as temptation by the nymph. By leaving the nymph and castrating one’s generative power, one leaves the realm of the cycle of becoming for the static realm of being, or ascendancy and union with the divine figured as the Mother of the Gods, Cybele. Thus, a mythic analysis and reading of the events of *Catherine* could be understood as a reimagining of the myth-ritual cycle of Attis-Vincent, Nymph-Catherine, and the Goddess-Trisha (the “Midnight Venus”). The self-mutilation and -castration often described by the male followers of the Mother Goddess is far from a literal depiction and is taken as more of a symbolic gesture in the video game. Trisha’s final temptation—her breaking of the fourth wall—aimed at the player could be understood as an invitation to be seduced by a wholly fictional character, but if we keep to the world of the fantasy and the myth (i.e. the diegetic), she is the Goddess tempting her Lover.

Julian the Apostate goes on further in his *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods*:

But him whom I call Callus or Attis I discern of my own
knowledge to be the substance of generative and creative Mind
which engenders all things down to the lowest plane of matter,
and comprehends in itself all the concepts and causes of the
forms that are embodied in matter. (*Oration* 5.161c-d; Wright
450-51)

What comes across in the diegetic world of Vincent and Catherine can be understood as symbolically representing a mythic model. The “Cathrine True Ending,” has Vincent committing his heart to Catherine and is installed as the new Lord of the Underworld with Catherine as his Queen. However, the figure of Attis would be aimed at the player who is spoken directly to by Cybele-Trisha (who can also be syncretized with Ishtar/Isis/Venus, making Vincent Tammuz/Osiris/Adonis). Vincent ultimately is patterned on a dying and rising god, while the diverse representations of the feminine manifests in Trisha “the Midnight Venus,” Katherine the devoted partner and potential wife, and Catherine the nymph/succubus/*hulijing/kitsune*. What seems to be one interpretation—an allegorical one—is supplied by Julian as he sought to intimate the hidden meaning of the Attis-Cybele myth: “In all things the conversion to the higher is more effective than the propensity to the lower. That is what the myth aims to teach us when it says that the Mother of the Gods exhorted Attis not to leave her or to love another” (*Oration* 5.167a; Wright 467). The boundary that becomes increasingly blurred in the storyline of *Catherine* is whether there is a higher truth in fantasy, or a deeper truth in reality. Determining where values are placed and to whom—whether to one’s individuality (e.g. The Freedom Endings), a temptress (e.g. The Catherine Endings), or a devoted partner (e.g. The Katherine Endings)—has great consequences that may unfold from seemingly minor moments.

According to a *MegaTen* wikia on *Persona 3* and *Catherine*, the tale of Vincent, Katherine and Catherine represents the “Lover’s Arcana” featured in *Persona 3* along with a cameo by Vincent (as “Man Drinking Alone”) at a local bar in the game’s city. The wikia states: “Completing the Lovers Social Link allows Yukari to start accepting

her mother and fall in love with the Protagonist (the player). Yukari would then grant the Protagonist her Cellphone-strap, bestowing the Ultimate form of the Lovers Arcana, “the Earth Mother,” Cybele” (“Lovers Arcana” *Megami Tensei wikia*). This only shows one minor, but significant, thread of the greater network of inter- and intra-textuality along with transtextuality at work in the MegaTen mythos, its fictional universe and the real world mythological and occult source material. The Lovers Arcana retrieves the myth of Cybele and Attis.

In Vincent’s case choosing to go with Katherine, Catherine, or Freedom results in a Good or True Ending representing a different and viable avenue for the growth of his libido. He either decides to take the conservative route of settling down (the natural order; pro-fertility and pro-society), the adventurous, erotic Underworld voyage (Lord of the Underworld), or realize his own boyhood dreams to become an astronaut and voyage into the heavens, much like Attis with his “starry cap,” leaving the lower world of the Nymph (Katherine or Catherine) and reuniting with the Mother Goddess, Cybele.

This constellation of symbols, motifs and themes associated with the dying-rising god are also explicitly revealed in the main menu of the video game which depicts Vincent crucified and entangled in barbed wire like the image of the Hanged God in Frazer’s *Golden Bough*.

How *Catherine* Engenders Evaluation and Discussion

What kind of projection of the feminine is occurring? Is this purely a male-oriented point of view? To begin to answer these issues, the analyst first has to acknowledge that these are indeed projected images of the feminine and the masculine in the form of *fantasy* and not to the degrading of female *reality*. There is no alibi for the

confusion between the two. As I understand it, the function of fantasy is to experience levels of exposure to taboos and evaluate them accordingly—in this regard, I am in agreement with Freud. A video game—like all works of fiction—rely on fictivity, or what we might effectively name *mythicity*, to create an alibi for projections. The comparative analysis exercised above has sought to bring together influences and older sources of lore that have been formative to the construction of the fictional female characters of the gameworld of *Catherine*.

The inescapable fact that the protagonist is a young male suggests a particular reading of the fictional world, the ludic context, and the imbalanced representation of romantic and human relations. In other words, the protagonist's gender and age have acted as points of entry for a hermeneutics. A purely ambivalent understanding of the values, transgressions, taboos and fetishes is limited by the protagonist. However, the mechanics and narrative design of *Catherine* also allow players to guide *their* Vincent within the infrastructure of “freedom within limits.” The multiple endings and the process of decision-making one moment to the next make *Catherine* a video game that attempts to make concerted efforts to render the complexity involved in maintaining some equity during the crisis of erotic relations and an affair. The affair between Vincent and Catherine happens whether the player desires this trajectory or not. The alibi is found on the level of the mythic when it is revealed that the crisis, the “Great Trials,” and the dreams were instigated by divine beings, i.e. divine design. Within the fictional world, a kind of determinism is gradually revealed in tandem with the freedom of choice—“freedom within limits.” The choice is not left up to the player whether the crisis will be avoided. Instead, the tension of gameplay comes from crisis management.

The message of these events and how they unfold will no doubt off-put certain demographics. That the affair is given a divine alibi is quite dangerous if it were not for the ontological gap between the fiction of *Catherine* and the reality of actual romantic affairs. At best, *Catherine* may serve as a video game that challenges couples who play together. The analyst (myself) and my partner did so, and the result of the play-through resulted in fascinating conversations, evaluations and discussions on the nature of affairs, their erosive effects on intimacy and the seemingly minor decisions that can lead to catastrophic and harmful consequences. In fact, co-op play—play involving two players—is encouraged in the later game modes that feature Vincent and Katherine climbing and helping one another. The reception of *Catherine* by players will vary according to age, gender and maturity. It also heavily depends on the degree through which the player can keep an ontological distance from the fiction. No single reception by any group should dictate the final interpretation. To allow such censorship violates creative license and the independence of artists to determine their own expressive aims rather than appeasing a third party.

This is tied to the much greater topics of *diversity* and *representation* that transcend any single video game and video game culture, and are attributed to societal, cultural and ideological discussions; what's more, that video games are becoming an international (i.e. intercultural) the analyst would do well to be cognizant of their culturally relative projections and biases onto another culture's commodities. On the other end of the exchange, cultures that export their commodities should not be surprised if the ideological subtexts of such commodities are criticized. This topic is surely valuable and deserves a separate study that goes beyond the scope of the present project

here. Having said that, this analyst will venture to say that “diversity” is achieved not through coercion from outside of the medium by interest groups, nor as an instrument to level the playing field, but the by-product of allowing each individual game developer to create the video games they wish to make for whom they wish to share with. Diversity—perhaps, better, *plurality*—comes about through supporting independence, creative freedom, and engendering the autonomy of choice.

Chapter 10: Reception of Eurasian Traditions in *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Okami*

Quite different from composing myths in mythic diction for mythic functions is the craftman's use of one or more inert myths of antiquity as scaffolding for image sequences, in order to supply the learned with opportunities to identify recondite allusions, or to imbue his [or her] work with some flavor of profundity.
—Henry Murray (347)

The two major case studies, *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Okami*, featured in this chapter function both as exemplum of adventure role-playing fantasy games in general, and as expressions of two very different avenues of cultural usage of the genre in particular. Although both occupy a similar single-player video game genre (RPG adventure), each stands as recipient and conduit of rather different trajectories of tradition from within their unique video game genealogies, histories, indigenous industries and sources of myth.

The deep roots of the fantasy genre itself stem from the diverse body of myths accrued and collected referred to as the Western tradition. The use of myth can be traced from a complex tome of material from medieval settings, Arthurian romance, Celtic myth and Norse Sagas. We cannot overlook the pervasive influence of scholar and author, J. R. R. Tolkien, whose *Lord of the Ring* trilogy, *Hobbit*, and cosmogonic novel *Silmarillion* set the standard for popular imagination and fantasy world-building.

Forms and Genres of Folk-narrative

A critical component to this chapter is the consideration of the different forms of cultural expression mediated through folk narrative genres. I use the neutral term *lore* to distinguish a body of stories, customs, and practices that circulate within the fictional world of a game, but can also be extrapolated from the game context for fan/player use. The main category that garners the most focus will be the mythological traditions sourced

and transmuted into *Skyrim* and *Okami*. Indeed, it requires that we carefully establish such assumptions of transmission. Other genres are just as prevalent. Here, I work outward from the conventional tripartite classification of folk genres: myths, legends/sagas, and folktales (*Mythen, Sagen, and Märchen*) for the world of *Skyrim*, which derives its sources mainly from European traditions and Grimmian methods (Bascom, “Forms of Folklore” 9-29; Thompson, *Folktales* 7-10). I also include and consider the category of epic as its own distinct genre as we have established above.

Okami, on the other hand, will be approached with more attention given to the native categories of Japanese storytelling and folk narrative. Of central concern will be *mukashi-banashi* 昔話 (alt. *mukashi, mukashi*, lit. ‘a long, long time ago’ ‘Once upon a time...’) (Seki *Types* 2), *shinwa* 神話 (myth; story of/about *kami*), *densetsu* 伝説 (traditional tale; legend), *setsuwa* 説話 (oral story), *monogatari* 物語 (narrative). Other genres may also apply, such as stories of *kaidan* 怪談, popularized by the writings of Lafcadio Hearn’s *Kwaidan*. The division is not a clean and strict partition of synchronic genres; some overlaps occur frequently, since each category has emerged out of a shifting history of evolving distinctions. Modern literary scholar Jin’ichi Konishi has argued for a distinction between sacred stories of gods (*kami*) and the general category of “myth”:

Early narrative is commonly divided into myth, legend, and tale [*shinwa, densetsu, and minsetsu* (fn63)]. This division is the result of a general application of Bronislaw Malinowski’s distinctions among lili’u, lubuwogwo, and kukuanebu in his Trobriand Islands research. It is difficult, however, to classify narratives on the basis of worldwide correspondence, since nationalities vary and cultures differ. Japanese

oral narrative contains some works that conform to the tripartite theory and others that do not. It might be appropriately considered as “setsuwa” (folklore). On the other hand, it is true no small amount of Japanese setsuwa—the Creation of Eight Great Islands, the Apparition of the Treasure Sword, the Descent of the Heavenly Grandchild, the Visit to the Sea Palace—has heretofore been subsumed under the generic category of myth. This setsuwa, unlike such tale as ‘Issun Boshi’ (The Thumb-sized Boy) and ‘Momotaro’ (The Peach Boy), was so highly valued that, even in a literate society, the proper treatment was felt to be its intentional preservation as oral narrative. Since it represents, so to speak, weighty narrative, it must be distinguished by a special name. *I would like to call these stories possessing gods as protagonists and centering on supernatural events deity (jingi) ‘setsuwa,’ and to reserve the term “shinwa” (myth) for use in expressing a wider concept.* In this sense, deity setsuwa is the representative genre among the weighty narratives, but others, centering on the founding of the realm or a royal succession, might be said to possess a weightiness second only to them. (164-65; italics mine)

This rich passage sets up many of the native categories and tales that permeate the world of *Okami*. For example, Issun Boshi features as the flea, narrator, artist and companion of Okami on their adventures in the video game. Konishi’s distinction between *jingi setsuwa* 神祇 説話 and *shinwa* 神話 presents a significant division between sacred stories that

depict the native *kami* of Japan, against the Western construct of “myth” that has grown out of modern theories. *Shinwa* may still be used in mythological research in Japan when referring to the material derived from the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, collectively referred to as *kiki shinwa* 記紀神話. We can also admire Konishi’s decision to apply it to his own native tradition—a comparative method akin to Malinowski’s gesture to make efforts to compare analytical and native categories (*Argonauts of the Western Pacific; Myth in Primitive Psychology*).

For example, the famous folktale, the Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, dating back to the 10th century, is *Taketori Monogatari*. Thus, the literary of narrative (*monogatari*) is the form used to transmit the content of the folktale. The history about *Taketori Monogatari* demonstrates a folktale that has been committed to literary form and extended narrative. Other more apparent examples from classics of literature would be the *Heike Monogatari* (Tale of Heike).

Pantheons Generated, Created, and Recreated

As we navigate the worlds of *Skryim* and *Okami*, it is important to develop a particular thread for comparative analysis based out of the two distinct ways both video games present pantheons, or systems of divinities. To assist in this strain of analysis I have found Bruce Lincoln’s “Nature and Genesis of Pantheons” to be most instructive and cogent in providing a framework for distinguishing native pantheons from outside interpreters. Specifically, I draw from his carefully constructed subcategories of pantheons (see especially fig. 3.1 in *Gods and Demons* 19), where he delineates “all pantheons” into the *implicit* and *explicit*, with the implicit pantheon derived wholly from the indigenous population and practiced through belief, known through informal talks and

kept mainly unsystematized; the explicit pantheon can be revealed or systematized by either indigenous specialists (e.g. priests, shamans, theologians, scholars) or exogenous theorists and scholars. Such a structure allows us to work with the wholly synthetic, fictional and explicit pantheons of the *Skyrim* world, where the player navigates between native and foreigner of a fantasy realm and race.

In comparison to the imagined pantheons of *Skyrim*, the sacred “pantheon”—more properly, *Yaoyorozu-no-kami* 八百万の神 (lit. “eight-million *kami*”)—of the indigenous *kami* 神 of made explicit by the imperial families and priests of Shinto, Japanese Buddhist priests, aspects of the implicit pantheons of Japanese folk religion, and the implicit *kamui* of Ainu as they are represented in the native-sourced world of *Okami*. *Kami* are not exactly unified *in toto*, but instead may group according to different sectors of the society. For instance, the heavenly *kami* found in *Kiki shinwa* are made explicit by Shinto priests and relate the royal succession, while the popular *Shichifukujin* (“Seven Lucky Deities”) relate to folk religion.

These very brief cases serve to point out that the trajectories of tradition—the imagined pantheons of *Skyrim* and the *kami* depicted in *Okami*—are, in many ways, very different in nature and function in relation to their originating culture areas and contexts.

One could argue, however, that the pantheons of *Skyrim* were created in the spirit of the high-fantasy genre which carries with it deep roots in the Western canon of literature. Lord Dunsany was one of the most influential authors for later fantasists, and assembled his own system of divinities in his 1905 *Gods of Pegāna*. Dunsany’s ability to fashion entire worlds would be admired and practiced by later writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien in his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and especially in his mythologically infused

literary creation, *The Silmarillion*, with its cosmogonic cycles and histories of fantasy races. E. R. Eddison was also heavily influential during the formative years of the high fantasy genre during the early 20th century with his 1922 heroic novel, *The Worm Ouroboros*, which carried overtones of Greek, Celtic and Norse myth—the worm in the title is, itself, homage to the Midgard serpent. Eddison styled his prose after Icelandic saga. One might also include the remarkably expansive Cthulu Mythos and pantheons of H. P. Lovecraft. As Flahault states in his article “Imagination and Mythology in Contemporary Literature (Tolkien, Lovecraft) and Science Fiction”:

Lovecraft’s knowledge of mythology may have helped him to enrich the description of his deities: Cthulu, for instance, has many traits in common with Typhon, who is, like him, akin to the powers of Chaos, to ‘those who came before’ (Hesiod’s formula, but it could have been Lovecraft’s), those cut off from the orderly world by a gate forever sealed (although for Lovecraft this gate opens often enough). (302)

According to Michael Hartman in his brief but concise 1999 essay, “The Making of a Pantheon,” the challenge of creating a fantasy religion or a pantheon for a fantasy game—what he refers to as “campaign world”—is difficult, but rewarding for designers and, in the end, enriches the experience for players. In the essay, Hartman encourages game developers to choose wisely what kind of pantheon or system of divinities to assemble. It is an interesting read in that he offers very practical and pragmatic advice such as going with a polytheistic system, but also researching real-world traditions to figure out if a single deity would suffice to represent the concept of love and fertility, or if they should be presided over by two separate divinities. Or similarly, if there should be

a war god and a storm god, or a single deity for war and storms. Lastly, naming the deities—a basic problematic—can turn out to be a rewarding creative task on its own. Any recourse to real-world traditions, Hartman attests, will only benefit the developer in creating “enough concepts [to] represent...your [the game master’s] deities to make the overall religion system interesting and laden with conflict,” since, “Conflict drives role playing” (n. pag., para. 3). After finalizing a set of deities for the world, Hartman concludes with a general appeal, “One need only consider the effect of religion on real life history to realize the enormous effect a well developed pantheon and religion system can have on any campaign world” (para. 10). One of the most important tasks, Hartman advises, is to coordinate the deity’s domain of power with the demand of players so that players keep the pantheon, or certain divinities within it, on their mind at all times to pray or petition to during campaigns.

In the world of *Skyrim*, the player may come across an in-game text entitled *Varieties of Faith in the Empire* and learn about the eight major pantheons of Tamriel. Skyrim (the region) has its own pantheons, one of which is the Nordic made up of Alduin (the “World Eater”), Dibella, Orkey, Tsun, Mara, Stuhn, Kyne, Jhunai, Shor, Ysmir, Herma-Mora, and Maloch. At a deeper level, a much more primordial and elemental system of divinities unify the later eight pantheons. To understand this common pre-history or mythic epoch, the player interested in lore would want to track one of few texts that explore these ancient myths. One such manuscript is *The Monomyth*, which provides a textualized version of the creation myth common to all Tamrielic religions. It is a composite text made up of several sections that leave some room for variations. *Skyrim* is only the fifth installment of the greater *Elder Scrolls* series, and so some in-game texts

like *The Monomyth* are left in fragments for players to re-assemble and discuss as a practice of participating in the lore. It features motifs of theogony and other etiological myths about the origins of certain tribes of divinities that all trace back to the primordial pair, Anu and Padomay.

But, perhaps at a much deeper root this pantheon of mythopoeic writers would find ancestral and spiritual ties with the poet and illustrator William Blake with his invented personal mythology of the Four Zoas. And, in terms of style and play with mythological material and divinities, the fantasy genre may find its earliest antecedence in the speculative writings of Lucian the Syrian.

With these trajectories of native and literary traditions in mind it follows that both video games are positioned on the end of a reception of a body of texts that both have engaged with and built upon to warrant closer analysis.

Case Study: *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim expresses a mélange of mythological material sourced out of the Indo-European mythosphere and culture complex. It consists of multiple sets of pantheons, from Goddess worship to an afterlife similar to that of Greco-Roman Elysium, Celtic Otherworld, and Nordic Valhalla. Aesthetically, *Skyrim* continues the pervasive trend of rendering a fantasy realm in the skin of Medievalism with all of its subsequent Tolkienian mythopoeia, *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop role-playing (sans the social function), and fantasy role-playing video games like the *Ultima* series. To be sure, in the world of *Skyrim*, dragons become of central concern for the major storyline. The content is rich with folkloric content, especially the dragon-lore, and in my initial estimation, represents one of the clearest examples of the trajectory of tradition within video and

computer game history alone namely, that of the heroic dragon-slayer. I will demonstrate that the player of *Skyrim* is immersed in the heroic patterns of the (Indo-)European hero, while also exploring mythological motifs and tale-types (ATU 300 *The Dragon Slayer*; ATU 673 *The White Serpent's Flesh*). The typical narrative of the dragon slayer revolves around a youth who must help a king and his estate, bringing to an end the ritualized human-sacrifice of the king's daughter to a dragon that plagues the land. ATU 300 is typified by such figures as Perseus who has to rescue Andromeda, Sigurd of Norse saga who must earn his fame by slaying Fafnir (Hansen 119-30). Though not strictly equivalent, (there are certain divergences away from the tale-types), each type finds some semblance in the main storyline of *Skyrim*'s "Dovah-kiin" (Dragon-Born).

Bardic Escapades and Heroic Paradigms

When the player enrolls at the Bard's College he or she may embark on a quest to recover a hymn to King Olaf One-Eyed, a Tyrant referred to simply as "King Olaf's verse." The quest to retrieve the poem and the manipulation—on the player's part—to "reconstruct" the poem is a fascinating glimpse into the sophisticated process of transmission in real-world oral traditions, the role of the oral poet as a tradition-bearer, and the production of a text.

The poem narrates a confrontation between King Olaf and the dragon, Numinex. A critical segment of the poem is missing, and the player must intervene and decide what happened during the decisive episode of the legend. There are three potential pathways: 1) that King Olaf bested Numinex by approaching him while he lay asleep; 2) King Olaf and Numinex come to an equitable deal, or 3) Numinex was King Olaf in disguise, thus having a symbolic meaning.

The quest to retrieve the verses involves an encounter with the ghost of Svaknir, a Nordic bard and contemporary of King Olaf who is credited with writing and singing the complete verse which ended up offending the king and resulted in Svaknir's fatal demise. The ritualistic ceremony established at the end of the quest re-enacts the burning and sacrifice of a mock-king. Like we find in Frazer's "dying god" in *Golden Bough*, and we see depicted in the 1973 British film *The Wicker Man*, the ritualized man-king is burned to signify regeneration.

The significance of this quest is solidified much later on in the storyline when the player learns that the dragon skull mounted above Jarl Balgruuf's throne at his citadel in Whiterun. The battle between King Olaf and Numinex is a kind of paradigmatic model that foreshadows the player's eventual confrontation with the dragon Alduin.

Ancestral voices: Conversing with Dragons

A key appeal to the mystical side of *Skryim* is the initiation of the player as the Dragonborn ("Dova-khiin"). Learning to hear and speak the language of dragons is critical to the players' advancement which will eventually lead to the Dragonborn negotiating with dragons or working closely with the key dragon, Paarthurnax a traitor to Alduin. To be initiated, the player has to ascend the central mountain of Skryim to locate the monastery of the Greybeards, elders versed in the mysteries. From their the path to fulfilling the role of the Dragonborn starts to take shape.

Upon successfully being initiated, the player spends the rest of the main storyline attaining and training in the deployment of *thu'um* shouts. Much like the Celestial Brushstrokes of *Okami* (explored later in this chapter), the shouts of *Skryim* form a celestial connection that reveals a deep ancestral voicing and highlights the common

theme of divine models/paradigms and heroic deeds. The diligent lore-oriented player will readily find such in-game texts as the *Dragon Language: Myth no More*. But, the most important in-game text is the Elder Scroll—a signature text that links the series into a greater mythology—and its obtainment by the player-Dragonborn. Paarthurnax, the rebel dragon and traitor of Alduin, is instrumental in sending the player-Dragonborn on the quest that will lead him/her to the location of the Elder Scroll.

Much of this initiatory process of learning shouts has ties with traditional lore found throughout Eurasia. The following are some sources drawn from authors of antiquity. The compiler Pliny (ca. AD 23 – 79) assembled one of the first major works in the genre of the encyclopedia, or compendium of known information regarding the *oikumene*, or “known world,” called *The Natural History* (*Naturalis Historia*). Echoes of Pliny are heard throughout the world of *Skryim*, from the characters and settings, to herbal medicines, from the Arcaneum of ancient texts to bestiaries. An entire project could be devoted to the reception of Pliny and his *Natural History* in modern fantasy world-building. For our purposes, I would like to focus on at least one passage that resonates with the lore and mysticism surrounding dragons and the Dragonborn. This passage is one of the oldest attested remarks regarding the ability to learn the language of an animal, fabulous or actual. Pliny states:

The person...who may think fit to believe in these tales, may probably not refuse to believe also that dragons licked the ears of Melampodes, and bestowed upon him the power of understanding the language of birds; as also what Democritus says, when he gives the names of certain birds, by the mixture of whose blood a serpent is produced, the

person who eats of which will be able to understand the language of birds; as well as the statements which the same writer makes relative to one bird in particular, known as the ‘galerita,’ – indeed, the science of augury is already too much involved in embarrassing questions, without these fanciful reveries. (*Natural History* 10.70; Rostock, et. al.)

Thu’um shares traits of other traditional forms of enchantment through the power of speech or shouting. In the Celtic tradition, according to the *Lebor Gabala Erenn*, the Tuatha Dé Danann were said to instill fear through the power of their Druidic battle cries (VII.349; Macalister 161). A certain kind of incantation akin to that of a screeching bird was used by Old Germanic peoples known as *galdr* (West *Indo-European* 327).

These are just a few of the more detailed applications of mythological literature and traditions influencing some of the most memorable elements in the world of *Skyrim*. Now, I would like to focus on some of the larger structures that give *Skyrim* depth through ideological, societal, mythical and political underpinnings.

Tripartition in Myth, Genre, and *Skyrim*

World-building requires a fine balance between the world of the characters and their interaction with the world itself. To flesh out this material requires the tools not too dissimilar from Plato’s myth of the state outlined in his *Republic*. The main difference with the video game is that the world has to be virtually assembled rather than existing in pure discourse. The more sophisticated the world of a game, the more it inevitably will rely on aspects of our own primary/real world. This involves the inclusion of politics, social relations, and sometimes religious components. The constructing the mythos of the video game, in the sense of a structure, is one of the main challenges in bringing cohesion

into the fictional world. Because of this primary and fundamental function of mythos, the mythos might also be tweaked, modified or distorted to cause catastrophic tensions to the world of the characters. What follows is my own interpretation of how a certain ideological structure, namely, Dumézil's tripartite ideology typified by the cultures belonging to the greater Indo-European family of languages, has informed certain curious major events in *Skyrim*. I view this process of revealing and bringing such structures to the surface as the first steps towards criticism.

A curious quest called "Season Unending" in the third act of the main storyline is undertaken prior to the players' voyage to Sovngard, the Otherworld of Tamriel modeled after the Celtic Otherworld, Norse Valhalla and the Greco-Roman conception of Elysium. It involves the player teaming with the Greybeards to call for a peace council that brings together the major factions of *Skyrim*. Its main aim is to bring onboard the Jarl of Whiterun who will not fully support the efforts of the Dragonborn (to challenge Alduin) unless the Civil War between the Imperial Legion and the Stormcloaks is brought to an end through negotiation. It is an optional mission that only arises if the player has not resolved the Civil War prior to the third act of the main storyline. Such changes to the story either involve the player joining the Imperial Legion or the Stormcloaks, and assassinating the major leaders, Jarl Ulfric (Stormcloak) or General Tullus (Empire).

As the following analysis seeks to argue, the Peace Council and its agenda appear to suggest a concentrated event that reflects and invites political and ideological analysis. This requires, however, that a closer understanding of Georges Dumézil's trifunctional or tripartite theory of Indo-European myth and society is needed. I do not intend to take onboard all of the major critiques of Dumézil's work, but will be using only the

mythological branches that have shown to have a sound hypothesis (Littleton *New Comparative Mythology* 216-225): namely, the trifunctional ideologies attested in Germanic and Celtic—as these are the most explicit influences on the aesthetics and lore of *Skryim*—and the branches of Indo-Iranian myths. The tripartite ideology may be divided into the following (I include the deities Dumézil used as representatives of the respective functions).

The first function deals with the dual sovereignty of magical and legal measures. The priest is first to establish/maintain cosmic order while the king exercises social order. As Dumézil argued, the first function of sovereignty is a split, e.g. Mitra-Varuna; Tyr-Odinn. The second function deals with militants and force, and is typically fulfilled by the warrior class. The second enforces the ordinance and law of the first function. The recurrent myths constellate around the heroic deeds of the Warrior God vanquishing a multiformed monster (e.g. a three-headed serpent). Deities include Indra, Thor, Hercules, and Thætrona.

The third function constellates amongst the principles of fecundity, fertility and wealth through the roles of (re)producers, farmers, and craftsmans, i.e. those who maintain the fields and the shop, while tending to fertility. Twin deities often represent this function in such figures as the Vedic Asvin, and Greek Dioscuri, both sets being associated with aspects of cattle, economic concerns, wealth and security, i.e. health and welfare. Dumézil posited that myth could be transposed into epic. As Dumézil describes it, “Whatever may be the epic expression of the third function, [it] always presents complicated and sometimes elusive problems since it is itself multiform” (*Destiny of Warrior* 8). The task of the first two functions, the priest-king and warrior, was to

strategize and learn how to deal with assaults on the classes of the third function. A rather dangerous ambivalence constellates around the multiformity of the third function deity and the monster that typically the warrior has to assault.

In *Skryim*, the plague of dragons threatens the villages of peasants (the commoners of the third function), and so it is on the request—and in the best interest—of the Jarl of Winterfall (a first-function king of juridic inclination) to first give the player (as “Third”) the task of slaying the dragons, while the priesthood of the Greybeards (as the other magico-religious second half of the first function) impart to the player-“Third” the deeper meaning of being a Dragonborn: an identification—symbolic or otherwise—with the dragon. There are certain typical personages absent from this mythologem like the maiden who needs rescuing, or serves as the catalyst for the hero/courtier. In other reflections of the myth, the maiden could be interpreted as being symbolic of the third function of fertility of which Alduin and the hostile dragons attack.

Dumézil attempted to articulate the hypothesized tripartite ideology effectively through Vedic theology first and foremost, while finding correspondences in other Indo-European descendants like the Roman histories, Germanic Edda and sagas, and Celtic accounts of the mythological cycle. It appeared, however, most explicitly in his interpretation of Vedic theology:

At the first level of Vedic theology, the two principal sovereign gods, Varuna, and the all-powerful magician, and Mitra, the contract personified, have created and organized the worlds, with their plan and their overall mechanisms; at the second level, Indra, the physically powerful god, is engaged in a number of magnificent duals, conquests,

and victories; at the third level, the twins Nasatya are the heroes of a whole series of brief but well-defined scenes, which continually bring into relief their qualities of bestowing health, youth, wealth, and happiness. (*Destiny of Warrior* 5)

The three functions can actually be graphed into the composition of *muthos* in the use put forth by Aristotle. Thus: the first function of the priest is occupied with *arche*/origins, power and law; the second function is occupied with edifying such laws in the present, in *meso*; and, the third function is occupied with the building of the home, infrastructure, and posterity, i.e. of *telos*. And as we have touched on earlier, the triadic structure finds an appeal in narratology (Prince 102). This assessment only emphasizes that the triadic structure has natural affinities, but is uniquely articulated into an ideological division in Indo-European groups.

Dumézil, having intimated the trifunctional ideology of the Indo-Europeans, discerns a triadic structure not unlike other tripartite divisions. In literary theory and criticism, the tripartition of genre has been well established in the Western tradition since Plato and Aristotle down to James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*, namely, lyric, epic/narrative, and drama (Abrams 148). As was touched on in the introduction to this study, we can recall that the Brothers Grimm had also argued that folk narratives could be broken into three major categories: *myth*, *legend* and *folktale* (*Mythus*, *Sagen* and *Märchen*). Their body of work reflects how strongly they felt about this tripartite division, dedicating whole volumes and collections to each category. On the level of societal power, each category of the modes of traditional stories matches with one of Dumézil's three functions. Myth, having cosmic implications, matches with the

sovereignty of the first function and so circulates only within the initiated elite of a “priesthood,” institution, or kingship. In one instance, Dumézil attempts to reveal the difference between a legend and a myth:

‘A land that has no more legends,’ says the poet, ‘is condemned to die of cold.’ This may well be true. But a people without myths is already dead. The function of that particular class of legends known as myths is to express dramatically the ideology under which a society lives; not only to hold out to its conscience the values it recognizes and the ideals it pursues from generation to generation, but above all to express its very being and structure, the elements, the connections, the balances, the tensions that constitute it; to justify the rules and traditional practices without which everything within a society would disintegrate. (*Destiny of the Warrior* 3)

It may follow that the second function of the warrior class is encapsulated in the heroic deeds recorded in legends. Heroes do not carry cosmic implication—at least not in any major sense—but, instead, act as a bridge between the divine and the human realms as semi-divines with societal and cultural force. The function of the hero-warrior is to expand the *oikumene*. Their semi-divine status reflects their lineage with one being a god/goddess and the other a mortal. In this way the hero is a personage of convergence and liminality. On this point, the transposition of divine figures into heroes means a scaling down of the deeds from the “universal” to the local. Dumézil and his successors saw this as trend in Indo-European ideology towards transposition and displacement, namely, encoding myths in histories, legends or epics (Van Hendy 264). In this way, we

can add epic and saga as two genres of the folk narrative that speak from the warrior class. And so, the third function with of its multifarious manifestation is of the commoners and keeps them entertained by folktales that carry little power on a societal level and are also regarded as mere fictions. Since folktales can travel more easily than myths and legends, the folktale has had the widest distribution and international spread among folk narrative genres.

Myth, in accord with this triadic scheme of prose narratives, is considered sacred, authoritative and cosmically consequential: it is deployed purely as a sacred account. The existents or characters of myths tend to mainly be those of deities to emphasize divine figuration to the cosmic consequences. The sacred lore is passed on through the lineage of priests, i.e., those of the sovereign function. A myth may be determined by the potency and efficacy of its version. Variation is somewhat limited in relation to the legend and folktale, but when variation turns to a singularity, staunch dogmatism sets in.

Legend is perhaps less consequential, but nonetheless partakes in the world as fashioned by a myth. The protagonists follow the pattern of the hero and can still take on local and cultural significance as paradigmatic models. Within this branch, one might be tempted to include the closely related folk narrative genres of epic and saga. The mythic divinities of the sovereign function are transposed down to the second, warrior function as heroes that either collaborate with the king-priest of the first function, or break away and rebel. Since these legends are strictly localized, the variety of accounts occurs in proportion to witnesses and here-say of concentrated circulation.

Folktales receive the least amount of authority and are perceived as being merely fictitious. They are the tales circulating amongst the commoners and peasantry—a rather

romanticized and simplistic representation that is. Being as such, this level of circulation on the vernacular level insures a greater multiplicity and hence a greater variety of themes, types and motifs.

The (proto-)myths reconstructed by comparative mythologists, linguists and archaeologists form a type of cycle involving the trifunctional entities. The “Thirdness” of Third (**Trito*) is literally being third and next in rank from “Man” (**Manu*) and “Twin” (**Yemo*) (134-35; cf. Anthony *Horse, Wheel and Language* 134-35, 239). Lincoln provides the following overview of the entire cycles of (proto-)myths:

...the personages who figure in [the myths]—‘Man,’ ‘Twin,’ ‘Third,’ and ‘Serpent’—were not regarded as mere characters in a story but as paradigmatic models who established the proper mode of being and acting that would be followed forever after by members of specific social classes. Every priest, in order to be a proper priest, had the responsibility to as as ‘Man’ acted, performing sacrifice to ensure the continuation of all creation. Every king was charged to act as ‘Twin’ had acted, giving himself for the good of all. Every warrior needed to act as ‘Third,’ fearlessly raiding on all foreign enemies—who were seen as thieves and subhuman monsters like ‘Serpent’—whom they killed or subjugated, and whose wealth they ruthlessly seized, secure in the belief that no livestock could ever rightfully have belonged to any non-Indo-Europeans but must have been stolen by them. (*Death, War, and Sacrifice* 12)

What is striking here is how much the myths of “Third” are emulated across many different fantasy role-playing worlds, especially MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*, where *raiding*, looting and monster-slaying are well established and conventional (near mundane) tasks. The Serpent/Dragon/Monster who hoards wealth (symbolized as water or coinage) and must be slain in order to instigate circulation seems to also have been coached deep into the conventional game mechanics that have become almost mundane: slay any creature and a player would be surprised if they did not yield some form of loot (e.g. gear, bones, quest-items, coins, etc...). Lincoln makes the following bold claim: “[the warrior] myth [of “Third”] must be considered as one of, if not *the*, most historically important narratives in world history, for it provided the ideological impetus and justification for the Indo-European conquest of Europe and Asia: it is the imperialist’s myth par excellence” (12). In such an “imperialist’s myth,” the warrior is sanctioned by divine right to cast the wholly other enemy as a serpent to be vanquished, and cattle-raider as a retriever of wealth and power to the proper owner(s). In its most horrific application, “Third,” (the warrior/second function) whose numerical sign is mirrored in the *third* function of Dumézil’s tripartite ideology, can wage a direct assault on the producer-farmer class of the third function if it were not for the **Trito* mythologem, which acts as an assimilation of the “Other” as the third function.

The Greybeards

The Greybeards are the priestly class of Skyrim and are considered a neutral party, and as such, their role in the Peace Council is critical in order to encourage all parties to participate. The Greybeards are much like the Flamen, Brahman and Druid of Roman, Vedic and Celtic traditions, respectively. Across these priestly classes is a common

mastery of sacred speech and utterances; they are masters of arcane knowledge and sacred histories; they understand the higher cosmic consequences of the events. In *Skyrim*'s case, the Greybeards hold the secret to the dragon-plague that befalls *Skyrim*. Their role, in relation to the player, is to initiate the latter into this secret knowledge and cultivate the power of *thu'um* (the signature shouts of *Skyrim*), while also fulfilling their destiny as ordained by the Greybeards. We might the Greybeards as the magico-religious side of sovereignty.

The Jarls and General Tullus

Lord ("Jarl") in *Rigsthula* (Littleton *New Comparative Mythology* 132-33).

Georges Dumézil has also argued that the tripartite ideology is reflected in the *Rigsthula* of the *Poetic Edda* (*Gods of the Ancient Northmen* 118-25). In the *Rigsthula*, the Norse Aesir Heimdall, disguised as Rig visits the homesteads of different levels of the society. Of particular interest to us is the last family with the father, Jarl—the title given to *Skyrim*'s kings—and his son Konr (*Rigsthula* 37-48; Larrington 243-44). The Jarl amasses wealth and social status, but his son is seen as the true fulfillment of selfhood. Konr (or Kin), as stanzas 43-44 of *Rigsthula* recount, masters runic knowledge, learns the language of birds, outwits his father, and, finally, earns the title of Rig, enabling him to deploy runes (Larrington 244). There are many intricate layers of implications woven throughout this lay, but for our purposes, I would like to emphasize that the player-Dragonborn may come to work closely with the Jarls of *Skyrim*, but ultimately "outrank" them once the player has gone from a mere prisoner to the Dragonborn. The lineage of Jarls still hold much sway over the individual kingdoms and still exercise much societal and juridic sovereignty, as befits a king.

It is interesting to note that General Tullius of the Imperial Legion shares a close nominal allusion to the mytho-historic Roman leader Tullus Hostilius, the ancestral leader of Rome following Numa and Romulus according to Roman succession and foundation legends. The emphasis in his militant title also suggests a nod to the real Tullus Hostilius who was a paradigmatic model of the perfect warrior (Dumézil, *Destiny of a Warrior*). Livy in his *History of Rome*, describes as “more warlike than Romulus” (1.8.2; Foster n. pag.). However, in *Skyrim*, General Tullius has no interest in the dragon plague and has come to Skyrim because of the Civil War. This leaves the plague of the dragons to the player to fulfill his or her role as Dragonborn: the warrior-function of Dumézil’s trifunctional ideology.

The Dragonborn

In theorizing the mythical society of Tamriel as trifunctional, I mean to also put forth the significance of another tertiary aspect of the player in the main storyline: the “Thirdness” of the Dragonborn, that is. The conventional position of players in a game is that of the hero, without whom there would be no story, nor game. The reliance of the medium on human intervention and participation means that the human player is core to the triadic relationship between player-sign-machine/text (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 21, fig. 1.1). The “Thirdness” or *tertium quiddity* of the player is made all but apparent in the very title of their fate as “Dragon-born,” and that the otherness of Alduin is the Otherness that identifies the hero with the slain: “The hero imagined to be simultaneously perfect man and perfect monster” (Miller, *Epic Hero* 344). This is all well and good for the psychological and archetypal understanding of the Dragonborn. However, the “archetypal” becomes increasingly “individualized” and personalized as the player implements

incremental modifications to their character. In this way, the player leads the fate of their character as a guardian, but can also navigate the different domains of other societal strata, not to mention that certain races in the fantasy world come with native talents. I would argue that the levels of configuration, modification and personalization that have become increasingly popular across many different genres of video games focusing on character development are essential and should be emphasized. The inclusion of such tools keeps the myth from becoming too dogmatic and ideological. The first step is to bring those concepts to the fore in scholarship and subject them to criticism.

This is all well and good for the psychological approach to the Dragonborn's function. However, the dragon crisis that plagues Tamriel is also a societal problem, one that is very similar to a certain account found in Welsh mythology. In the tale of "Lludd and Llefelys" from the *Mabinogion*, we learn of three plagues or calamities effecting King Lludd and the people of the Island of Britain: First, a mysterious peoples known as the Coraniaid who had exceptional hearing abilities so that no word was left unheard, making secrecy among the people of Britain near-impossible; second, a terrible scream that was heard every May eve that struck terror in the people, caused men to lose color and strength, women to miscarry, maidens to go mad, and vegetation and animal life to diminish; and third, a curious case of a year's supply of food to be wasted since only the first night's feast would satiate the diners (Davies 111-12). Each could be addressed in further detail, but for our purposes I would like to focus on the second plague since it shares the most relevant correspondence with *Skryim*. The terrible scream heard throughout the Island was actually the sounds of a dragon. Llefelys, king Lludd's brother, informs him that the second plague is caused by the combat between two dragons, the

native dragon of the Island and a foreign dragon; the screaming sound comes from the native dragon, but can be tended to by performing a certain task: by measuring the exact center of the Island, a location can be found to where a vat of mead with a blanket overtop is to be placed. Once the dragons are found, their fighting will persist until they land together on the sheet over the mead. In so doing, they will be transformed into pigs (Davies 113).

The vision of warring dragons was a common motif in other texts of Medieval Europe. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (AD 1136) we find the fantastical "Prophecy of Merlin," in which the legendary magician presents an extended allegorical and symbolic exhortation of the war between the Saxons and the Britains through the imagery of a white dragon in combat with a red dragon, respectively (171-85). Though linked through veils of allegorical interpretations of history, the "Prophecy of Merlin" is a prime source of the fabulous bestiary tradition that still tends to be explored by fantasy writers and worlds of High Fantasy to the present day. *Skyrim* is but one case of dragon lore being applied to in participatory form.

This leaves us with the figure of Alduin, the World-Eater, and deity in the Nordic pantheon. His mythological counterparts in traditional tales are numerous, but we might include him with various dragons, serpents or "worms" of Norse myth like the famous Midgard serpent, Jörmungand who circumscribes the outer rim of Norse "Middle-Earth" (Midgard) (Lindow 229-30). Nídhöggur, whose name means "Evil-Blow," might be a closer approximation of Alduin. According to Snorri Sturluson in *Gylfaginning* 15 of his *Prose Edda* Nídhöggur is said to reside under the well Hvergelmir gnawing at a root of the cosmic tree Yggdrassil (24). The seeress of Edda serves a critical role as the harbinger

of the dark dragon who arrives during the chaotic events of Ragnarok (*Völuspá* 66; cf. Lindow 239). Like the monsters and dragons of Indo-European myths of “Third,” Alduin and his accompaniment of lesser dragons, represents a plague that threatens the commoners, the economy and thus attacks the foundation of the social structure of Skyrim, which, as I have argued, is constructed of three strata of social roles: priests, warriors, and commoners. The player as the Dragonborn—hero and warrior—is tasked with the challenge to work with members of each strata and navigate through the social structure in order to recover and establish a harmony that transcends any one group.

I also argue that *Skyrim* offers the player the opportunity to explore and participate in the three major categories of folk-narrative: myth, legend and folktale. From the Greybeards, Jarls and General, the player learns *myth*; from their own embodiment of heroism, the player fulfills their role in birthing a Skyrim *legend*; and, prior to either of these, the player mingles with craftsmen, villagers and commoners over-hearing rumor, gossip, ballads and the occasional *folktale*. Gradually, the successful player will integrate all of these into their character’s psyche whilst fulfilling their destiny as the Dragonborn, ridding Skyrim of Alduin and reclaim cosmic and societal order.

Concluding remarks on *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

Throughout this chapter I have drawn on the comparative mythology of Georges Dumézil and his hypothesis of the trifunctional ideology of Indo-European myth and society. It is important to stress that the hypothesis has been challenged on two key points: The first, is its claims of reconstructive projects from an overtly etic perspective; that is, fitting the traditions into a preconceived schema. Bruce Lincoln has made one of the stronger critiques of Dumézil’s hypothesis and the ideology his own scholarship, this,

after pursuing such methodologies in his own work and finding that the quest for “Proto-” myths, cultures, languages was skewed in practice (*Death, War, and Sacrifice* 123, 231-243 and *Theorizing Myth* 121-137, 211-216). He has, thus, argued that such research and methods is more a product of discourse around hypothetical *Urheimat* than actual originating locations (*Theorizing* 216).

A second claim made by Dumézil is that the trifunctional ideology is genetically tied exclusively to Indo-Europeans and their descendants. Recent revisions have challenged such claims and have presented cases not against the uncovering of the three functions (priest, warrior, producer), but against the innateness of it to Indo-Europeans alone. Furthermore, the hypothesis has been challenged on the grounds that it does not feature across *all* cultures *within* the so-called Indo-European family. For instance, there is a distinctive gap in a fully realized trifunctional pantheon in the Olympians of the ancient Greeks. However, Plato’s *polis* and structure of the *psyche* both reflect a clear tripartite division: *archontas* (rulers), *stratiotes* (guardians) and *demiourgois/georgois* (craftsmen/cultivators); *logos* (reasoning), *thymos* (spirited-ness), and *epithymos* (appetite) (*Rep.* IV.435; cf. Sallustius XV). Instead, the spread of the ideology has been under much scrutiny and refinement. Yoshida and Littleton have made some important contributions for suggesting an Indo-European influence on the pre-Heian era of Japan. This may suggest that those cultures that made contact with Indo-Europeans had received the tripartitioned ideology on the level of the aristocracy, and used it as a framework and administered it through their body of sacred histories. Such an adventurous and challenging proposal would give some explanation to the Indo-European-like themes and motifs found in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, like the dragon-slaying adventures of

Susano-o. These areas of interest rub up against the core issues of comparative mythological research: polygenesis or monogenesis? This remains an issue that deserves closer research in general.

Case Study: *Okami*

The next section will work towards contextualizing the Clover Studio/Capcom adventure game *Okami* (Clover Studio 2006) within its own traditional Japanese mythological roots (*Nihon no shinwa* 日本 の 神話), culture complex and role-playing tradition. At its core, the video game's lore centers on a ludic retelling and theography of the *kami* Amaterasu and her brother Susano.o as they cooperate to challenge the return of the great beast of disorder and chaos, Yamata-no Orochi. We can turn to the primary source material, that of *Kojiki* 古事記 and *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀, collectively called *Kiki shinwa* 記紀 神話 of Japan's indigenous sacred tradition of Shinto for the core mythological referents.

The video game begins with an extended exposition on the history and backstory of Nippon. As the opening lines indicate (*mukashi, mukashi*) the presentation of the fictional world of *Okami* is framed as *mukashi-banashi* (a tale of long ago), and so can be taken as a folktale. This is reflected throughout the video game by characters commenting that belief in the divine has waned, and is, in ways, reflected in the presence of the curses that plague the land of Nippon. However, the implications and consequences of the player in *Okami* are cosmic within the fictional world and so could be argued as mythic in mode. It is these features and the mythological cycles of *Okami* that we will dwell on most, and will not be addressing *all* aspects of folkloric and classical literary reception—such an in-depth analysis deserves its own separate study.

The tale begins in a time of crisis when the local village of Kamiki is visited by a white wolf called Shiranui (“White-wild Majesty”), who practices the ritualistic annual offering of a maiden to the mountain spirit Orochi, is visited by a white wolf named Shiranui. Nagi, the local warrior, reproaches Shiranui, but their fate becomes more deeply intertwined as the ideal pair to combat Orochi. The name of Nagi is itself another layer of ludic interpretation of traditional sources. “Nagi” derives from the *katakana*, イザナギ “**Izanagi**,” and, again, creates a linguistic play on Izanagi. In a similar vein, Nagi’s love-interest, Nami is an abbreviated take on the ancestral *kami*, “**Izanami**.” Within the lore of *Okami*, Nagi teams up with Shiranui and disguises himself as the maiden Nami. The legendary combat occurs the night of the Kamiki festival and has the warrior and wolf exchange in an extensive battle with Orochi. Though almost defeated, the pair pushes back Orochi sealing him in the Moon Cave with the sword Tsukuyomi. The battle incurs damage on Shiranui who receives poisonous wounds from Orochi which eventually prove fatal to the white wolf.

The battle serves as a paradigmatic model of the future battles that come to pass during the course of *Okami*, as the player takes on the role of Amaterasu Okami, a white wolf and reincarnation of Shiranui. Nagi is memorialized in a cave dwelling, but his role will be taken up eventually by the warrior Susano of Kamiki village. It is Susano’s doubts of the legendary accounts’ validity that drives him to test it and enter the Moon Cave where Nagi’s legendary sword Tsukuyomi is kept to seal away Orochi. Upon removing it, Orochi is revived and begins his reinstallation and reign of terror over Kamiki village. Susano will eventually admit to these deeds to Kuni, who first scorns him for his grievous mistake. With the return of Orochi comes the ritual sacrifice of a maiden, with Kuni

being chosen. As a sake brewer, she believes she can defeat Orochi alone, but the task is far from that simple and will require the player to seek out Kuni who runs to Moon Cave, and assemble a special batch of sake for the impending first battle with Orochi.

Amaterasu disguised as the white wolf reflects one of the more sophisticated instances of word-play in the video game *Okami*. The linguistic gesture is a play on words opening up polysemic possibilities with the pronunciation of *okami*: a pun on the Hiragana, *ookami* おおかみ of the Kanji 狼, wolf, and for Great Kami 太神 *Ō-kami*, an epithetic title included in the *kami*'s name, Ama-terasu-Ō -kami (Heavenly Illumined Great *kami*).

Susano and Monster-Slaying in Japanese Tradition

So too the character Susano, descendant of the warrior Nagi, shares many traits with the *kami* of *Kiki shinwa*, Susano-o. But, at a closer reading of the language, Susano of *Okami* is actually constructed from the *katakana* スサノオ (“Susano’o”), rather than the traditional *kanji* 須佐之男 (Susano-o). Certain textual affinities link the warrior Susano with the *kami* Susano-o. His love of drink and sake is no mere allusion. In the *Kojiki*, Susano-o was known to go into wreckless drunken escapades (*Kojiki* 18; Philippi 79), and, more specifically, when Susano.o comes to a local village to save the girl Kushinadahime from Yamata-no Orochi (Eight-tailed serpent), he instructs the maiden’s parents to brew and serve eight vessels of sake (itself called *ya-sipo-wori no sake*, lit. “the eight-times brewed sake”) (*Kojiki* 19; Philippi 89-90).⁵⁵ When *Okami* first meets Susano, descendant of the warrior Nagi, she must supply him with sake to get “rejuvenate”

⁵⁵ See Konishi (184-86) on the significance of “eight” as a sacred number in Izumo tradition, of which Susano is the central *kami*.

him. The character Kushi is based on the maiden **Kushinadahime** and recounts episodes of the legend regarding the battle between Nagi and Orochi by getting the foe drunk on sake. In the version told in *Okami*, Nagi is the legendary warrior who first did battle with the first Orochi 100 years prior to the events of *Okami*.

As the account in *Kojiki* attests, the combat between Susano-o and Yamata-no Orochi takes on similar mythological themes found in the Indo-European myths of the storm deity versus a water dragon (West 255-259). And like such combat myths Susano's battle with Orochi in *Okami* reflects the mythologem's basic theme of being a nature myth; that is, by Orochi being slain, the waters hoarded by Orochi are released and Okami's greater mission to restore the land of Nippon can unfold.

The hero in conflict and combat with a monstrous adversary is well attested not only in *Kiki shinwa*, but in traditional tales. It is one of the few internationally recognizable tale-types (ATU 300 *The Dragon-slayer*). The adversary may change from the great eight-headed Orochi, to a localized water serpent, to a monstrous feline. Susano-o goes into battle alone, only with the preliminary assistance of the parents of the girl he seeks to rescue. In other local legends, a warrior comes along and is accompanied by a canine companion. The canine is the true local hero, or becomes so after entering courageously into battle. One famous tale (*mukashi-banashi*) shares many traits with *Okami*.

Shippei Taro is a particularly striking example in relation to *Okami* since it features both a warrior-Samurai and a canine (a descendant of the wolf; Japanese *o-okami* 狼). According to the tale, a priest came to a village and heard sobbing coming from one of the houses. The priest learned from the family that a yearly harvest-time ritual was

approaching whereby a young girl (their daughter) was to be sent as human-sacrifice to appease a local mountain spirit and quell the onset of a storm. The priest wished to put an end to the deed and offered himself, but learned that he must employ the assistance of Shippei Taro. To the priest's surprise, Shippei Taro turned out to be a giant dog that caused fear in the *bakemono* (lesser spirits near the mountain spirit). Through a cunning plan of hiding themselves in the chest that was used to send the young girls, the priest and Shippei Taro successfully infiltrated and slayed the *bakemono* and the mountain spirits (see fig. 2, app. B). Shippei Taro and the priest had successfully brought peace to the village (Lang, *Violet* 36-40; Seki, *Folktales* 33-36). The Shippei Taro tale shares close ties with the Izumo province, traditionally held to be the location where Susano-o is said to have descended upon during his own career as slayer of Yamato-no Orochi and rescuer of Kushinada Hime; the priest, however, did not end up marry the young girl. Classicist and folklorist William Hansen includes the Shippei Taro tale in his discussion of the wide distribution of international tale-type ATU 300 *The Dragon Slayer (Ariadne's Thread* 120-21).

Serpent-, dragon, or monster-slayers are prevalent throughout Far East Asia. Some even go against the typical male-hero paradigm and include female serpent-slayers like the heroine Liji (or Li Chi) in Bao Gan's collection of tales *In Search of the Supernatural* (19.440; 230-31).

Divine Instruments

Amaterasu Okami acquires three classes of weapons known as the Divine Instruments: the Reflector (mirror), the Glaive (various swords), and Rosaries (jewels). Each is used to issue out multiple offensive attacks during combat.

The three classes have a direct referent in Japan's Three Sacred Treasures, *Sanshu no Jingi* 三種の神器, also known as the Imperial Regalia of Japan. These sacred treasures are specifically the mirror Yata no Kagami, the sword Kusanagi, and the jewel Yasakani no Magatama. The sacred lore and transmission of the regalia can be found in the *Kojiki* as the heavenly descent of Amaterasu to bestow the “travel kit” to Ninigi (Ooms, *Imperial Politics and Symbolics in Ancient Japan* 123-29).

Divine Artistry

Amaterasu Okami receives her terrestrial vocation by Yomigami, *kami* of rejuvenation, to fulfill her role as the reincarnation of Shiranui the White-wild Majesty, and also as the sun *kami* herself. In order to do so, Okami must contact the thirteen celestial *kami* known as “brush gods” and (re)learn the celestial brushstrokes from each:

1. Yomigami, dragon *kami* of Rejuvenation
2. Tachigami, mouse *kami* of Power Slash
3. Hanagami, a monkey trio *kami* of Greensprout (abilities include: blooming, creating a water lily, and grappling vine)
4. Bakugami, board *kami* of explosions and the cherry bomb
5. Yumigami, rabbit *kami* of the Moon and the ability to turn day to night
6. Nuregami, the snake *kami* of the waterspout
7. Kazegami, horse *kami* of divine wind
8. Moegami, phoenix/rooster of inferno and fire
9. Kasugami, sheep *kami* of the veil of mist ability
10. Kabegami, cat *kami* of walls and ability to paint scaleable tracks

11. Gekigami, tiger *kami* of Thunderstorm

12. Itegami, ox *kami* of Blizzard

Okami contains within herself the celestial brush of sunrise, since she is, afterall, the *kami* Amaterasu. When she finally acquires the thirteen celestial brushstrokes, she will have reinstated herself in stature and power as the legendary Shiranui. The quest for each celestial brushstroke provides the main structure and frame for the quest system.

Furthermore, what remains one of the more appealing and innovating features of *Okami* lies in the actual drawing out of the celestial brush moves in order to cast them. When the player wishes to use one, a translucent paper appears on the screen allowing the player to draw an ink stroke over areas of the visible area. Thus, a bomb can be strategically placed, or an enemy can be slashed.

The celestial brushstrokes of *Okami* put her in direct relation with her companion Issun, the artist and mini-samurai. As the player learns celestial brushstrokes, Issun also attempts to memorize them for his own uses. As no mere motif, brushstrokes permeate the aesthetics and visual presentation of the video game which draws extensively from the traditional Japanese style of *ukiyo-e*.

Issun

In the context of building the visual canon of *Okami*, it bears mentioning the character of Issun the Wandering Artist. As his name signifies, he is both a combination of the Issun-Boshi (“Little One-Inch”) of folklore (*Folktales of Japan*, Tale 28; Seki 90-92), and an aspiring artist in the world of *Okami*. The attentive player will discover that it was Issun all along that was the extra-diegetic artist responsible for the visual pieces featured throughout the game. True to form, Issun is first encountered as a flea-like sized

being with an outspoken and sassy demeanor. It is only half-way into the game that the player—upon being hit by a magical mallet—shrinks to the size of Issun who appears as a youthful samurai. The context of this meeting revolves around an adventure around the Imperial Palace of Sei'an City that has the pair descend into the body of the Emperor Takara to cure him and the Imperial Palace from a fog. The source ends up being the boss Blight *Ekibyō*. Upon defeating Blight (causing him to flee the Emperor's body), and healing the Emperor, Okami returns to normal size. The following adventure has Okami and Issun meeting Kaguya (who had been imprisoned at the Palace). The young maiden character is based on Kaguya Hime of the celebrated literary tale, *Taketori Monogatari* ("The Old Bamboo-Hewer's Story") (Dickins). Okami and Issun will eventually help Kaguya fulfill her quest to go back to her celestial origins at the Moon—a nod to her literary counterpart. This is but a single thread that constitutes the rich tapestry of textual influences that is *Okami*. There are obviously many threads that cannot be covered here in detail, but there are certain themes of mythic significance that can be addressed.

Rejuvenation remains a leitmotif of *Okami*, and the enactment of divine power within the fictional world. As the player progresses, learns brushstrokes and combats the malevolent spirits of Nippon, it is gradually revealed that Amaterasu Okami (as a reincarnation of Shiranui) has descended from the Heavenly Plain *Taka* to cleans, purify and renew nature itself from Orochi, the plethora of malevolent spirits (*oni*) and eventually death itself (as the boss, Yami). At a structural and mytho-logic level, *Okami's* storyline rests on the basic opposition between generative powers of life sourced from the sun and the opposing forces of death, decay and degeneration. Rejuvenation, then, recurs throughout the deeds of Okami as she feeds local animals, restores vegetation, flora and

forests to gain their favor in her greater combat against chaos, death and void. It is not a feat undertaken alone, since Okami relies on Susano and his sword for boss fights, and is supported by the celestial brush *kami*.

Waka (and the Return to the Heavenly Plane)

One of the last characters that deserve some attention is Waka, *tengu* and guardian of the Moon Cave.⁵⁶ Waka is an elusive figure who becomes increasingly important near the end of *Okami*. As a celestial-pomp Waka alludes to the fate of Okami to ascend to the Heavenly Plane by recovering and entering the Ark of Yamato which, during the events of *Okami*, is discovered submerged in Laochi Lake. The Ark becomes the vehicle through which the celestial ascent sends the player into the finale, completing Amaterasu-Okami's cycle. Waka factors as one of the original crew of the Ark which suffered from a battle prior to the events of *Okami*, when Orochi assaulted the Moon. It may suffice to acknowledge that the Ark of Yamato is one of the more powerful images of *Okami*: the Yamato is a reference to the "Region and kingdom from which the imperial lineage claims descent. It refers also to the Yamato Minzoku, the Yamato race, the original inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago" (Picken 318-19). Upon boarding the Ark of Yamato, Issun informs Okami that he must stay behind, but Waka informs him that he still carries much responsibility as a Celestial Envoy.

The narrative structure and storyline of *Okami* takes the player on a journey into deeper and deeper layers of Japanese history and ancestral cultural heritage. It goes well

⁵⁶ *Tengu* 天狗 (lit. "Heavenly Dog") are a kind *yokai* bird-like associated with the Otherworld of Japanese folklore, come from a rich tradition that cannot be addressed here in any great detail. Suffice it to say, Waka, the *tengu* of *Okami*, carries many traits of the traditional being; other more malevolent *tengu* feature in *Okami* as minor enemy. For a recent and thorough study of *tengu* research published a few years after *Okami*, see Wilburn Hansen's 2009 book, *When Tengu Talk*. Hansen traces the body of work of 19th century scholar Hirata Atsune and his supposed encounter with a *tengu*-boy replete with travel accounts and an "ethnography" of the Otherworld.

past modern and even Ancient history, and ventures into neighboring tribes like the Ainu in the *Okami* quest undertaken in the land of Kamui—a reference to the *kamui* divinities of Ainu (Munro 16-27). The final Owl-like bosses resemble *dogu* figurines from the Jomon Period (14,000-400 BC). The final stages feature an ascent to the Celestial Plains by way of a Yamato (space)ship. The battles with Orochi and True Orochi are but preludes to showcase the Susano(-o) cycle as the heroic personage of *Okami*'s Nippon and the *kami* of *Kiki shinwa* and usher in the deeper structural opposition at the core of Amaterasu Okami's mission of reincarnation and rejuvenation: to take on Death itself in the form of Yami whose full name is Tokoyami no Sumeragi "Emperor of Everlasting Darkness."⁵⁷

Sacred objects, architecture and shrines derived from Shinto are placed throughout the landscape of *Okami*'s Nippon. Players familiar with these objects become increasingly use to walking through *torii* 鳥居 (gateways), entering *jinja* 神社 (shrines; dwelling place of *kami*) and, most fittingly, saving progress at stations fashioned as *kagami* 鏡(the mirror). Motohisa Yamakage relates the symbolic significance of *kagami*: "The mirror is the precious treasure-like tool reflecting the image of Kami. It is also the symbol of the sun, the source of all life and the symbol of spiritual light when spirit of Kami (*shinrei*) manifests itself in this world" (47-48). The most well known and sacred mirror, *Yata no Kagami*, is said to be housed in the Ise Grand Shrine, *Ise Jingu*, dedicated to Amaterasu. We also know it as being one of the three sacred treasures of Japan.

⁵⁷ On this transition in the adversary from (True) Orochi to Yami (from serpent to Death), and the hero from Susano (Susano-o) to Okami (Amaterasu) (Hero to deity), see a striking parallel in the "Indo-European" mythological formula tracked in Watkins' chapter "*Nectar and the adversary Death*" (*How to Kill a Dragon* 391-97), whereby the linguistically formulated "Hero Overcomes/Slays Adversary/dragon/Death is presented in its variations. Death is then viewed as the "ultimate adversary," and can be shown as an inflection of R185 *Mortal fights with "Death"* in Thompson's *Motif-Index* (Watkins 394).

Like *Skyrim*, *Okami* demonstrates how a game world can uniquely adapt and virtualize traditional and conventional folklore and mythology into dynamic, interactive models. However, each do so through quite different means. *Skyrim* stems from a syncretism out of a multiplex of cultural and mythological references, while *Okami* comes out of a single cultural complex. For comparative analysis, we will situate *Okami* within its indigenous trajectory of the mythological tradition (*shinwa* 神話) of Shinto with close attention to its use of traditional Japanese legend/saga (*densetsu* 伝説), fairy tales, folktales or ‘Once upon a time’ tales (*mukashi-banashi* 昔話) and Classic literary epics like the *Heike Monogatari*. Rather than fabricating new worlds of pure fantasy the world of *Okami* interprets traditional lore for new generations to explore through play and rich game worlds.

Of the aforementioned genres, we can draw particular attention *mukashi-banashi*, since this is the phrase used to introduce the story of *Okami*. Keigo Seki in *Types of Japanese Folktales* offers the following definition for the folk genre: “*Mukashi-banashi* literally means an old tale or a tale of ancient times. This term is derived from the peculiar form of the opening phrase of folktales, “*mukashi, mukashi* (a long, long time ago)” (2).

Intercultural Exchange

Japan has always tended to be a nation that embraces new media to share and celebrate its cultures history and traditions, sacred and/or secular. Prior to video games, acclaimed films like the 1959 *Nippon Tanjō* —translated variously as *The Birth of Japan*, or more popularly as *The Three Treasures*—portray vivid renditions of Kiki mythology, the mythic origin of Japan, and the significance of the Three Sacred Treasures. Japanese

video game studios have tended to produce sophisticated and seemingly erudite explorations of mythological systems. For instance, Atlus's *Megami Tensei* universe not only has database of world mythologies, but also features a storehouse of native traditions. *Cosmology of Kyoto* (Softedge 1993) is another prime example of utilizing the genre of non-linear interactive fiction to explore aspects of Japanese Buddhism (ca. Heian Period) like transmigration of the soul, reincarnation and journeys to the levels or realms of Naraka like Avici attested in sacred texts like the *Lotus Sutra*, replete with the specific denizens (Kubo and Yuyama). Among such games, however, *Okami* is quite an exceptional and celebratory video game that showcases some of the core sacred and secular tales of Japanese culture. This is but a mere introduction of some of the threads and layers woven into *Okami*. The artists, creators and designers committed so much of their native culture into the video game that the above analysis is a pale shadow to the first-hand experience of playing the video game itself which—as this researcher can attest—amounts to 50+ hours of gameplay.

As the game's producer, Atsushi Inaba, stated in a 2007 interview with *IGN*: “We have incorporated so many stories from different mythologies in the game, so I doubt there is anyone who can spot every single story or myth,” but in so doing, the saturated lore of *Okami* serves as one of the rare instances of a game studio openly sharing their native culture for an international audience. Inaba, when reflecting on the topics of intercultural exchange, states:

Using traditional culture in a game doesn't have to deliver a message but simply be used to help expand the expression of a theme.

Obviously I was born and bred in Japan so I may qualify as the most

suitable person to show our traditional culture in a game, however, everyone has a feeling of admiration toward different cultures so it may be interesting to have a take on our culture from an outsider's perspective. But, it would be important to appreciate this culture first though.

Having said that, while working on *Okami*, the team realised that we didn't have a complete understanding of our own culture so it was a good opportunity to rediscover our own cultural background. (Inaba; Shea interview)

Of the video games discussed in this study, *Okami* stands apart not only for the inspired and inspiring vision achieved by the game developers, but as an exemplary case of the medium's capabilities to make a mythological tradition nearly habitable, if only for brief glimpse.

Cross-cultural Implications, Universality, and Localization

Between the two trajectories of cultural mythologies demonstrated by *Skyrim* and *Okami*, I move into the milieu of cross-cultural concerns and implications at work in the production and marketing of games as *cultural artifacts* and *products*. As cultural artifacts they express artistic concerns, but as products they must also be appealing to a global audience if they are to break out into markets beyond the native soil. This dialectical tension between the local and the universal is valuable to the greater role video and computer games play as culturally expressive forms of media—in other terms, the homogenous category of *gamer* and *gaming culture* alongside the indigenous idiosyncrasy of the variety of culture-specific contexts. On the practical level of

commerce and commoditization the practice is called *localization*: the literal translation and migration of one culture's product into another (e.g. a Japanese video game localized for North American and European markets). Though considered in recent discourse—this study included—in relation to video game marketing, localization is very much a part of the migration of folktales as studied by the folklorist and ethnographer dating back to the early 20th century Finnish School of the Historic-Geographic method.

The matter becomes more complex if we consider the borrowing of mythological content held in high esteem or even as sacred from one culture-complex to another. For succinct examples, consider Western Medieval Dragons fought in Asian constructed game worlds (e.g. *Dragon Warrior/Quest*), YHWH featured as the climactic final boss (e.g. *Shin Megami Tensei*), or the Apocalyptic genre of Enoch repurposed through an action adventure game (e.g. *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron*). In popular manga and animé, the recent *Fate* universe stretches across heroic mythologies from around the world centered on epic story-arcs of recurring wars and quests for the Holy Grail; mythic, epic, and romantic modes blend. We might also cite the usage of a Hindu divinity, Kali, in a Western massively multiplayer online battle-arena like *SMITE*. This raises a curious question: might the translation and transmutation of one cultural mythology speak just as much to the cultures mythologizing than the mythologies represented aesthetically? Where does myth arise within the intercultural exchange of products? In other words, does a Medieval European mythos rendered by a non-Western culture represent a new inflection of the mythos, or does it reveal the non-Western cultures own mythologizing of the West?

To address such inquiries, one must remain cognizant of the complex relationships between texts and goods; intertextual and intercultural exchanges: that is, their transmission, their migration, their mobilizing by groups and their (re)contextualizing through administration by networks of active agents and products of commerce; Thomas Pavel refers to this as “world models” of “the economy of the imaginary,” whereby

Users of world models...spontaneously make distinctions between fiction and error on the one hand, and fiction and truth on the other. They...know that world models can serve more than one series of users. A given model may lose the assent of its users without, however, being irremovably discarded: deposed world versions often find secondary users. Mythologies...survive this way. (*Fictional Worlds* 142-43)

The mythologist abroad in a foreign field-site must also be aware of the etic and emic categories generated and employed for research not only in categories identifying commonalities, but also native grown categories; depending on the aims of research, the inquiry may be to determine what originates from the field-site, or what has been imported from other economies of the imaginary. For example, the category of “myth” has its own unique history and mythology in the Western Tradition, and remains a problematic, unsettled category as a concept, mode and/or genre. Pioneering fieldwork-oriented scholars like Bronislaw Malinowski in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* faced such problems head-on in assuming, comparing and assessing the Trobriand peoples “living mythology” with that of the “dead mythology” of classical antiquity. Behind such

endeavors is the hidden assumption that one will find myth(ology) abroad where ever there are humans.

Issues surrounding the theory of genre in the international and comparative arenas still tend to trace back in (Western) scholarship to Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm who first attempted to delineate the standard “romantic trio of oral genre”: myth, legend and folktale. Sir James George Frazer also maintained a similar stance along with his expected evolutionary spin of myth as a proto-science. This tripartite division of prose narratives has persisted and has perpetuated through many forms of imported and exported products of media. As a classic example, Nintendo’s 1986 video game *The Legend of Zelda* reflects the U.S.-side localization of the Japanese genre of *densetsu* 伝説 (from the originating title, *Zeruda no Densetu*), yet the world of *Zelda* features strong influences of Medieval European legendry. Again, the analyst may wish to follow Bascom who argued for the cross-cultural over the universal, and so keep apparent the distinction between analytical and native categories, while also baring in mind that localization goes both ways; that is to say, *The Legend of Zelda* depicts legendry content born of a Western Medievalism on the part of Japanese developers, and so designating it within—i.e., making it subject to—the traditional Japanese category of *densetsu* may be an overly literalized assertion. Instead, the ambiguity in situating *Legend of Zelda* may come more from the issue of locating the discourse of “otherness.”

To be sure, myths of a certain breed of processing—mythologizing of sorts—may arise through a reaction towards the “otherness” of a neighboring or distant culture. Joseph Campbell often quipped that “Mythology is other people’s religion” (*Inner Reaches* 27). Bruce Lincoln duly states,

It is not always the case that myths are the product and reflection of a people who tell stories in which they effectively narrate themselves. At times, myths are stories in which some people narrate others, and at times the existence of those others is itself the product of mythic discourse. (*Theorizing Myth* 211)

To seamlessly situate biblical allusions alongside mythological allusions, and deploy sacred traditions within the context of a video game is bound to stir controversy.

However, the biblical scholar must also recognize that the Judeo-Christian tradition has not reached all corners of the globe, and countries like Japan have made concerted efforts to stand over and against these sacred traditions, content to keep them as foreign and thus non-native. The result is products like *El-Shaddai* or the *Megami Tensei* franchise that approach biblical sources (apocryphal and non-canonical included) *as mythologies* to explore through a ludicity. Myths perceived as “myths” (i.e. as lies) tend to imply a certain distancing from within the dominant myth’s sphere of sovereignty, influence and efficacy—its hegemony—be it through the foreign perspective of the outsider or through the lens of disenchanted citizens or groups. Hence, to pronounce a misconception or fallacy in modern terms, one often resorts to labeling content as *mere myth*. In a similar gesture, one could write off attempts to valorize a video game’s message by denigrating it as “just a game.” I can personally attest that several times during gaming sessions one player’s personal high stakes was dismissed by another who would exclaim “Chill out,” “it’s just a game,” or “Get a life.”

In such a climate, one may doubt that we can pass through the threshold of immaturity and the brash in a video game setting. Furthermore, if a certain level of

maturity, cultural sensitivity, and education are contrasted with scathing racial slurs, cyber-bullying, and gender bashing, efforts to elevate and create a meaningful platform and space for intercultural discourse may seem foolish if not bleak. I believe this can and will change as the gaming demographic continues to evolve, expand, and diversify. The acceptance of video games as viable cultural artifacts and activities has slowly been acknowledged in the class rooms of primary school up to professional and scholarly studies as we have seen. Video games are no longer fringe, nor exclusively part of an industry of recreation. Instead, they exist as nodes within a network of cultural influences both high and low.

Few mythological motifs have had as deep a resonance in video game history as those constellating around dragon slaying. It far exceeds the bounds of the medium and is one of the “quasi-universals” of worldwide distribution (Kluchkohn; cf. Fontenrose; cf. Watkins). In his extensive linguistic analysis of the mythologem, Calvert Watkins describes the function of the myth, in agreement mostly with Fontenrose: “The dragon symbolizes Chaos, in the largenst sense, and killing the dragon represents the ultimate victory of Cosmic Truth and Order over Chaos...it is a symbolic victory of growth over stagnation or dormancy in the cycle of the year, and ultimately a victory of rebirth over death” (299).

There is still something rather unique about the ability of games in general and video games in particular to serve as a bridge between groups, cultures and societies. The social function and position of games make them a prime nexus for cultures to interact and engage in spirited competition and cooperation. By engaging virtually in each others’ cultural symbols and tales, two players from different sides of the globe can knowingly or

unknowingly learn about commonalities (the dragon) and differences (slain or revered).

Bonnie Nardi, reflecting on her interview with Chen, a Chinese *World of Warcraft* player, states:

Games are venues for unselfconscious cross-cultural encounters afforded by software artifacts that embody but at the same time transcend culture. Just as Chen found interest in encountering European dragons and the novelty of gnomes and dwarves, so may we in the West delight in knowing of happy Chinese dragons. They may come to us as future commodities in video games, just as mythological creatures of the West have made their way to China through *World of Warcraft*. (203)

Cultural interaction and participation in another tradition's imaginarium is one of the key affordances of the immersive environments of virtual worlds, online and off. In the comparative study of myth, the mythologist has often decide whether like motifs derive from the human mind (cognition or psychic unity) or from direct intercultural exchange two cultures' history (diffusion). Within this chapter we have observed the dragon-slaying motif as it occurred in two different cultural contexts as represented by the European dragons populating *Skyrim*, and the very specific traditionally inspired Yamato-no Orochi of Japanese *Kiki shinwa* in *Okami*. In this instance, the reception of a common dragon-slaying motif is well attested by both sources, unlike the benevolent dragons or *long* 龍 that tend to populate Chinese tradition, as Nardi attests with her informant. The monster-slaying paradigm established itself very early on in the formation of Imperial Heian-era Japan with Susano-o (Japan's own native Trickster) slaying Yamato-no Orochi

to save a local village girl in both the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*. Foreign importation of Indo-European motifs seem to have found their way into this particular chapter of Kiki mythology, most notably with Vedic Indra versus Vrtra (*RV* 1.32) with Vrtra becoming drunk with soma, and Yamato-no Orochi becoming intoxicated with the eight barrels of sake (cf. Witzel). This textual soil and terrain provide an underlying readiness to receive the European dragon, High Fantasy worlds and knighthood—what we might call the *topoi* of “Medievalism” and Arthurian Romances. It may not be so much a one-way diffusion, but an initial mutual exchange which continued as a coterminous development at the two ends of Eurasian ruling-classes. For, as Shuichi Kato posits, “The so-called myths included in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* were not the true myths which lived in the hearts of the people at large, but were rather ‘mythological literature’ created by the ruling class” (45). The modern rejoining of these two distant share-holders seems to be merely reflected in products of commerce and popular culture media. As the above analysis has also shown, a familiarity with Indo-European myth and folk-literature genres lay at the base of the ficitonal world of *Skryim*, but they too also share deep roots with the rise of comparative philology, mythology and the counter-measure in folkloritics in the formative decades of 18th-19th century scholarship (e.g. the Brothers Grimm), and such pivotal literary translators and creators of language and cultures both real and fantastical, J. R. R. Tolkien.

Perhaps at a deeper level of cultural contacts, the motifs of Japan’s mythologies will turn out to share in a mythology and ideology of a general Eurasian character. In their ambitious work *From Scythia to Camelot*, C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor have attempted to present the influence of Scythian lore and legends—reflected in more

modern renditions of the corpus of Ossetic Nart sagas—on Arthurian material, while Atsuhiko Yoshida, in a three-part series of essays from 1961 to 1963 for *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, has gone through great lengths to present challenging research on the possible Indo-European (specifically, Northern Indo-Iranian) origins and influence on Japanese *Kiki shinwa* (“La mythologie japonaise” pt. 3, 247-48 ; cf. Littleton “Indo-European Strain”). The result of these cultural and scholastic exchanges may be simply being reflected across the vernacular level of the Japanese fascination and reception of Arthurian legend and European Medievalism in such formative video games like the *Dragon Quest* series and *Legend of Zelda*, along with numerous other franchises of signature Japanese popular culture media.

With Yoshida and Littleton’s efforts in mind, we can focus on one particular similarity of interest in some detail. The pattern of tripartition is reflected in sacred objects of Scythian kings and the Imperial Regalia of Japan: according to Herodotus, the Scythians had an origin tale in which a plough and yoke (agriculture), a sword (warrior), and a flask all made from gold fell from the sky (*Histories* 4.5); and so too, the Three Sacred Treasures, i.e. the Imperial regalia, of the Imperial lineage of Japan are the mirror Yata no Kagami (wisdom), the Kusanagi sword (warrior), and the jade jewel (or beads) Yasakani no Maga-tama (wealth) (*Kojiki* 1.39.2) that were bestowed on Ninigi, grandson of Amaterasu, who descended from heaven to earth to deliver it to the Emperor. The Imperial Regalia is said to be associated with symbolic colors: red (Kusanagi sword), white (Kagami mirror), and green (Maga-tama *jade* jewel/beads); power, purity, and growth (Ashkenazi 169-70). It is worth noting that this color scheme and symbolism

resemble the triadic color scheme of the typical Indo-European white (priestly), red (warrior) and green/blue (commoner) (Winn 35-36, 52-53).

Littleton, in a challenging and ambitious pair of articles, focused the comparative scope to two major points of transmission and intercultural possibilities, arguing that the combat between Susano-o and Yamata-no Orochi shared stock with the common theme of the deity-versus-monster combat and hero-versus-monster combat of the Indo-European mythological tradition (“Susa-no-wo versus Ya-mata no woroti”). If these implications are any sign of diffusionary possibilities, the perceived “Medievalism” and High Fantasy of Japanese video games and popular culture imaginaries, may have derived from much earlier influences from AD 400-700 (Kofun, Asuka and Nara eras). Such a time period would include the arrival of Buddhism into Japan (ca. AD 552), and the completion of the *Kojiki* (AD 712) and *Nihon-shoki* (AD 720). In a discussion regarding the *kami* Susano-o’s combat with Yamata-no Orochi, Daisaku Ikeda cites the work of folklorist Tara Obayashi who “believes that such legends first appeared in the West around the middle of the first millennium B.C. They were apparently associated with the making of swords and the use of iron and gradually spread east to Asia” (59).

When Nintendo entered the video game market, Shigeru Miyamoto’s coin-op arcade *Donkey Kong* (1981) had already reflected the plumber Mario—a protagonist who would become the famous video game character icon Mario—saving Pauline (the predecessor to Princess Peach) from the ominous adversary, Donkey Kong (based on the iconic film monster King Kong of the 1933 film of same name).⁵⁸ Mario’s adversary and

⁵⁸ The character and namesake of King Kong also has roots in the Western reception of China’s beloved Monkey **King** (Houwang 猴王), also known as Sun Wukong, of the 13th century novel, *Journey to the West* (*Xiyoubi* 西遊記) and Beijing opera. The loose “folk etymology” of (Monkey) King (Sun Wu)kong is tempting, but does not entirely reflect in the characters, since King Kong was translated into the characters

female damsel would later change into King Koopa and Princess Peach respectively, and set the stage for the world of Nintendo's classic *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), successor to Mario's starring-role appearance in *Mario Bros* (1983).

The next major game that spawned a franchise of its own is Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) for the Nintendo Famicom and Entertainment System. The world of Zelda overtly brings the player into a Medieval High Fantasy landscape, the land of Hyrule. The protagonist Link is, again, on a central quest to rescue Princess Zelda from Link's main adversary, Ganon. These iconic protagonists of Nintendo are, in our times, legendary in stature and have transcended game culture entering into international popular culture. In hindsight, we can see in them the Proppian hero of the wondertale, or Campbell's monomythic hero. The iconic Triforce of the *Legend of Zelda* universe—power, wisdom, and courage—also suggests some occupation with triadic structuration both in the ideological and the mythological with each Triforce presided over by a Goddess: Din, Goddess of Power; Nayru, Goddess of Wisdom; and Farore, Goddess of Courage. Such a divine ensemble seems to show some engagement with the Triple Goddess as presented by Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* (1948).

The Triforce, and Triforce-like, symbol(s) has had an interesting life of its own in recent video game culture. The independent video game, *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* (2011-12) by Capybara Games, features a female protagonist known as "The Scythian" who must undergo a quest into the Caucasus Mountains, is guided by ominous "The Archetype," and must confront three enemies in the form of the Trigon Trifecta, mystical triangles, each with a unique color: Gold Trigon (yellow), Light (blue),

jingang 金剛, a Chinese term for the Sanskrit Vajra, the mythical king—entirely separate kings. Lewis Hyde, in his magisterial study of the mythical Trickster, closes the study with the case of Monkey King and his reception in the West (Hyde 352-54).

Bright Moon (red) Trigon. It should be remembered that the historical Scythians were known to have included women in their ranks of warriors, inspiring the Greek's lore of the Amazonians (Littleton and Malcor 8-10, 161). The video game developers make upfront statements about their highly conscious use of a wide array of symbols, characterizations, theories, concepts and literature. A brief sample of source material that inspired the video game include Jung's *Red Book*, Goddess studies, and clear knowledge of research and history of the Russian steppes, Scythian lore in the works of classical authors, general romantic and fantastical appeal of the Caucasus region, and the sacred and mythic station of Mt. Elbrus—the site where the Titan Prometheus was said to be chained atop and where folk traditions persist of Promethean-like figures (cf. Colarusso 158-70; Barber and Barber 222-30). It is clear that the game deserves further attention and comment in future writings beyond the immediate study.⁵⁹ At present, my early assessment is that *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* attempts to engage and participate in a mythic discourse beyond the immediate video game, which I would characterize as a strong female protagonist combating the Indo-European tripartite ideology that is made explicit in The Scythian's combat against the Trigon Trifecta. It would be tempting to posit a collective readiness on an archetypal and unconscious level, but the direct cultural influences of diffusion supply ample support for the logistics of distribution, inspiration and circulation. Some video games engage in such material innocently with interests mostly lying in expanding on fantasy world-building, while others, like *S: S & S EP*, seem to push the entertainment value of the video game into difficult ideological territory. It gives this analyst some pause to validate or support such

⁵⁹ For further information about *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* and its network of references, the reader will find such material conveniently addressed by the developers themselves at the video game's website under the "Themes & Concepts in S: S&S EP."

uses of a medium that can so easily be misapplied and misconstrued given the greater playful context that it mainly serves for youth and general audiences. I would argue that the cross-over between ideological “play” (if we can call it that) should be researched and analyzed with an eye towards criticism (Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth* 211-16). Other aspects of the complex network of diffusion may well be traced in the exchange of commodities, but these cultural exchanges have also had their share of catastrophic encounters and clashes of nationalist ideologies.

Japan’s tragic modern history of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States gave rise to a cinematic response in the form of the giant monster genre of films (Japanese *daikaiju* 大怪獣) like 1954’s *Godzilla* (*Gojira* ゴジラ), a cinematic figure as large and influential as King Kong (see Foster 160-63). Out of this cultural stock of collective representations, we get the highly popular *Monster Hunter* series (*Monsutā Hantā* モンスターハンター; Capcom 2004 - present). The series focuses both on the single-player and online multi-player cultivation of the players’ hunter, or team of hunters, working through a series of quests and boss/monsters. A common motif is the feline comrades who can either assist the hunter-player during battle or maintain the domestic household and prepare food. What this suggests—in a curious and playful turn—is another “Indo-European” underpinning of Dumézil’s second and third functions (warrior and producer respectively). Cristiano Grotanelli in his article dedicated to Dumézil’s third function, arrives at five recurrent traits of the relationship between the second and third functions: “(1) the administration of food; (2) the production of powerful weapons for the battle against an anticosmic being; (3) the actual killing, or the partial dismembering, of the monster, after it has been defeated by the

warrior; (4) the building of a new structure near its remains” (140). This does not negate the possibility that the second-function warrior can fulfill the third function tasks on occasion. Further, the tone of the *Monster Hunter* series presents the protagonist not so much as a typical “hero,” but as a “hunter” who, occasionally, may be received as a local hero of a village. The series does a fine job of making the career of monster-slaying feel more like a commissioned job than an epic quest; but, this is part of its appeal alongside other typical dragon-slaying video games. The typical action of slaying the monster is quite common across fantasy-based MMOs as well. However, there is an important social dynamic that sets the multiplayer quest—whether in the context of a guild-orchestrated quest in *World of Warcraft* or a team of hunters in *Monster Hunter*. Nick Yee, in his extensive study of multiple MMOs came to this realization of the social component of interpersonal politics and cooperation:

In the same way that dealing with other players was what made running a business difficult in *Star Wars Galaxies* and what makes cargo transport risky in *EVE Online*, other players make dragon-slaying difficult in games like *World of Warcraft*. Dragons do not have inner divas or bedtimes. People do. Slaying the dragon is actually quite straightforward once you’ve figured out how to manage a team of two dozen people to help you. And this is the crucial management problem that every successful guild leader must solve. (65)

In the case of the *Monster Hunter* franchise, the series developers have developed and crafted an extremely sophisticated NPC/PvE where the monsters are not so “straightforward.” In fact, one of the main appeals of the *Monster Hunter* series is the

challenge of tracking and learning the behavior of each monster; the more cunning and challenging the monster, the better. Players are left to their own devices and strategies for taking down each creature.

These matters bring us back to the issue of comparison and localization. Carlson and Corliss have taken up these topics in their recent and significant essay, “Coding Culture: Video Game Localization and the Practice of Mediating Cultural Difference,” which gives a thorough overview of the impact and practice of “localization:” i.e., the translation and modification of the video game product and content from one exporting culture to the various importing cultures. The process, often overlooked for its implications and impact, has garnered much more attention thanks to the rise of critical research into the history of commerce and video game exporting. Carlson and Corliss state:

Understanding the complexities at work in the business of localizing video games – in order to trace the ways media, information, and even people are filtered and channeled as they move across borders and between zones – is especially valuable to the study of our increasingly interconnected social lives, in order to recognize the forces that shape how we are able to, in turn, experience and imagine those interconnections. (180)

To assist in understanding certain layers of intercultural exchange, the student of myth may offer valuable insights into this area of research. Such a task requires a careful revision of the comparative method.

Concluding Remarks: On Comparativism

Comparativism has had its share of critiques following the massive tomes accumulated by 19-20th century scholars committed to the construction of grand theories. The junior researcher of myth—and comparative mythology, new and old—has much to learn, take away, and revise from his/her forerunners. David Gordon White, in “The Scholar as Mythographer,” summarizes the postmodern critique of comparison and modernism thus:

[M]odernist metanarratives, in order to accommodate widely diverging local histories and traditions, abstract the meaning of those traditions, by way of a ‘translation’ into the terms of a master code, which leaves the specific tradition simply unrecognized. Such metanarratives also become coercive and normative: they systematically control and distort the local under the sign of the universal. Such a drive to totality cannot respect the specificities of the genuinely heterogeneous traditions. (White 49)

But instead of abandoning all efforts, White concludes that it only calls for a refinement of method on the part of the comparatavist:

[I]t is possible for comparative studies, and more specifically comparative religion, and most specifically comparative mythology, to steer a middle course—between the universalism of our modernist forebears and the nihilism of certain of our postmodernist contemporaries—through the opening afforded by the cognitive activity of reading and interpretation. (White 53)

This passage offers valuable insights for concluding the myth-analysis of this chapter dedicated to the worlds of *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Okami*. The techniques of reading and interpretation are only the first few tools the student of myth must master and apply in approaching the rich worlds of role-playing video games. To fully extrapolate a thorough exegesis of either video game would amount to a tome of commentary to convey the layers of signification, intertextuality and cybertextual affordances.

The project of cross-cultural comparison still has much to offer only if it is taken on with rigor and the fine coordination between similarities and differences from one culture-area to the next. As I have attempted to demonstrate, *Skyrim* and *Okami* participate in overlapping genres in the video game medium and in traditions that may very well share a deep diffusionary heritage. The trajectory and development of each, however, falls within respective diachronic paths with differing folk-narrative genres. It could be argued that one would find a substantial common ground in Japanese folk-narrative that would fall within the (Indo-)European tripartitioning of folk genres (i.e. myth, legend, folktale). However, when such categories do not apply, the comparativist must be ready to treat such a triad as a purely analytical classification, and work towards learning the native categories and genres. Such work may be viewed as superfluous and inconsequential in the analysis of video games; this is all the more reason why such work should be pursued to not let the “trivial” be an alibi for certain myths.

Chapter 11: Gods of Ludic Proportions

Immortals are mortal, mortals immortal, living the others' death,
dead in the others' life.

—Heraclitus (XCII [D.62, M. 47]; Kahn 71)

Gods too decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And
we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the
murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest
thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under
our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? With what
water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of
atonement, *what holy games will we have to invent for
ourselves?* Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us?
*Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear
worthy of it?*

—Friedrich Nietzsche (*The Gay Science* 120; Nauckhoff)

In this chapter, god games serve as the central genre that most explicitly elevates the state of play to an arena of anthropomorphized deities that the player virtually embodies. In the god game genre, players partake in the play-arena as divinities literally, or from the point of view of an omnipotent deity. I use this as a point of departure and open the genre up beyond the conventional definition proposed by Ernest Adams: “The term *god game* refers to a game in which the player takes on the role of a god, but one with limited powers like the god of ancient Greece, rather than an all-powerful god from monotheistic traditions” (579). However, the monotheistic traditions should not be arbitrarily exempt from this arena of godly play. Instead, they reveal one strategy through which a god manifests through history or player interacts with a game world from on high.

Historically, the common ancestor of strategy and god games is Don Daglow's ground-breaking *Utopia* (1981), making both genres linked from the outset. If tribal divinities of “primitives” or pantheons of antiquity are fair game, why should a living god

be exempt from the ludic imagination? God games appear on the surface to be a recent phenomenon of computer games, but rather stem from a much older impulse performed in rituals of embodiment and masking. Simulated city-building or resource management games, although not designated as god games, still blur the line between Homo Faber/Ludens and Deus Faber/Ludens. That is to say, video games offer participatory worlds for the simulated behavior of mythological models and paradigms. Therefore, I argue for a more nuanced, inclusive and radical delineation of what constitutes a god game, as they reveal attitudes towards godly behavior and elicit god-like power-play. The issue of genre maintenance and essentialism by Adams reveals more of a hidden bias of pragmatics and political correctness, than the degrees through which video game scenarios reveal conscious or unconscious conceptions and perspectives. Genres are not dogmas, but negotiable taxonomies susceptible to revisions and hybrids. The deified point of view, role, or *locus*, does not have to be explicit. Instead, any game where the player is situated in the commanding role of the overall game world—i.e. directing from the Heavens—may represent a *deified locus*. Such a perspective not only elevates the influence players have on the game world, but also suggests how deeply mythic the activity is. The player shapes the *mythos* directly – within limits (rules), or with near-limitless elasticity. The games are, in a real sense, cosmoplastic. Such salient examples would be Will Wright’s *SimCity* and *Sims* series’ and Sid Meier’s *Civilization* series where the player dictates the life of virtual beings and a polis. Conventionally called Real-Time Strategy games (RTS), some deal directly with concise epochs of history like *Total War: Rome* and *Civilization*, where players re-enact and rewrite historic campaigns and battles—it is *as if* the player becomes Zeus atop Mount Ida. In many respects, this

prompts a return to the myth-history dialectic. It also, as I see it, gives a new heightened inflection to *ekphrasis* as so revealed on the Shield of Achilles wherein the player witnesses or instigates the tremors of war juxtaposed with the protection of a peaceful community.

In the recent installment of the series, *Civilization V*, an expansion pack *Gods & Kings* adds religion as a core strategy towards establishing a *polis*. Beyond the explicit use of religious installments and cult building, the basic premise of the *Civilization* games rests on themes often found in foundation myth-histories of real-world civilizations or in the philosophical discourse of Plato in his brief mention of the game *polis* (*Rep.* 422e).

At their core, god games challenge the player to confront a profound speculative, theological and mythological question: What kind of god/goddess/Overlord would *I* be? Some games ask this literally (e.g. *Populous* and *Black & White*), but the impulse, I argue, runs through nearly any real-time strategy game (RTS) and resource management genre as a confrontation with god-level play, power, ritual, and embodiment. Further, the impulse to don the mask of a mythological god, a practice as old as myth and ritual, reveals one's own attitude towards and relationship with the divine. God games themselves are also one channel of revealing, or perhaps reflecting, a contemporary expression of a God-image.

As homogenous as the god game genre may sound at this point, it is a rather diverse heterogeneous enterprise touching on a variety of gaming styles, game mechanics, themes, strategies, and designs. Themes alone demonstrate the paths developers have taken in exploring how to play as a god and theorizing about god-hood. In our study we have already touched on *Okami*, which aligns mostly with adventure-style game play and

the fantasy adventure genre. However, the actual role the player takes on is the wolf-guised great Shinto *kami* Amaterasu. In other scenarios the player takes on a more godly dominion as an Overlord in *Populous*, *Black & White* and *From Dust*. *SMITE* is a massive multiplayer online battle arena game (MOBA), but allows users to play as any number of deities stretching across multiple real-world pantheons, creating an international all-star team of gods and goddesses. The implications of a myth-conscious approach to god games will readily demonstrate the variety of ways myths can be deployed in the god game genre, while also revealing the variety of ways the divine can be represented and participated as.

Case: *Black & White* and Theogonic Process

Black & White is a 2001 conventional god game from Lionhead Studios, developed and created by the major forefather of the genre, Peter Molyneux. The computer game is a spiritual successor to *Populous* and is built around the conflicts, both internal and external, between gods. The internal conflict is depicted graphically by the player's dual conscience of the Tempting, Impish Demon (Evil), and the Peaceful, and Moral (Good).

Black & White's prologue by the narrator opens like a pure theogony: "A land of innocence has no need for gods...until fate intervenes. When people pray, a god is always born... able to change eternity. That god is you. Are you a blessing or a curse? Good or Evil? Be what you will, you are destiny." In these few lines, along with the context of the parents' prayer for divine intervention in saving their child from shark infested waters, the *Black & White* mythos begins in the mode of a theogony (lit. the birth of a god). As the prologue is narrated, the cinematic cutscene also features the descent of the player-

god from the cosmos with the newborn god depicted as a vague celestial orb of light voyaging past planets, solar systems and what appear to be interdimensional thresholds separating the source of divinities and the physical universe. As the orb descends and becomes a hand which saves the young boy, the question then falls back onto the player who has been called out to act as a god in the game world: what *kind* of god will you (the player) be? This moral question posed to a supposed god drives and informs the mythos of *Black & White*.

However, as a god, the player is not alone. For one, the player will eventually confront other local deities—as non-player characters in single-player mode—of neighboring villages. An online multiplayer mode is also available that lets players cooperate or compete in skirmishes. During the single-player storyline the player is ushered through the game by two guardian spirits in the form of a white bearded and garbed holy man, and an impish demon; a playful take on the motif of the angel and demon as consultants of one's conscience. Both figures announce themselves as the conscience of the god-player.

The players' presence is felt through the animated cursor/ "Hand of God," which he or she uses to pick up items ranging from trees, rocks, grains to nearly any object in sight. As the player gathers mana from worshipers (s)he can begin to learn and cast godly spells by way of a gesture-based system of hand movements done through the movement of the mouse. One of the more curious and humorous interactions is when the player picks up a villager and places him or her near certain areas or people in the village to assign them their "god-given" vocation, or calling. For instance, placing a villager in a wheatfield assigns them the discipleship of farmer, or placing a villager of one sex next to

the opposite sex assigns them the role of breeder. Through these game mechanics, the player can gradually delegate tasks for his or her worshipers to maintain the village through self-governance and self-reliance. However, the reality often falls short of the ideal if the player does not keep some presence in the worshipers' daily life and bestow blessings or instill fear by wielding godly powers over them. Villagers are apt to become idle and lethargic, and sometimes need reminders of their vocation. The real gameplay is in *how* the player decides to engage with his/her worshipers and villages. Over time, their behavior, whether wrathful or beneficent, will reflect in the landscape as it becomes either a paradisaal Heaven on earth with vibrant vegetation and flowers, or a Hell on earth as the ground becomes a dessert with erosion and cracks revealing glowing lava beneath the soil. At its most hellish, the player-god may offer up human sacrifices into the sacred altar located around the players' main temple. Through one player-through, I experienced how easy it was to gain divine power through being wrathful, but also found it increasingly difficult to transition into a benevolent deity in the later game.

The other key entity is the players' creature that stands in as the "avatar" and ambassador of sorts. The creature can be a cow, an ape or a lion. Other varieties of creatures were added on in expansion packs. In relation to computer game history of technological achievements, the creature in *Black & White* was an exceptional breakthrough in creating a malleable artificial intelligence which could "learn" the commands of the player by a rudimentary reward and punish system.

Experiencing god-hood through subjectivity raises fascinating theological and mythological issues. We are reminded of a passage by Friedrich Schelling:

Considered objectively, mythology is as what it presents itself: *actual theogony*, the history of the gods. Because, however, actual gods are only those for which God lies as the ground, the final content of the history of the gods is the production of an actual becoming of *God* in consciousness, to which *the gods* are related only as the individual, productive moments.

Considered *subjectively*, or as according to its emergence into being, mythology is a *theogonic process*. (137)

Through the theogonic process and rise of ascendancy, the player learns many magical gestures and casts them by physically drawing them with the mouse. The generative act that truly shapes and casts an effect on the world gives the player an empowered position just like the brush stroke ability in *Okami*.

Case: *From Dust* and Emergence Myths

From Dust has the player take on the role of a deity whose task it is to guide a tribe of nomadic peoples through a series of lands/levels. As the game unfolds, it becomes apparent that the overarching myth of the game is that of emergence from levels of an underworld.

The mythological motif of emergence unifies *From Dust*'s storyline focusing on the journeying of a tribe. Along the way, the tribe revives artifacts and ancestral knowledge of their cultural identity. The general meaning of the emergence myth is summarized thus: "In the type of myth known as emergence creation, the emphasis is squarely on the creation of humanity...the focus is on a process by which humans emerge in stages into this world from under the earth" (Leeming, *Creation Myths of the World*

21). In real-world traditions, the available evidence of attested emergence myths is concentrated in the South West region among the North American Indians. Sproul, in her extensive sourcebook of recorded creation stories presents the following account from the Apache (Sproul, *Primal Myths* 260-61). Though not presented in its entirety, the following segments of the emergence myth as passed down from the Lipan Apache, offers a suggestive episode that echoes some elements of *From Dust*.

Down in the lower world, at the beginning, there was no light;
there was only darkness. Down there, at the bottom, were some people.
They knew of no other places; they lived there

They held a council down there. They discussed whether there was
another world. They decided to send someone above to find out. They
looked at each other and asked who should be sent out.

One said, 'How about Wind?'

They asked him. Wind agreed to go.

Wind went upward. He was a whirlwind. He came up to this earth.
Nothing but water covered the earth then. He rolled back the water like
a curtain.

After the wind had rolled back the water, land appeared. The water
was all at one side. (Sproul 261)

Other animal agents are sent to survey the newly discovered upper world, including Crow and Beaver, who fail to return with any news or information. The group decides to trust in Badger who faithfully returns with a report and so four men are sent to follow up with a scouting quest:

Then they sent four others after that, four men, to look over the world above. These first four who came up on earth to prepare it were called by the word that means Indian. I know of no other name for them. These four chose one from whom were to be made the things of the earth as we know it now. They selected Mirage. They put Mirage up in the form of a ball. They walked away from Mirage and looked. It looked very pretty. That ball of mirage became a part of this earth.

Now they fixed the world. They were going to make hills and mountains. They made a little lightning. They made little arroyos, and water came running to them. That is the way the earth and the mountains, the hills and the water were made. At first it was all level, but of Mirage they made all the things of the earth. (Sproul 261)

Certain features of this account of emergence and creation share close resemblances with *From Dust*. In the opening scenes of *From Dust* we witness the birth of a deity in the form of a conjured ball. The ball is created from the incantations and song of the tribe and from it springs the active divine agent as the player's cursor—in many ways, similar to *Black & White*. Whenever the player manipulates and interacts with the natural elements, the material is drawn into a ball of earth or water depending on the material. Through these cosmoplastic deeds, the player-deity can interact and play with the landscape while on high.

Though empowered through the abilities to manipulate the natural elements, the player (as a deity) must also work with the rhythms and catastrophes of nature, like volcanoes, floods, and fire. The stakes are raised when the player must send up to five

individuals for each totem across each map. Once the totems are populated, the player can then lead a select few to go through the threshold to the next level. Between each level/map, the player is shown a cut-scene featuring the tribe travelling through a cave.

Case: *SMITE: Battleground of the Gods*

Whether you choose to wild Jove's sceptre, or to mount the fiery chariot of Phoebus and circle earth with your moving flame — earth unterrified by the transference of the sun; every god will give place to you, and Nature will leave it to you to determine what deity you wish to be, and where to establish your universal throne.
—Lucan (*Civil War* 1.47-52; Duff 7)

One of the most recent iterations, the computer game *SMITE: Battleground of the Gods* (Hi-Rez Studio), finds its core axiom in the *theomachy*, *titanomachy* and *gigantomachy* motifs (*Motif-Index*: A162 *Conflicts of the gods*; A162.1 *Fight of the gods and giants*), putting an expansive selection of pantheons from the major mythological systems at the player's disposal in the mold of a Massively Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA). Playable systems of divinities include Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Norse, and Mayan. A degree of *interpretatio ludi* and *agonistic theory of myth* is at work with the *theomachy* modified and amplified to the hyperbolic sphere of online gaming. To be more precise, we can follow Bruce Bouden's discerning of two types of theomachy, the serious and the comic: "a serious type [is] set in the distant past, often before mortals yet exist, and while the gods are still jockeying for power; and a comic type, set in the present, with low stakes" (90). Since *SMITE* is set in the mode of the ludic with little consequence but rich in contingency, we can situate closer to the latter type, but perhaps designating it as a third type. Gods and goddesses can be purchased or earned in a marketplace like playable idols/commodities, which the player can "embody" for battle: the immortal becomes the avatar for the player, rather than the player being the agent of

the divine. Special items can be purchased during rounds of play to give the god a “build,” a term meaning the outfitting of the character with items enhancing their native abilities. With the added ludic element of contingency, deities spar with each other in a dynamic environment beyond the confines of metered verse and narrative restraints.

This has not been without controversy, especially when certain pantheons are sourced from living traditions like Hinduism (Agni, Kali, Rama and Bakasura). The *SMITE* community and its development are very much alive and expanding today with new deities added nearly monthly for purchase with in-game currency in the form of *favor* (earned through in-game performance) and *gems* (purchasable with real currency), merit-based and money-backed respectively. In this way, *SMITE* stands as one of the most myth-minded experiments into the lengths *interpretation ludi* can go into sacred pantheons. It is not to be overlooked that *SMITE* draws from *pantheons*, rather than any monotheistic system. *SMITE* is representative of a hybrid genre that takes the elements of massive multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs), like *Defense of the Ancients 2* (shortened to *DOTA 2*) and *League of Legends* (often shortened to *LoL*), and casts a pantheistic and polemic “god” game with the emphasis on international and cosmopolitan take on the divine. Diminished are the vertical and horizontal planes of translatability into ludic interpretation. Ancient divinities fight alongside/against divinities of younger history.

Critics may well find fault in placing *SMITE* in the god game genre proper, which tends to situate players as omniscient overlords either in a strict monotheistic mode, or as one god competing against other fellow gods for ascendancy to a single-god world (e.g. *Black & White*). *SMITE* may even share more in common with earlier arcade fighting

games like *Primal Rage* (Atari Games 1995), which has players take on the role of primordial deities in the form of giant Apes (Blizzard god of Good and Virtue, and Chaos god of Decay), a Tyrannosaurus (Diablo god of Evil and Destruction, Sauron god of Hunger), a Styracosaurus (Armaddon god of Life), a Deinonychosauria/"Velociraptor" (Talon god of Survival), and dromaeosaurid-King cobra hybrid (Vertigo god of Insanity). The Primordial deities of *Primal Rage* might not necessarily be based on specific analogs in real-world divinities, although, recent scholarship in applying natural history and philosophy to myths (geomythology) suggests that *Gigantomachy* themes, cataclysmic floods and mythical beasts may well have generated from observations of fossils indicative of primordial battles fought in a remote "mythical" past, and thus these types of myths took form (Mayor, *First Fossil Hunters* 191-227).

However, with our inclusive and expansive amendment of what constitutes a "god game," we may note that monotheism and polytheism are quite present in the magic circle, but not with equal treatment. Monotheistic games naturally tend to imbue godhood through omnipotent and omniscient perspectives on the gameworld where it remains up to the player's will, i.e. "God's will," to be imminent, wrathful, beneficent or idle, or a combination of all traits. God games—viewed and theorized as such—turn over, refigure, modify and play through/with their arborescent structures—i.e., their hierarchies—offering creative responses that may have always entered the ludic imagination of modernity through 'what if...' scenarios (e.g. 'what if...Zeus fought Odin?'), but are now ludic models of mythic referents: myths to think and play.

Wars of Gods and Giants

The theme of deities or primordial beings in conflict is well attested in traditional myths. Like any conflict, the *theomachy* reveals traits and characteristics of the participants involved representing—sometimes symbolically—the relationship of the deities between each other. *Theomachy* provides a venue for presenting the leading traits of each deity involved and establishes power-relations, hierarchies, and dominion; deities become defined by their adversaries (See “Adversary Principle,” Barber and Barber 49-52). The motif is not a fixed taxonomy, but rather a signifying move that highlights a shift, change or reconfiguration in the hierarchical structuring and restructuring of sets and systems of divinities. A re-evaluation takes place on the cosmic scale and the celestial hierarchy re-aligns. Often this shift mirrors a transformation on the terrestrial, human level of political, religious or societal shifts.

We have already discussed the significance of the *theomachy* motif as it pertains to the epic games of *God of War* and *Asura's Wrath* with the protagonist leading the conflict against Zeus or Deus. The motif is also attested in the fantastical backstory of the *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* amongst the poetic pantheons of Tamriel. The motif is a potent entry-point into the mythic mode of storytelling since it explores the powers and abilities of not just heroic persons and demigods, but deities themselves and the actions that lead to creation on a cosmic scale. What changes from one game to the next is the level of interactivity, participation and engagement afforded to the player.

SMITE readily draws from many pantheons that each have their own “version” or variation on the motif of deities combating with some primordial “other.” This “Other” is often depicted as a team of Giants, in the case of Norse and Greek tradition, or more

deviant opponents like the *asura* versus the *daevas*; Aesir versus the Vanir; or *Amatsu-kami* versus *Okunitsu-kami*; or Horus versus Seth (two deities not included yet in the *SMITE* roster). There is a recurrent and conscious selectivity in the pantheons included in *SMITE*, as well as a selectivity in the individual gods to be included.

We have addressed the conflict motif between *devas* and *asuras* in some detail above in the analysis of *Asura's Wrath* and its storyworld. Even within the interaction and development between sacred traditions—here, Vedic, Puranic and Buddhistic—there is not one single conception of the primordial beings involved, but a modification applied by each source that participates in the mythic discourse. However, we can revisit them in more or less a Vedic referent in *SMITE's* inclusion of Agni, deity of fire, domestic hearth, and sacrifice. Puranic deities tend to be included in the Hindu roster.

Within Greek mythology, conflicts occur either between gods (as in Homer's "Theomachy" in the *Iliad*), between the Olympians and the Titans ("Titanomachy"), or the later Giants ("Gigantomachy"). In an overt and exemplary allegorical reading of Homer, Heraclitus the Grammarian/Allegorist (not to be confused with the 5th century BC pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus "the Obscure") sets out to give the following commentary on book 20 of Homer's *Iliad*:

But next there rises up against Homer the fearsome and grievous malice of his accusers, in the matter of his Battle of the Gods [*theomachia*]. It is no longer "dread strife of Trojans and Achaeans" that breaks out in his text; confusions and contentions in heaven infect the gods themselves:

Phoebus Apollo with his winged arrows

Confronts the lord Poseidon; grey-eyed Athena

Faces the war-god; and to counter Hera

Comes Artemis with golden bow resounding

And showers of arrows, she the Archer's sister;

And Hermes, the strong helper, faces Leto;

Against Hephaestus, the great eddying river. (*Il.* 20.67-73)

Here is no battle of Hector with Ajax or Achilles with Hector or Patroclus and Sarpedon. No: Homer has organized the great war of heaven; he has not set up his disastrous conflict as a mere threat, but really brought the gods to come to blows with one another. (*Homeric Problems* 52.1-4; Russell and Konstan 90-91)

As Heraclitus sees it “Homer has here given us a scientific theology in allegorical form” (58.4; 96-97).

Conflicts between ancestral spirits and deities are attested well beyond the Indo-Europeans. The *kami* of Japanese tradition are divided into two major branches, the *Amatsu-kami* (Heavenly *kami*) and *Kunitsu-kami* (Earthly *kami*), who throughout the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* contest with one another, not in any strict dualism per se (Ashkenazi 141).

At the commencement of this study, *SMITE* lacked any representation of Japanese *kami*, but as of January 2016, the “Rising Dawn” event took place to usher in the Japanese divinities as a new playable pantheon, beginning with Amaterasu. The trajectory of this newly added pantheon to the *SMITE* world suggests a continued engagement by Hi-Rez Studios and the developers to collect and convert international “mythologies” that feature the ancient mythological theme of theomachy.

Prior to the Japanese pantheon, the Far East was represented mainly by deities and supernatural beings drawn from Chinese mythological literature. One mythical figure in particular was the latest addition of Xingtian, whose deeds were recorded in some of the most ancient sources of Chinese myth (*shenhua* 神話):

Xingtian and the Supreme God Di came to this place and struggled against each other for ultimate power. The Supreme God cut off Xingtian's head and buried him at Eternally Auspicious Mountain. Xingtian's nipples then transformed into eyes, and his navel became a mouth. He performs a dance with an ax and shield. (Shanhaijing Plate XLV, no. 233; Strassberg 171)

Xingtian (or “Xin Tian” in *SMITE*), whose name means “Heaven Punisher,” continues to be a powerful symbolic figure of righteous rebellion against tyranny, and has even come to be interpreted as a culture-hero for the Chinese *vox populi* for his spirited resistance and persistence reflected in his transformative and (ant)agonistic feats described in the passage above (cf. Yang and An 217-18). Though he is “Heaven Punisher,” rather than Punished *by* Heaven—as the myth might convey—it is Xingtian’s valiant persistence that earns the mythical figure his title as a paradigmatic warrior. Unlike the common Indo-European theme of the rebellious divinity being subsumed under the the sovereign and militant divinities, Xingtian is a uniquely Chinese divinity that would likely frustrate the program of the sovereign function.

Prior to the addition of Xingtian, the Chinese “pantheon” represented in *SMITE* ranged from primordial ancestors of deep significance like Houyi—archer and culture-hero responsible for shooting down the nine suns—to Nüwa (spelled Nu Wa in-game) to

figures drawn from mainly mythological literature (*shenmo xiaoshuo* 神魔小說) like Sun Wukong, Monkey King—the latter being another rebellious figure. Some extensive research was done by the development team to equip the deities with their traditional weapons and attested skills. For instance, Nüwa, in her latest iteration, comes equipped with her five stones, which in traditional accounts she used to patch the sky (An, *Huainanzi* 6.7; Major and Queen, et. al 224), as such she is classed as a Mage, meaning she works with magic-based skills. Sun Wukong, on the other hand, is a Warrior with melee, close-ranged, attacks dealt by his Magic Cudgel, akin to his weapon in *Journey to the West*, Ruyi Jingu Bang (“The Compliant Golden-Hooped Rod”), which Monkey acquired by stealing it from Ao Guang, Dragon-king of the East—himself, a playable deity in *SMITE*.

To go on further through the pantheons and deities would be almost superfluous. Suffice it to say that *SMITE* has accumulated 72 playable deities across eight real-world pantheons: Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Hindu, Mayan, Norse, Roman, and, most recently, the addition of Japanese *kami* starting with Amaterasu.

Pantheomachy?: Ludic Possibilities in Polytheism and Monotheism

Creating a video game that has direct references to actual cultural pantheons of ancient or modern societies presents a distinct challenge of style, taste, prudence and cultural and religious sensitivity. The developers of *SMITE* have made no concerted effort to include monotheistic—that is, Abrahamic traditions (Elohim, Yahweh, Allah, or God the Father)—for reasons that would potentially cause issues with the communities who’s faith is still very much shaped by the Deity. Todd Harris, Chief Operating Officer of Hi-Rez Studios, comments on the reason for the exclusion of the Abrahamic traditions based

on a lack of “stories about deities fighting one another with ‘awesome abilities,’” drawing from the examples of the biblical personages, Adam, Noah, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed (Gamespot, n. p.). In other words the *theomachy motif*, which does not include the cosmic conflict between angels and demons and other mythological narratives, is lacking in these traditions. It seems reasonable to assume that this stems from a much deeper and long-running tradition of demythologization amongst the Abrahamic traditions and their scholars. However the choice to include them would not be completely out of place to the *SMITE* roster, since many demi-gods, semi-divines and lesser mythical beings also exist in the mythic traditions of the non-Abrahamic faiths but find representation in *SMITE*, like Sun Wukong Scylla. Hi-Rez Studios has already received protest against the overly sexualized representation of the Hindu divinity Kali by Rajan Zed, president of the Universal Society of Hinduism. The issue remains quietly but significantly present as the studio continues to add divinities based on non-Abrahamic traditions; neither is the problem side-stepped by relegating the pantheons to antiquated or bygone societies. There remains some bias for negating the inclusion of Abrahamic faiths and personages, all the while continuing to import other peoples’ deities of present-day or by-gone traditions.

Given the context of this material in relation to the greater case studies, it sometimes takes an exogenous studio to explore and creatively elaborate on video games about Jewish and Abrahamic folklore, pseudegrapha, Apocalyptic literature (e.g. *El Shaddai*), or inventing a sophisticated international database of figures from religions and mythologies (e.g. MegaTen franchise). We might also consider Hans Blumenberg’s

argument that dogmas do not allow for the flexibility and malleability of myths (*Work on Myth*).

From a purely game-design perspective, the the problem of whether or how to include omnipotent and omniscient divinities looms. The same theological issues would arise if the developers decided to include Jesus Christ or (beyond the Abrahamic divines) Brahman. The Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus, oddly enough, may offer insight into the problem: “*Pas theos methektos esti, plen tou enos*. Every god is participable, except the One” (*Elements of Theology* Prop. 116; Dodds 103). An alternative would be to include Abrahamic beings but to shift the register and include only the rank of “demigod-equivalents” angels, demons, or saints.

From Metaphor to Metonymy (Revisited)

To understand a shift in perspective on the part of myth in the game world environment, we should recall the difference between the metaphoric understanding of myth, and what I have come to refer to as the metonymic.

In their seminal book, *Metaphors We Live By*, cultural linguists Lakoff and Johnson dedicate a whole chapter to the similarities and distinctions between metaphor and metonymy, “Metaphor and metonymy are different *kinds* of processes. Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding. Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to stand for another” (36). A primary example they use is the phrase “The *Times* has not yet arrived for the press conference” versus “Steve Roberts [from the *Times*] has not yet arrived for the press conference.” In this case, the *Times* stands in for Steve Roberts, or vice versa, but also carries with it a more authoritative

tone that signifies the absence of an important institution: the *Times*. Lakoff and Johnson's dictum, *the part for the whole*, concisely explains this phenomenon of language as it shapes one's thoughts, actions and attitude. The individual, human, and personal factors are set aside in favor of dehumanized treatment in service to abstractions.

The deity of a polytheistic system can easily fall into a consolidated metonymy. You will be reminded of a previous case in point mentioned above: the tribe of *asura* being conflated over time into the single being Asura. In many ways, metonymy is the adversary of contextualized and localized variants of a myth, deity, or cult. Zeus had many cults with specific localized temples. Metonymic mechanisms would later consolidate the various "Zeus's" into a single divine figure, Zeus. Hesiod and Homer both are guilty of using their medium and mode of epic verse to create the singular Zeus, but the cultic worship disseminated Zeus across the Mediterranean. The phenomenon is compounded by cross-cultural syncretism where hybrids form, like Zeus-Belus/Baal, Zeus-Ammon, or Zeus-Oromazdes (See Herodotus 1.181, 2.55.3; Puhvel 103). Though resulting in fascinating syncretisms, the Zeus of the poets and the Zeus of the priests were not always in synoptic agreement. It raises an interesting question: were they perceiving and conceiving the *same* Zeus?

For our purposes, we can relate this to a session of *SMITE*. When a player wishes to address another, they may refer to them by either their real name (personal), user-name (slightly personal alias) or their character/deity (impersonal). The result is a performance of fascinating exchanges that either call attention to the gods involved in the exchange or the players playing as them. For instance, over the course of a match, Odin may kill Thor, or Thor's player may give a command to Odin's player. Taken on the literal plane, Thor's

player may carry the authority, but in the context of Norse saga, such a scenario would be bewildering, if not impossible, only in that it would subvert the hierarchical structure in place amongst the Aesir.

In an extreme case of ludic syncretism, Guan Yu (Chinese Martial deity) may challenge and combat with Ares (Greek God of War). Both divinities are taken out of cultural context and re-contextualized into opponents in the MOBA game genre.

By highlighting the metonymic over the metaphoric, I mean to suggest (and argue for) the practically and empirically testifiable function of metonymy as a means for both reading a myth (mythic event, figure, story, etc.) and in finding a congruous character-scenario that applies the mythic elements. In other words, instead of describing and discerning meaning at the level of metaphor and similarity, a video game environment—including the interactions occurring within it—situate meaning in a more direct connection of metonymy and congruity. As Lakoff and Johnson also emphasize, “the grounding of metonymic concepts is in general more obvious than is the case with metaphoric concepts, since it usually involves direct physical or causal associations” (39) And, since in games that represent mythological, religious or cultural figures and symbols, they speak of “symbolic metonymies”:

The conceptual systems of cultures and religions are metaphorical in nature. Symbolic metonymies are critical links between everyday experience and the coherent metaphorical systems that characterize religions and cultures. Symbolic metonymies that are grounded in our physical experience provide an essential means of comprehending religious and cultural concepts. (40)

If we return to Mäyrä's dual structure of games as "core" and "shell," an interesting set of differences emerge between the different kinds of games involving playable gods. At the "core" of a god game is the simulated endowment of godly powers and strategies of power. God games engage with the power-oriented (i.e. hegemonic) characteristics of what it means to be God or a god. The "shell" remains the wholly representational skin of referents. The synthesis seems to come in with the knowledge of what god the player is or seeks to be, which determines how they act or how they play; this process can also unfold in the opposite direction. By acting and playing a certain way, the player may come to realize which god they act like. From one god game to the next, this can also be predetermined by the "shell." For example, in *Black & White*, the player is given a clean slate, as it were, and over the course of the game, the player's actions reveal the type of god they are. Although there are some limits to the range of gods that can be emulated, it ranges from a beneficent loving god, to a wrathful god; and of course, if the player sits idly by watching the worshipers pine away and beg for intervention, the player may simply not reply and so take on the role of *deus otiosus* (idle god).

An example of a predetermined "shell" would be a game like *SMITE* (here, theorized as a god game), where the representation is so strongly tied to the mythological referent that the behavior is informed by the power and god/goddess chosen by the player. Given the abilities of elementary power of fire, the player may either take it in its primal form playing as Agni (*agni*- itself being the Sanskrit "fire" in the same Indo-European language family as Latin *ignis*, where we get the English "ignite"), or technologically refined abilities of Vulcan. Vedic Agni "is both the actual fire and the god embodying it" (Puhvel 64); he oversees sacrificial fires and cremation, and as Rakṣohan, he can slay

raksas, or demon-like beings (Bhattacharji 191). The Roman fire-god Vulcan, similarly, “is the fire which, for good or evil, devours and destroys” (*Archaic Roman Religion* 320). *SMITE*, in its *interpretatio ludi*, allows players to either team both fire-gods up (which would not be highly advisable, since both are Ranged, Magical Mages), or put them against one another. In this particular instance, the “shell” and the “core” are both near-cognates; the representational layer and the respective deity’s gameplay style form a syzygy; they are in sync with each other.

Concluding Remarks

This study is more interested in the cross-cultural than a quest for the universal. I have also presented the case that the god game genre has been largely defined through the perspective of Western-dominated conceptions of the divine. What is considered “safe” for game world content is still a problematic because it raises the issue of what can be appropriated from foreign (spatial or temporal) mythologies. Polytheistic or “tribal” or “primitive” amalgamations (e.g. *From Dust*) are prominent in representation, but the attitude towards such content perpetuates the idea that God of the Abrahamic faiths must be exempt from ludic interpretations—unless the analyst considers those rare instances in non-Western video games like *Shin Megami Tensei*, where the Biblical God (identified as Yahweh) is portrayed as a final boss. Of course, such manifestations occur in products perhaps not intended for a Western audience. Within the Western convention of god games, Biblical monotheism remains absent, but retains a marked presence by this very absence. The absence may very well be caused from a greater cultural hegemony that extends well beyond the sub-culture of video games, but nonetheless dictates what is

allowed and/or permissible and what is not, what survives localization and what gets lost in translation.

Chapter 12: *EVE Online* between Myth and History

What remains to be conquered is the dramatic narratives, the type of plot that knots together several destinies into a dynamic network of human relations and then disentangles them to let characters go their own way.

—Marie-Laure Ryan (“From Narrative Games to Playable Stories” 57)

The plots and the *dramatis personae* are strikingly similar in both myth and science fiction. In sum, it is the projection which is crucial, not so much the time and place or local coloring. It is the removal from reality to fantasy which allows the human spirit rein to portray its spiritual struggles and play out its moments of anguish.

—Alan Dundes (*Interpreting Folklore* 51)

In my discussion of poetics, narrative, and myth, *EVE Online* presents a particularly challenging and exceptional case in which storytelling and mythopoetics is both on-going (to the present), and existing largely in the shared collective dialogue between content creators and players. The “sandbox” is attempting a major return to the fashioning of a living tradition, where players create the history and lore of New Eden with the developers, replete with monuments, relics and wreckage left by historic in-game battles in-world.

When discussing my research with my player-informant familiar with *EVE Online* and even those within the *EVE* community, “lore” in this particular context was questionable, or spurred hesitancy in regarding *EVE* as “lore-rich” like other explicitly lore-driven MMOG’s like *World of Warcraft* (Personal interview). My informant’s work, along with other lore-centered *EVE* players, requires much collaboration and independent efforts to produce some semblance of a coherent body of lore. I emphasize this now, because prior to the release of official books of lore and in-world history like *EVE: Source*, players were left with fragments and small glimpses into the larger mythology

and history taking place. My hope is that both tracks, the vernacular engagement and the official canonization process, will continue to exist side-by-side. It has been my task to trace this ambivalence and work towards a more *living* sense of lore as communicated by players, i.e. the vernacular, as they engage with the more top-down administration of *mythos* from CCP. It is important to note that CCP invites such participation, albeit within limits.

The level of complexity in gaming and storytelling tactics form a sophisticated world of networked content, which I liken thematically to an emergent Interstellar Opera *mythos*. Philosophically, I approach the architecture and user-experience of the *EVE Online* cosmos as fulfilling, in some capacity, the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, wherein the rhizome resists hierarchical structuring (arborescence), instead legitimizing multiplicity and networks. Deleuze and Guattari define the rhizome as "an ascentered, nonhierarchical, non signifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states," as such it "connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states" (21). By analogy, Deleuze and Guattari liken the rhizome to a map (12). At the commencement of this study, *EVE Online* has celebrated its tenth year anniversary (a feat rarely reached by persistent online worlds), and so also stands apart from our set of case studies as a seemingly living world with a *mythos* and history still coming into being.

With the advent of the Internet and the great flood of communicative connectivity that it ushered in, the computer gaming world has not been the same since. It was a

tremendous breakthrough in the expansion of the “magic circle.” The rise in online gaming, i.e. gaming that takes place over networked computers and the Internet, came to popular fruition in the early 1990’s yielding persistent worlds wherein guilds, communities, economies and markets emerged. Online games can range from casual rounds of online poker to the magnitude of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG). Massively Multiplayer Online (Role-playing) Games (MMO(RP)G), inherited their fantasy and science fiction themed worlds from the experimental networked games first created in academic labs like University of Illinois’ pioneering PLATO educational computer system developed in the Control Systems Laboratory in 1960, and later to *Multi-User Dungeons* (MUDs). In my effort to investigate new emergent realms of mythographic and mythological domains, I am conducting virtual participant observation within the MMOG, *EVE Online*. *EVE Online* persists along a balance between principles of emergent properties made manifest by a continuous flow of player activity and the backdrop of a core storyline: our future expansion into a Post-Earth and Post-Milky Way Galaxy frontier. As a persistent space exploration world, *EVE Online* is conceived within—and marketed as—a single world server (single-shard), named *Tranquility*, wherein players occupy that single universe with a dynamic live economy and socio-political alliances and enemies.⁶⁰

A Web of Texts

In my of analysis of game worlds, lore and world-building, *EVE* contributes an essential facet and case study of both the ever-growing complexity of video gaming and the rich transmedial traditions from which it draws: namely, Celestial exploration,

⁶⁰ However, I should note that in reality, there is indeed one other server outside of the shard, namely, the server *Serenity* situated in China.

Otherworldly Journeys, antecedents of Modern Speculative Fiction, and Science Fiction literature and film. As the genre of science fiction goes in the Western Tradition, all may lead back to Lucian of Samosata (ca. AD 120-180) and his short novella *True Story* (*Alethe Diegematon*) with its sprawling depiction of celestial voyages to locales of mythology and Homeric epic. Celestial battles are waged between the empires of “Sunites” (*Helioton*) and “Moonites” (*Selenitais*). Later works of Speculative and Science Fiction, like Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* series supply suggestive influences on the poetic components to New Eden. For example, the EVElopedia functions comparatively as a compendium of in-world knowledge within the EVE Universe much like how Asimov envisioned the *Encyclopedia Galactica*.

The most immediate media-specific influences are those of previous computer games like *Spacewar!* (1962), *Empire* (PLATO 1973), *Elite* (Acornsoft 1984), *Wing Commander* (Origin Systems 1990), and *Homeworld* (Sierra Entertainment 1999). Thus, we can pursue a diachronic track of tradition unique to the young history of the video game medium itself, while pursuing intertextual trajectories impacting the creative direction, aesthetics, and mythopoetic process as it converges in *EVE Online*.

As speculative as this ancestry may first appear, I offer such an approach for framing a set of heuristic and hermeneutic problematics for *EVE Online* viewed through the lens of intertextuality; this means that the analyst must be ready to reconsider and reevaluate categories and boundaries, as well as designating and defining the most pertinent set of texts that resonate both outside of and within the EVE universe. For instance, cues from the user-experience offer audio, visual, and literary allusions and motifs that the mythologist must take into account for not just what is being presented,

but how it is being delivered. *EVE* features evocative, ambient soundscapes and music tracks composed by Jón Hallur Haraldsson. Such an immersion, I argue, shares a profound resonance with the Pythagorean tradition of music and philosophy. More precisely, I would draw attention to the core set of themes relating to the harmony and music of the spheres, the immortality of the soul, and metempsychosis (transmigration of the soul after death) (Godwin; James). Such philosophical and speculative myths developed across many traditions, but were elucidated in the *Dialogues* of Plato (e.g. *Timaeus* and the Myth of Er in *Republic*), and sonically understood by Scipio in his visionary dream of celestial ascent to meet his grandfather, Africanus, in the concluding episode of Cicero's *Republic* Book 6.

Cicero's text is perhaps the best specimen for the sonic description which provides a textual inspiration for the ambient music of *EVE Online*. Framed as a dialogue between Scipio and his grandfather, Africanus, the episode referred to as "The Dream of Scipio," has the pair discussing a wide range of topics from the notion of sound coming from the motion of the celestial spheres and planets to an extraordinary account of Scipio's celestial voyage in which he views Earth as a mere sphere alongside the other celestial bodies: "Now the earth itself seemed so small to me that I felt ashamed of our empire, whose extent was no more than a dot on its surface" (*Rep.* 6.16; Rudd 89). Africanus implores his grandson to not think too highly of the squabbling rumor of mortal men on earth, when his *real* inheritance and ancestry lies in the "eternal home and habitation" (*Rep.* 6.26; Rudd 92). Africanus imparts to Scipio the knowledge and teaching of the divine mind:

...bear in mind that *you* are not mortal, but only that body of yours.

You are not the person presented by your physical appearance. A man's true self is his mind, not that form which can be pointed out by a finger. Remember you are a god, if a god is one who possesses life, sensation, memory, and foresight, and who controls, regulates, and moves the body over which he is set, as truly as the supreme god rules the universe. And just as the god who moves the universe, which is to some extent mortal, is eternal, so the soul which moves the frail body is eternal too. (6.26; Rudd 92-93)

A similar concept is presented to the player in *EVE Online*, but explained through the language of advanced science, technology and biomechanics. The player enters the world of New Eden just as the fictional worlds are advancing in cloning technology. Deemed the "Age of the capsuleer," the new epoch is described as a manifest destiny through a shared discourse with transhumanist and post-human discourses. The capsuleer technology makes what was once a spiritual and philosophical tradition a materialistic actualization. The player-capsuleer is in a sense *immortal* since a clone of their in-game character is always kept as a back-up and insurance.

Alongside, and implied, in such doctrines is the notion that the soul acquires a form, or in this case, a vehicle (*ochema*; chariot), a means to navigate to an Other World, or what the late scholar in the History of Religions Ioan Couliano surveyed and termed "The Platonic Space Shuttle" (188-211). Couliano went so far as to suggest that the multitude of otherworldly journeys that recur in sacred traditions, myths, epic poetry, folk literature and philosophical discourse, are amplified by our modern works of science

fiction (234). Although it may initially appear as a rather obtuse path of comparative analysis, I argue that *EVE Online* touches on the major themes, aesthetics, and philosophical concepts behind the Pythagorean tradition of the Music of the Spheres and the human occupation with otherworldly journeys to warrant careful consideration and elucidation.

To begin to understand the intertextual relations and how they impact, shape or manifest in the EVE Universe, it is imperative that we first explain key concepts used for theorizing the problem of myth itself. First, what does myth mean in this context? We can approach myth through two signifying categories.

Mythic text—a text which participates in a received and articulated body of pre-existing cultural, “real world” lore, i.e. pretexts. The connection with the past, remote or near, further implies that the text is merely engaged in an ongoing conversation with deep ancestral echoes, and tends to deny itself as an originating source; so too does authorship tend to be hidden. This leads us into the nature of myth and its discursive/recursive traits.

Mythic Discourse—a type of discourse developed, expanded, and utilized for analysis by Historian of Religion scholar, Bruce Lincoln. He states, “I would characterize myth as a discourse that consistently denies originality and obscures the identity of its producers and reproducers, thereby concealing their positionality and the interests (material and other) that influence the modifications they introduce in the stories they tell” (*Gods and Demons* 55). In such a case, the storyteller-audience relationship is evaluated on the grounds of contextualizing the myth, and involves claims of ideological formations within the text. Lincoln, in his earlier work *Theorizing Myth* thus states: “...when a taxonomy is encoded in mythic form, the narrative packages a specific,

contingent system of discrimination in a particularly attractive and memorable form. What is more, it **naturalizes** and **legitimizes** it. Myth, then, is not just taxonomy, but *ideology* in narrative form” (147; bold font my emphasis). To grasp the subtlety of Lincoln’s own appeal, I would like to draw attention to his usage of the terms “naturalizing” and “legitimizing,” that, for Lincoln, supplies myth-narrative forms with a certain kind of potency. Such traits of the mythic form bring together Roland Barthes’s proposition of “*myth as a type of speech*” that “turns history into nature”, and the problematic of narrative and legitimation introduced by Jean-Francois Lyotard. Under such rubrics and restraints, myth and narrative (big and small) can be contained and analyzed through a critical lens. By my own extension, I would also include Seymour Chatman in this discussion; in particular, his relational concepts of narrative, naturalizing and verisimilitude:

Audiences come to recognize and interpret conventions by “naturalizing” them...To naturalize a narrative convention means not only to understand it, but to “forget” its conventional character, to absorb it into the reading-out process, to incorporate it into one’s interpretive net, giving it no more thought than to the manifestational medium...The notion of “naturalization” is very close to that of verisimilitude, the ancient appeal to the probable, rather than the actual. (Chatman 49)

EVElore

In relation to our discussion of poetics, narrative and myth, *EVE Online* presents a particularly challenging and exceptional case in which storytelling and mythopoetics

function over the course of a developmental history (from 2003 - to the present), while existing largely in the semi-shared collective dialogue between content creators, developers and players; in other words, there is a dialogue between diachrony and synchrony. The “sandbox” quality of *EVE* attempts to fashion a living world of lore where players create the history of New Eden with the developers, replete with monuments, relics and wreckage left by historic in-game battles. But, within that sense of participating in the diachronic, narrative there is the synchronic level of the text.

The level of complexity in gaming and storytelling tactics in *EVE Online* form a sophisticated world of networked content, which I liken thematically to an emergent Interstellar Opera mythos. For purposes and interest of a structural analysis, we can position the mythos on two narrative levels with sub-levels within each.

The first level is the *diegetic mythos*, or the indigenous myth as it is presented for player-characters in-world lore. The in-world lore can be broken into further categories. The following entry describes “Prime Fiction”: “The Prime Fiction of the EVE universe includes all official fictional information published by CCP for consumption by the players. It is distinguished from Player Created Fiction, which is not sanctioned by CCP, but typically compliments Prime Fiction by building on its established principles” (“Prime Fiction” *EVElopedia*). Much of the canonized material can be found under the “Lore” entry in the *EVElopedia*. *The Book of EVE* by SantaClaws, EVE Chronicles, Short stories, Scientific articles, *True Stories* series, and *EVE Source*. “Player Created Fiction,” known elsewhere in popular culture and media typically as fanfiction, consists of player-compiled sources of lore, i.e. works of “unofficial” EVElore collected by players for players.

The other major group is what I call the *extra-diegetic mythos*, or the meta-discourse that compounds the recursive characteristics impacting gameplay (the metagame), the lore (databases) and storytelling. Such narrator-driven *mythoi* are delivered through mediated forms outside of the game. CCP invites the interaction between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic by including an in-game browser that lets players access the Internet without leaving the virtual world. Players can also access the EVElopedia at any time to read over literature, resource entries, tutorials, and lore.

The relationship between the world of New Eden and the primary world of the *EVE* community is mimetic of the relationship between CCP and players. The sense of the participatory and the transmediality are well instilled on many levels. This leads me to emphasize that the above categories are far from being absolute, but sometimes necessary to keep a sense of organization. A clear example of transgressing absolutism is the recent *True Stories* project, which was the result of player's voting for a story, or more properly, an account of a player's experience (*diegesis*) regarding in-game events that unfolded. The story became the basis for the inaugural 2014 graphic novel series by the same name: *EVE: True Stories* (Way, et. al.). In many ways, the project reflects a concerted effort on CCP's part to fulfill their aim to document player experiences and let players voice their own personal narratives.

The environment and culture of New Eden itself encourages "freedom (within limits)," providing "career paths" for players-capsuleers, replete with in-game currency called PLEX (**P**ilot's **L**icense **E**xtension). The universe is divided into three major sectors (secs): hi-sec (high security sectors), low-sec (low security sectors, and nullsec (0.0 security sectors) collectively referred to as Known Space. Nullsec and Wormhole

Space, designates a particular liminal region of New Eden where in-game security enforcement known as CONCORD, do not offer sanctuary or sanctions. In nullsec, players are able to wage large-scale battles between corporations and alliances, while also establishing sovereignty over regions. Politico-economics heavily influence most aspects of New Eden, but are felt most explicitly in nullsec. The interaction between the two may be understood as the tension between systemic structures and cybernetics versus anti-structures of space and the rhizome.

Rhizome, Arborescence, and Narrative

Philosophically, I approached the architecture and user-experience of the *EVE Online* cosmos as simulating, in some capacity, the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, wherein the rhizome resists hierarchical structuring ("arborescence"), instead legitimizing multiplicity and networks. Deleuze and Guattari define the rhizome as "an ascentered, nonhierarchical, non signifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states," as such it "connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states" (21). By analogy, Deleuze and Guattari liken the rhizome to a map (12). Although regions of sovereignty factor into the socio-political tensions and fuel conflicts of New Eden, free-roaming, deterritorialization and nomadic life-styles are also available for players pursuing exploration mining and crafting.

My method of analyzing the small narratives and their individual discourses has been influenced by Steven T. Brown's application of Deleuze-Guattari "rhizomatic reading" of the popular manga and animé, *AKIRA* and its ties within Japanese visual

culture. Brown outlines his method as follows: “Instead of analyzing works of Japanese visual culture for deep meaning or as expression of some ‘inner layer of the world,’ I practice rhizomatic reading, which views such works tangentially through their rhizomatic connections with other anime, other films, other works of art, and other discursive formations” (9). Certain key signifiers within the EVE Universe cue the analyst towards such a reading, with the visualized presentation of New Eden as a complex network of multiplicities. I would highlight such characteristics of multiplicity as both the social dynamics and affordances of the MMOG infrastructure and through the agency of players with multiple identities (‘alts’) on standby. Multiplicity (or at least, duplicity) is always ever present (implied) in online user-ship. Further, Brown highlights the necessity for viewing products of popular culture as existents within larger networks of intertextuality and competing/cooperative small narratives—à la Lyotard. In my own application we may delineate the following levels of *small narratives* (*petit récit*) that, when privileged, could expand into grand narratives:

1. *Space Opera Narrative*: Although understood as a pejorative term in early science fiction writing, Space Opera as a sub-genre has been revived as a functioning imaginarium wherein large-scale battles set in interplanetary or interstellar space are waged with competing galactic empires.
2. *Future-History Narrative*: In this sense, the future-history narrative emerges from the intertextual antecedents like Robert Heinlein’s multi-book fictional universe project.

3. *Megacorporation Narrative*: A feature prominent in many science fiction works of literature, film and game worlds where corporations ascend to the geo-political power of nations, but even further poetically amplified to the level of intergalactic corporations. For example, the Caldari in New Eden is the quintessential corporation-empire.
4. *Economic Narrative*: The market, or “hypermarket” (Baudrillard), of New Eden is central to player-capsuleer’s success and stages itself as the leading ideology worth playing.
5. *Liberation, or Prometheus narrative*: The Promethean myth resides in a deeper layer of motivation. On the surface, freedom and unbounded potentiality, i.e. “the sandbox,” are countered by the existence of the mythical, unreachable, Jovian peoples as the horror of actual genetic modifications.
6. *Theomachy, or Conflict of Immortals (i.e. Emphyrean Age)*:
 We may cite the current age of New Eden, the Emphyrean Age, as the present epoch of capsuleer-immortals.
 Technological advancements within New Eden has enabled the characters to migrate consciousness into clones. As capsuleer/immortals, players compete, cooperate, and collide as deified beings.

7. *Harmony or Music of the Spheres*: This is expressed subtly and artfully by the ambient music and the celestial setting, while it is interwoven through the history and lore of capsuleers *as immortalized beings*, or posthuman beings.
8. “*Meta-*” “*Post-*” “*Trans-*” *Narrative* : By way of certain other smaller narratives, like *metempsychosis* and *immortality*, New Eden’s capsuleers embody the discourse and philosophical notions surrounding our own prescient schools of thought like *transhumanism* and *posthumanism*, whereby humanity either merges with technological advancements or is supplanted by the formation of a new entity or identity. *Meta-* consists of a pervasive ideology and rhetoric within EVE culture, manifesting most acutely in the praxis of metagaming.
9. *Technological Advancement or Science as Epic*: By this phrase, I mean to invoke the Prime Fiction that aims at realism in the portrayal of advanced technological, biological and interstellar achievements narrated in the scientific journals of the lore. Such a basis has some resonance with Lyotard’s notion that “the state spends large money to *enable science to pass itself off as an epic*: the State’s own credibility is based on that epic, which it uses to obtain the public consent its decision makers need” (28;

emphasis mine). In other words, science fulfills the function of “epic.”

10. *Mythological Narrative*: Explicit allusions and referents to world mythologies and religious canon. E.g. The very name of “EVE,” the founding of “New Eden”, the Empyrean Age, and empty regions of space named after the primordial yawning gap of Norse cosmology, Ginnungagap. Earth becomes a relic of primordial myth, to the point of being questioned for its anthropogenic validity. On this layer of the lore, mythological motifs manifest such as A1630 *Wandering of tribes* and a celestial transposition of A1631 *Emergence of tribe from lower world*.

11. *Saga Narrative*: On the level of meta-discourse, the Saga Narrative emphasizes the history-making aspects of New Eden’s founding and on-going development as it relates to, or echoes, the historical founding of nations. Explicit allusions are made to the “Viking Age” of Nordic culture throughout EVE culture, both in-world and in developer content. The construction of the EVE Monument is but one major gesture towards the human propensity towards stor(y)ing tradition for the function of cultural posterity.

Again, these trajectories of small narratives are not stringent and linear progressions, but rather constituent lines of contingencies that interact, overlap, compete or compliment to

mimic a world within a world.⁶¹ The player may engage with, and participate within, all or one of the emergent network of overlapping possible narratives; link-mapping, or hyper-linked paths of possible story and social engagement are made accessible through various levels of discourse from oral, textual, or electronic paths. Conceptualizing such a body of storied interconnectivity has been intimated by John Miles Foley formulated and presented in his coterminous online-based *Pathways Project* and “morphing book” *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*. However, much more follow-up research and case-sensitive analysis remains to develop a comprehensive and comprehensible case beyond speculation on establishing meaningful connections between Foley’s project and our analysis of the fictional universe of New Eden and the human production of the EVE community.

I would also add that this research has led me into a separate problematic that transcends the present discussion: namely, whether myths participate more in the process of rhizomatics (roots) or arborescence (trees) phenomenon.

EVE in Dialogue

My two informants who participated in this study were uniquely positioned in the greater *EVE* community. I approached them both since they shared a common interest in lore, but from different approaches. One commonality was the inability, or hesitance to really pin *EVE* down as a “game.” In both cases, the informants tended to view *EVE* (and New Eden) as a community and as a virtual world. There was an emphasis on not relegating *EVE* to any one single interpretation. Instead, there was a sense that *EVE* was tailored to provide a freedom. The quality of exploration and consequences were

⁶¹ The term “world” may be more apt than “text,” but not entirely out of agreement with, the idea of texts within relation to a network of texts, i.e. intertextuality or the transtextual.

recurrent themes in my interviews with both individuals. There was also a deep appreciation for the thematic elements of *EVE* and a general interest in the science fiction genre across multiple forms of media. And lastly, both informants felt that their interest in *EVE* would wane, but has only grown thanks in part to the community and the social bonds that develop between players.

A player since 2007, my first informant Mark is—who I have come to refer to as—an “EVElorist,” since he has concentrated his efforts on assembling and recording lore in New Eden and sharing it with the fan community. He has garnered some prestige for his expertise on lore in the community, offering lectures at EVE University—a fansite and educational service dedicated to helping newcomers or those interested in advancing their knowledge of in-world systems and/or mechanics.

Through our brief in-world conversations, Mark introduced me to the rich possibilities of in-world lore and the kind of emergent roles that have come about that were not intended or designed into the virtual world. An exceptional case is Mark’s independent project “EVE Travel” and his accompanying “EVE Lore Survival Guide”: the former focuses on documenting and analyzing lore collected from travelling to historic sites, cosmic formations, nebulae and landmarks; the latter is a massive on-going project that Mark updates from time to time. Upon reflecting on our exchanges, I was able to formulate such categories as the “hyperemic” and “hyperetic”: the former refers to those players committed to role-playing alone with no break in character or in-depth analysis into the nature of internal histories, storyline and lore; the latter are individuals who stay in-world and in-character, but have recreational or concerted interests in

reflecting on the lore, mythos and histories—i.e. the backstory. This can be done through collaborations or, in Mark’s case, as an independent endeavor (Personal Interview A).

A player since 2002 beta, my second informant Paul joined CCP Games—the developers behind *EVE Online*—as a content creator of EVE fiction in 2012. As a player, he explored amateur writing projects in different genres of player fiction, but was able to cultivate the skills needed that eventually earned him position to contribute to backstory with the team at CCP. For example, he focuses on military and technical literature, as well as political writing (Personal Interview B). Working closely with the back-story team, Paul has been able to contribute to the “Prime Fiction” since joining CCP. Our conversations, however, touched on more than his role as a writer.

We also explored the culture that surrounds *EVE Online*, why it has the appeal it does, and also some of the leading traits that make it a unique virtual world. During one particular instance, he and I discussed the nature of going into worm-hole space as a dark forest (Personal Interview B). The ability to engage in “non-consensual PvP” makes any encounter with strangers generate a shared apprehension, especially in areas of nullsec where CONCORD—the hi-sec security squad—are entirely absent. Thus, any player can attack any other player in such circumstances without penalty. This type of open sense of risk also creates the adverse emergence of genuine trust between players. Paul often stressed that it was the large risk and possibility of failure that made *EVE* such a memorable experience, but also an experience that fostered social intelligence. As a player, especially, he took pride in the early years of being able to make in-world career moves from nullsec politics, to large-scale fleet battles, to his founding of a notable pirate corporation (Personal Interview A and B). These career moves are typical of players, and

many try out multiple careers with different in-world identities—e.g. *EVE* allows players to develop three separate personas.

From my own experience with conducting virtual world research, I came to understand the intricacies of the etic and emic perspectives, but also felt that virtual worlds present further sophisticated facets. There seems to be a doubling of critical distinctions and perspectives that I have visualized in Figure 3 (App. B).

Here, we have levels of immersion and abstraction that function more along a continuum than a sterile taxonomy. The degree to which the analyst/ethnographer reaches the holistic perspective varies and depends on their commitment and rapport within the particular field-site. Though porous, the breaching of any cellular wall can cause transgression, reprimanding, and a breaching, i.e. a rub with a taboo. The conventional etic and emic rules apply for Out-world (real-life) analysis (i.e. Out of Character positionality (OOC)), while the hyper-states could be grouped as a separate world-within-world perspective. The hyper-states—enactments akin to Baudrillard's hyperreality—then, would be synonymous with In-world characters (under the rules of conduct appropriate to In-Character (IC)) who either engage in analytics of the roleplaying world, such as lore-masters, dungeon masters, player historians (hyperetic), while strict In-Character roleplayers participate wholly in the emic mode within the hyper-state (hyperemic). The hyper-states offer a descriptive rather than prescriptive method of maintaining distinct voices within the various levels of discursive analysis and participation. By employing and modifying the conception of emic and etic units introduced by linguist Kenneth L. Pike alongside my use of Stith Thompson's *Motif Index*, I also mean to suggest that the analyst consider new methods of application. For

example, Alan Dundes's proposed unit of the *motifeme*, or emic view of the conventionally etic unit the *motif* ("From Etic to Emic"). We might ask: How can these elements function within a virtual world? The proposed units of the *hyperemic* and *hyperetic* are such modifications that may serve useful for the virtual ethnographer in framing differences and correlations when faced with partitioned worlds of interaction with informants.

In my early assessment, I believe that the fieldwork will be cogently effective and demonstrated within my research into the *EVE* Universe, since it is my focus online community and field-site. My aim was to attain interviews with individuals who have had long-term, mid-term and short-term experiences with the medium in general, but also those with various levels of experience within *EVE Online*. Seeing as the EVE community has recently celebrated their 10 year anniversary as of the time of this study, I made efforts to reach out to those who had witnessed key changes and events over the course of those that historical range. By participating in the world, engaging with committed players and interviewing a member of CCP, I sought to cultivate an authentic representation of the complexity that is the EVE Universe. EVElore is just as player driven as it is orchestrated by the game developers at CCP; both are in a unique dialogue. In this way, I believe that the EVE community reveals a deep and innovative engagement with mythmaking and world-building, blurring the line between myth and history.

Limits of the Study: A Brief Prolegomenon and Research Outlook

I have judiciously selected material from the interviews during the research and preparation of this study to present the possibilities that a field-site of this nature offers. Though not developed in any comprehensive capacity that truly reflects the sophisticated

relationship between the *etic* and *emic*, I have found the fieldwork to be invaluable in formulating concepts that would not have come about otherwise without the conversations with my informants. I consider the *hyperemic* and *hyperetic* to be heuristic concepts that will remain open to criticism and held as working hypotheses. In this way, I am continuing to stay engaged in the field-site and I am also developing further research on the *emic* perspective in its own right to correlate it with the *etic* material—a process that has been intimated and brought together here. Further engagement with the field and long-term observations might challenge the nature and need for the two intermediary categories. Nonetheless, these “hyper” categories offer theoretical degrees and levels of participation. They serve as indicators that I have found useful when conducting fieldwork in virtual worlds and came about through a need to properly describe social functions and *rôles*. This chapter is in many ways a prolegomenon to an on-going endeavor.

Heroic Capsuleers and Personal Mythmaking

We can return to the idea of personal myth and heroicism, which can be defined as a sub-genre of myth espoused by C. G. Jung in the process of individuation and later popularized by Joseph Campbell in his formulation of the hero’s journey as it applies to the individuals’ life-course and psychological development. By knowing one’s myth(s) (or engaging with them knowingly!), an “emplotment” (to use a Ricoeurian term) can be intimated for charting, steering and controlling; or, at the very least, an orientation formerly unconscious becomes conscious.

EVE Online is structured to allow for contingency and personal freedom (within the confines of New Eden). The player can conceive of their own career paths and side with one of the four major races, all the while grouping into smaller corporations (akin to

“guilds” in other MMOG’s). By selecting a race, the player is, in a sense, taking on the myth and ideology of that race. Role-playing and lore-focused exploration are options left at the discretion of the player.

Although what I am describing does not leave much room for a top-down mythic structuring, it actually enables players and groups to generate their own heroic or anti-heroic intentions. This form of anti-structure actually allows for the spontaneous formation and performance of personal and group mythmaking.

Building on this concept, we can return to the ideas explored in the epic games where the player takes on the role of a ready-made script hero of epic and myth. The aim of the heroic life, however, is not to imitate, but to emulate, not to simulate, but to bring to fruition one’s own heroic traits from within. Outside of the impersonal and dispassionate study of myth, we can instead look at the applied methods of personal mythmaking in the construction of one’s in-world identity. It is not an inherent design of the MMORPG to provide an authentic avenue for development and exploration of one’s personal myth: it stands to rest that it remains wholly in the user-end and how the user decides to participate in the virtual world.

Since MMORPG’s provide the tools for the exploration of identity-construction (especially in open-ended virtual worlds like *EVE*), they may supply some means for a user to explore aspects of identity construction and personal mythopoiesis. As for the heroic aim of fame and name, the player is given a creative opportunity to make a name for themselves. In the case of *EVE* the individual’s in-world capsuleer-avatar can be famous, a neutral no-body, or *infamous*. With more autonomy given to the player, the more it tends to veer away from the predetermined heroic simulation of a single-player

adventure game in the mode of mythic or epic, or the quest and raid models structured into games like *World of Warcraft*. Such games attempt to create the single-player experience by the use of “instancing” whereby a dungeon, its NPCs and obstacles are regenerated each time a player enters the domain. Like a theme-park attraction, instancing is designed with the attention to give each participant the experience of the central protagonist of a plot. In *EVE Online* this model is only lightly used for career building exercises and commissions assigned by NPCs known as career agents. When capsuleers enter certain sectors of space, they may be greeted by a discernably scripted fleet of NPCs.

In this way, *EVE Online*’s capsuleers/players bury “the root” deeper between two seemingly opposing agendas as Ryan has articulated succinctly:

[T]he root of the conflict between narrative design and interactivity (or gameplay) lies in the difficulty of integrating the bottom-up input of the player within the top-down structure of a narrative script: if the player’s choices are too broad, there will be no guarantee of narrative coherence; if the choices are too narrow, the game will be boring.

(*Avatars of Story* 196)

When asked whether *EVE Online* is a game, both of my informants seemed hesitant. A certain investment of time is often demanded by the *EVE* player where the lines of work and play begin to blur. They much preferred the “worldliness” of New Eden, and so I often adopt this emic perspective to describe *EVE Online* as a virtual world, rather than a gameworld—although, gameplay and strategy can be exercised within the virtual world. But, given the thematic celestial scape of New Eden and the personal narratives that

naturally emerge from in-world experiences, the stakes of gameplay elements seem to be heightened. The best alibi for a game with high stakes (i.e. “deep play”) is pretending like it is *not* a game at all: by telling a myth.

Encapsulating a Myth

The Barbers posit that ancient myths served as time capsules whose purpose was to transmit information. From this perspective, we might say that myths are mnemonic vehicles. As recipients of myths, it is the task of the mythologist—the “voyeur”—to decipher the content and messages of the time capsules, while it is generally the task of myth-tellers—the “pilots” to keep a myth engaging and in the conversation, while, finally, the myth-consumer—the “passenger”—rides along.

In reaction to *EVE Online*, the time capsule is literally being assembled for future generations. Instead of the time capsule of myth in *in illo tempore* it is a collective project with a mission to record and prepare messages for future generations. Helmar Veigar Pétursson of CCP heads a project in conjunction with the Mayor of Reykjavik Jon Gnarr, to prepare the time capsule. Each player carries forward the history of New Eden. Their capsuleers etch their stories into the greater time capsule. The otherworldly tales of the designers and players of *EVE Online* seek to push the boundaries of the actual and the virtual. In order to do so the fictionality usually given to a video game must gradually give way to create a world of real consequences. This endowment, I argue, carries the project of *EVE Online* into a habitable zone between history and myth.

In a similar vain, the EVE Monument has also been created to commemorate the many players who have contribute to the world-maintenance of New Eden and the EVE Online community. The monument carries with it cultural echoes of a Nordic heritage.

We read in the *Ynglinga Saga* of Snorri Sturluson that “For notable men burial mounds were to be thrown up as memorials. But for all men who had shown great manly qualities memorial stones were to be erected” (Hollander 12). Such memorial sites (akin to ancestral menhir), as we have seen, do not only become real-world constructions, but players leave in-world sites where major player- driven battles in New Eden took place. On both fronts of the EVE Monument and the monuments left throughout New Eden, they resonate with ancient practices of memorializing courageous sailors, like the following account given by Plutarch on a legend attached to the Pilot’s Festival established by the ancient Athenians:

Philochorus says that Theseus got from Scirus of Salamis Nausithous for his pilot, and Phaeax for his look-out man, the Athenians at that time not yet being addicted to the sea, and that Scirus did him this favour because one of the chosen youths, Menesthes, was his daughter’s son. And there is evidence for this in the memorial chapels for Nausithous and Phaeax which Theseus built at Phalerum near the temple of Scirus, and they say that the festival of the Cybernesia, or Pilot’s Festival, is celebrated in their honour. (18.5; Perrin 35)

Like the Cybernesia of ancient Athens, players of *EVE Online* can take part in FanFest, an annual gathering in Reykjavik. The gathering is one of the many ways the EVE community sustains itself, while also offering other FanFests in North America in Las Vegas. While these venues bring players together in physical space, the virtual worlds’ ability to enable sustained and malleable textualization of the events makes New Eden a prime example of the virtual imprinting of our actual interactions. The drive to explore

these new seas makes them incredibly appealing as frontiers of the dream that is (or once was) cyberspace, but only when a reality—i.e., a complexity—can be achieved through carefully coordinated impressions of self-organizing and self-piloting. I would characterize this interaction between the designers and the players not only as that between Homo Faber and Homo Ludens, but also the need for mythmaking and -consuming (Homo Mythicus) and the ambivalence between self-governing and being governed (Homo Cyber).

By creating an infrastructure and allowing “freedom within limits” the future-oriented mythos of *EVE* along with its “semifictional” history do seem to point to a paradigmatic shift in what a game can be (Rossignol 140-41). In our application of myth-analysis to the *EVE Online* community and the world of New Eden, it seems to suggest that the study of myth has been saved and indeed does have a new future in the virtual worlds of our making; not only by turning to deep histories of cultural and material artifacts, but in looking towards our future-histories. These claims are mythic in register and eloquent in their simplicity. Myths—specifically, myths set in creative modes—constellate around three questions of orientation: where did we come from (*archē*: issues of origins)? How did we get here (*meso*: issues of being)? Where are we going (*telos*: issues of chartering)? To puzzle through these three questions is an infinite game.

Who/What is “Eve”?

This last section is about a basic, but perhaps overlooked, signifier and what it signifies. It begins with a simple enough question: what is the significance of the virtual world of *EVE Online* being named “Eve”? For some it could mean Everyone-versus-Everyone, in reference to the conventional acronyms of vernacular video game slang:

PvP (Player versus Player) and PvE (Player versus Environment). A simple answer is that it refers to the EVE Gate, the natural worm whole that opened up a new intergalactic frontier for humanity. Perhaps there is more to it though. Is it a Biblical reference? Such an inference is easy enough to assume given that the name of the in-world system that players inhabit is called “New Eden.” Furthermore, the EVE Gate resides in the “Genesis” region. However, I would like to offer some provocative intimations and commentary meant to serve more as alternative directions of inquiry rather than declarative interpretations; I offer them more in the spirit of mythological musings.

A certain faction of New Eden and the *EVE* community deserves some mention: The Sisters of EVE. Within New Eden, the Sisters of EVE are a humanitarian group and religious congregation that study the mysteries and origin myths of the EVE Gate. They believe that the EVE Gate is a “gateway to Heaven” (*EVE Source* 151; cf. SantaClaw 104). They also erected the Sisters of EVE Charity Statue, which served as a real-world fundraiser initiative.

Since *EVE Online* takes place mainly in the environment of interplanetary space, and that the player’s in-game character is—through science-fictional discourse—a clone capable of transmigration of consciousness, a certain mythological interpretation and set of similar images and concepts could be found in the sacred texts about ancient Egypt religion and myth. For instance, the belief that the *ba*-spirit of the deceased continued on in the afterlife—a belief first held exclusively to the pharaoh in the Old Kingdom-era and later “democratized” in Middle Kingdom on (Taylor 20-25). Since *EVE* in, in essence, a fictional world taking place in celestial regions (a post-Earth humanity), it also lends to the theme that the feminine presence be ascribed to some plane of the celestial rather than

the terrestrial. Again, drawing from ancient Egypt, belief held that individuals were translated or transferred into the body of Nut, the sky-goddess, whose body acted as a “shell” (a “Nut-shell”) or encasing of the cosmos. She also was often depicted in the inner lids of coffins, or ceiling iconography of tombs. Geraldine Pinch describes a typical function of the goddess as attested in the Pyramid Texts, “...it is Nut who draws the dead king up to the heavens to live again as a star. The sky was often thought of as a watery region in which the stars and planets might swim like fish or sail boats” (174). It is also important to acknowledge that ancient Egypt has had a certain mythology and appeal in other science fiction media: Roger Zelazny explored similar terrain in his 1969 novel *Creatures of Light and Darkness*; the concept of *EVE*’s stargates—the means through which players navigate interplanetary space—was popularized by the 1994 film *Stargate*. The EVE Gate is the literal and figurative world-navel and originating point through which the various tribes of New Eden are said to come from. It might come as no surprise that echoes of these ancient beliefs and mythic motifs find some expression in our modern works of speculative fiction and virtual worlds.

My research has also lead me to believe that the video game’s title refers to a much larger concept of “Eve” than the biblical figure of Jewish and Christian tradition. It also appears to deal with issues echoed in modern science, in particular in evolutionary biology regarding “African Eve,” also known as “Mitochondrial Eve,” the genetic ancestor of all modern *Homo sapiens*. Richard Dawkins, in his lyrical style of popularizing theories of science, encapsulates the data of our common ancestor in narrative form with “Eve’s Tale,” part of his greater 2004 book *The Ancestor’s Tale* (48-61). I argue that the science fiction theme of a future-history is but a guise and vehicle for

exploring and discussing our own origins as a species. In an interview with *Kill Screen*, CCP's creative director, Torfi Frans Ólafsson intimated that there were strong underlying influences of popular science writing, citing Richard Dawkin's famous book *The Selfish Gene* (1978), which influenced some aspects of the world of *EVE Online*:

[*EVE*] was inspired very much by behaviour that we observed in the MUDs [multi-user dungeons] of the 90's were emergent behaviours, which included a simple group set, a nice simple group set, give it time and enough people that would witness emergent behaviour, or highly complex emergent behaviour, like the foundation of villages and cities, or complexe organisms or something like that. If you just allow it to be. And it was also heavily influenced by Richard Dawkins and *The Selfish Gene* and his theory that, you know, vehicles with DNA will move forward. It's all very meta. (Ólafsson, *Kill Screen* interview)

It is suggested, then, that this general framework presents a compelling and suggestive analogy between the “selfish gene” and the capsuleer-player; or, if we wish to be more nuanced, that the player functions as an individual organism within the ecology of New Eden, and that their capsuleers—remember, that players can create up to three—each function as a “selfish-gene” striving to succeed in each career path. The perspective is determined by the level of focus, from microcosm to macrocosm and back. If players are more social and partake in corporations with other players, then they could be seen as micro-organisms participating in accord with the larger social kinship or greater phylogeny. This “biological” metaphor of *EVE Online*'s participants is really just another way of articulating a parts-whole relationship as well as a way of describing social

networking and agonistics through competing ideologies—Gallentean, Caldarian, Amarrian, or Minmatarian—perhaps not unlike Dawkins’ other concept of the “meme,” a new replicator (like a gene), but instead “unit of cultural transmission, or unit of *imitation*” (*Selfish Gene* 192). The entire economic and political body gives shape and significance to *EVE Online*’s mythos.

And so it is for the remote past, but what about the remote future? “Eve” may very well also refer to that sense of a tomorrow that has not quite yet arrived. Future-oriented projects like *EVE Online* do achieve some degree of sophistication and contingency in portraying interesting speculations on the future of the human race. But, if it read as a “true story” from our future, it would only be entering our present state in order for us to alter the path. Like a myth, the future-history of New Eden can be understood more as means for representing self-image and world-image, than on predicting the future. Futurism, like utopianism (or dystopianism!), partakes in a mythic discourse without knowing it is a type of myth. It is a common misconception to interpret science fiction as prophetic or fatalistic in project. Instead, any conception of the remote past or a remote future mirrors the time, aspirations and problematics of a changing and evolving present.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude this final chapter in my study, I would like to present the following passage from Plutarch’s *Life of Theseus*, which, to me, encapsulates an important philosophical problematic about being, continuity and the retention of identity through change:

The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned to safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel. (22.1; Perrin 48)

Ships valued upwards of thousands of USD—when translated from in-world currency (ISK) to equivalent real-world currency—are often destroyed in mere moments in the epic battles of New Eden. Thousands of players, all actual people, partake in those battles, but within a virtual world. What continues and persists after the battle is not the ship that is lost, but the spirit and tenacity of the player to assemble a new ship and begin again. When a player loses their , their in-world identity is left floating in a pod known as the capsule, the most basic of spaceships. It too also gives players a moment to decide: is it worth it to keep *this* pod, or “die” and upload a snap-shot of consciousness to the closest cloning facility where a new clone awaits? Is this rebirth? Is this transmigration? When even the person is no longer there, are they lost or found in the worlds of others’ words? Are they saved and translated into or by myths?

Chapter 13: Closing Remarks of the Study

Myths upgrade. Their survival as relic or reality is based on a stubborn ability to remain permeable and find new vessels for expression in culture. This study investigates a contemporary instantiation of myth in a contemporary form of media: video games. Although this new emergent and participatory media has grown up rather quickly as a dominant form of entertainment, the process of translation across media is nothing new: “the mythical value of the myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation” (Lévi-Strauss, “Structural Study of Myth” 210). Myth stands over and against the “un-translatability” of poetry. But whereas the poetry of myth maybe lost in translation, ludicity remains; it has a ludo-logic. We can observe this quite clearly in the way myths and mythic motifs survive over time and seemingly manifest across a diverse array of cultures (i.e., *polygenesis*), or are distributed through cultural contacts (i.e., *monogenesis*), as mythic themes are adapted into particular cultural contexts. Indeed, translation can invite controversy as Jorge Luis Borges acknowledged in his 1926 essay “Two Ways to Translate,” in which he cited the Italian expression “Traduttore, traditore (translator, traitor),” however Lévi-Strauss proclaimed, “Myth is the part of language where the formula *traduttore, tradittore* reaches its lowest truth value” (210). In the realm of video games we are not so much dealing with traitors, but rather traders in a marketplace wherein cross-cultural exchanges of myths, game styles, and traditions meet in a *metaxy* of transactions, competition, and cooperation expedited through technological means and the ludic imagination.⁶²

⁶² A Platonic term amplified by the modern philosopher Eric Voegelin, referring to the In-Between Reality; *between* being-becoming. Although I will refer repeatedly to *metaxy*, we can think of the metaxic reading as on that proliferates in the middle as being “rhizomatic,” in the sense introduced in the philosophy of

Translatability has been a central thread of this study and occurred in two distinct directions for comparative analysis: spatial and temporal (see Smith, *God in Translation*). I do not limit translation to the domain of language and linguistics, but rather take as a point of departure Roman Jakobson's "intersemiotic translation, or transmutation," which "is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" ("Linguistic Aspects" 233).

I have offered my own arguments in favor of a critical approach to the cross-cultural study of myths through their use in video games. To facilitate in expanding this broader usage of translation for this study, I have drawn on Mark S. Smith's "cultural translation" (*God in Translation* 1-15), a synthesis from the works of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz and Biblical scholar Jan Assman as a key reference for the historical accounts of deity translation in antiquity. On this basis, video games may present mythologies derived and translated from cultures exogenous to the creators and players by being distant or foreign in time (i.e. mythologies of antiquity), or in space (mythologies of peoples in other places). On the other hand native developers may also mobilize their own sacred traditions and accounts for commercial use. To succinctly frame this approach to cross-cultural and comparative referents within the video game environs, I relied on the amended categories of "vertical translatability" (temporal) and "horizontal translatability" (spatial) as established by Smith (272-273). Vertical and horizontal translatability occur when one culture translates distant ancestral accounts into a language or form that is meaningful in a contemporary context (temporal), or translates in such a way that is meaningful for/to a contemporary neighbor or distant culture into

Deleuze and Guattari in their work *A Thousand Plateaus*. That is, all things are connected in an unseen, undesignated root system.

their immediate tradition (spatial). Such a framework allows for concise terminology and an aperture through which to perceive and contextualize mythological systems presented in the cross-cultural milieu of video gaming and the international distribution of video game products within commerce.

As we focus on video games that explore mythological themes, motifs and narratives, it is important to recognize that the real and traditional strength of myths lies in their inherent ability to communicate and speak across generations by adapting their message to various different media. This is not to say that myths are biological in essence, but rather sociological and cultural in practice; myths pretend to be hardware, when they are really software. From antiquity to the time of current living oral traditions, myths have served one great purpose: to preserve whatever is held most valuable and meaningful to a given group. Video games, a type of software with hardware interfaces, continue to impact the way youths (but also older generations) perceive mythic material of antiquity, modern mythologies of contemporary life, and future worlds of promise. In their young history, video games have also been treated as scapegoats for spreading ideological agendas—that is, subtle messaging, distortion, inflexion and turning “history into nature,” shaped for consumption (Barthes 240). A critical approach to the use of myths in video games and in play is needed to keep transparent the lines of transmission and translation, lest video game platforms are used as tools for ideologies. That is, the critical approach would offer some means for deciphering the ideologies mythification and gamification (Bogost, *Persuasive Games*). Both are subversive tactics used to exploit the power-persuasiveness of myth and the motivational components of games for commercial, productive and economic gains. This much needed approach towards the

recognition and reception of myths in video games would also aim to make transparent those developers (independent or major companies) who seek to use video games for their own culture wars, or attempting to articulate “elevated” discourse within the ludic context through tenuous preconceptions. Such (mis)applications would amount to nothing less than tactics of distortion and coercion of the medium for personal interests, gains and—in a word—propaganda.

Technological innovations, especially those associated with the encoding of language and communications, have played a significant role in the ways a given people literally relay and receive their body of myths. From oral tradition to the written word, from the written text/manuscript to mass-produced printings, from poetry to prose, from still to moving images (to name a few), these moments of technological and stylistic transition kept myths alive channeling through pathways of new media. Indeed, myth is received and circulated as an authoritative, time-honored mode of shaping worldviews and generating meaning. However, when a myth migrates beyond the original context of belief it may very well yield “weaker forms,” Jaan Puhvel states:

Myth can be transmitted either in its immediate shape, sacred narrative anchored in theology and interlaced with liturgy and ritual, or in *transmuted form*, as past narrative that has severed its ties to sacred time and instead functions as an account of purportedly secular, albeit extraordinary happening. (39; emphasis mine)

Though myths in “transmuted form” are removed from their original ritual contexts, the experience afforded by the new participatory media of the video game may set the user (i.e. the participant) afloat in a “sea of stories,” as Salmon Rushdie eloquently put it,

enabling one to experience myth in an interactive spatial-temporal dimension rather than a weaker distant form such as passive reading/listening. We can, as it were, develop a media-conscious study of myth, while cultivating a myth-conscious use of media. If we are to follow this line, however, I suggest that we heed Marshal McLuhan's opening statement to his essay "Myth and Mass Media": "When an attempt is made to bring the relatively articulated concept of "myth" into the area of "media"...it is necessary to reconsider both "myth" and "media" in order to get at relevant data" (*Myth and Mythmaking* 288). I would go further and say that both concepts are so invested in one another that one is sure to follow the other under any close analysis. It is media that keeps myth timely, while myth keeps media engaged with the timeless. This is what separates mythology from the direct discourse on the nature of god or gods, i.e. theology: mythology is a veil of mediation that distorts or slightly modifies an otherwise direct discourse about gods allowing for variability. Such an assertion requires that we designate what *kind* of medium myth is modified through.

From its roots in material objects like knucklebones to today's virtual dice, from board games with two people to virtual arenas and cosmic battles involving thousands of players, gaming is as deeply rooted in our repertoire of activities as mythologizing and imagining. As game scholar, Jesper Juul, states:

Video games are two different things at the same time: video games are *real* in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. To play a video game is therefore to interact

with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world. (*Half-Real* 1)

A video game, like a ritual, has the ability to employ rule sets to instill reality into a fictional or mythical event; that is, both video games and ritual make some attempt to (re)actualize myth through the experience of play. By suggesting this I do not mean to relegate all fiction to the status of myth. Instead—working off of Juul’s passage—I would go further and intimate that the “real rules” of a video game push the medium’s fictional worlds closer to myth (as opposed to other genres, narratives and fictions) insofar as they demand the participation of the player(s) to give the worlds a reality (presence) and for the player to temporarily immerse themselves in a mythic event, personage, and/or realm. The real rules and event of a game “normalize” and naturalize the mythic, and so offer a new perspectives on the myth as it is played out through the player, other players or non-player characters (NPCs).

If we consider the social side of games, their reality—or, “real-ness”—becomes more apparent. Regardless of the game world’s fictive qualities, real players commit real resources. In his book *eGods* sociologist and game researcher William Bainbridge explains it thus: “If games are not real, then neither is art, or music, or drama, or sports, or politics, or the stock market, yet all of these are real in their socioeconomic consequences” (3). How might the student of myth reconcile these “socioeconomic consequences” with the myths operating within, through and around a video game? Do we focus on the product or the process—or both? Further, how is myth perceived and approached by game designers and players? How do their distinct stances and attitudes toward the games modify/distort this process and perception of myth packaged in a

commodity? My research was oriented around such questions to establish a critical method of approaching video games *as mythic texts*, that is, texts which serve as mediating gateways—conduits and transmitters—to aspects of the mythological in their performance and discourse in cultural production and reproduction.

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Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms and Concepts

Agonistic Theory of Myth: A phrase I use to emphasize the pervasiveness of contestation between versions and theories of myths. The theory postulates that not only is contestation and the striving for authority basic and elemental to myth, but that it narrates its own history through competing versions to determine the best version and “spin” on the myth that is most applicable to in a given context. In such a framing, a myth told by a myth-teller competes with other myth-tellings, while theories of myth compete with other theories of myth. 19th-20th century theorists made appeals for either single origin or primary functions of myth, but this has gradually shifted to critical and pluralistic approaches deemed “eclectic,” but affirm that a myth or body of myths has multiple levels of hermeneusis and functionality. The “volatile field of contestation,” described by Bruce Lincoln, could be said to form an originating conception of the agonistic theory of myth, along with deeper antecedents in Hesiod’s concept of Two Strifes, Hans Blumenberg’s notion of mythogony, and Lévi-Strauss’s dictum that a myth is constitutive of its variants. A closely related conceptual model of myth is James J. Liszka’s myth as transvaluation wherein a myth challenges values on different levels of culture by the narration of crisis (possible transgressions of rules) or stasis (establishment of rules), both relying on conflicts of hierarchy(-ies) (see *Semiotic of Myth*).

Allomythic Games: A term Jason Anthony uses to designate games that create allomythic (ἄλλος: “other” + μῦθος: “story”) or nonexistent traditions. Anthony states, “allomythic games postulate new religious landscapes, and go a step further by providing a first-person way to step into these traditions and practice them” (39).

Aporia: A Greek philosophical term derived from and exemplified in Plato’s Dialogues that literally means “impasse,” *a-* (“without”) *poros* (“passage”) (as opposed to *poria* or *porous*, passage). Generally, it is a discussion point that has exercised all seemingly available paths for a resolution, but to no avail. Thus, the real core of the problem emerges out of puzzlement. In the dialectical method of Socrates, those who think they know the nature of a given topic/definition are exposed for ceasing to truly grasp the core or essence.

Ergodic Literature: A category of literature that involves non-trivial effort on the part of the reader-user to traverse the text (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 1). See *cybertext*.

Cosmopoetics/kosmopoiesis: Lit. “order-making.” However, the term may also be closely related to World-building as it relates to literary works. Closely linked to the cosmopoetic is the cosmic and cosmetic which order the world on the one hand, and adorn and embellish in order to attract. See World-building.

Cyberbard: A term media scholar Janet Murray uses to describe a future bard who can navigate and channel digital content for storytelling purposes across various platforms of media (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 208-13).

Cyberspace: A term coined by the novelist William Gibson in his cyberpunk novels. Its full literary description comes from his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, and is defined as a consensual hallucination experienced (or induced) by its users of networked communications technology.

Cybertext: A neologism coined by Espen Aarseth to designate texts that focus on mechanical organization and the process and performance of literary exchange between the user and the cybertext, rather than the reader and the traditional text.

Diegesis: In the context of Plato and Aristotle, *diegesis* meant to narrate or to provide a narrative of an event; to tell. In the modern discipline of narratology, the study of narrative, diegetic (a similar term) has come to mean the world of the fiction and its characters.

Fakelore: The lore generated by “industrial man,” or commercialized lore used for advertising. (Dorson)

Folklorismus (folklorism): Up-rooting traditional folklore from a host-folk and recontextualizing it for ulterior motives (e.g. commercial use and ideological co-opting). Venetia J. Newall citing Hans Moser: “[Moser] distinguished three forms of folklorismus: the performance of folk culture away from its original local context, the playful imitation of popular motifs by another social class, and the invention and creation of folklore for different purposes outside of any known tradition” (Newall 1).

Homo Cyber: A term used by cultural anthropologist Tom Boellstorff to mean “the virtual human, [in reference to] both the forms of human social life emerging online, and the way that human being has always been constituted through techne” (*Coming of Age* 56).

Homo Faber: lit. “Craftsman,” distinguishing humanities innate ability to construct, fabricate, and craft through interaction with the environment.

Homo Ludens: lit. “Human at Play.” A title given to the human species that signifies the importance of “play” as the fundamental ground(ing) of culture (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*).

Homo Narrans: lit. “Storytelling Human.” A title referring to the significance of storytelling as the axiom for—and foundation of—human culture and society. John Niles defines it as the human being’s ability to inhabit mental worlds (Niles, *Homo Narrans*).

Homo Mythicus: The myth-oriented human and their activities connoting an ability to produce and consume myths, and to assemble a meaningful whole or worldview from surrounding images, symbols, and objects (Ohana 6).

In-Character (IC): A term used in role-playing scenarios to identify when a character is enacting, behaving or speaking through their choice character. See also *Out of Character* (OOC).

Interpretatio graeca: The practice of translating-interpreting foreign deities into a Greek equivalence or correspondence. It occurred most frequently with Greek authors attempting to understand Egyptian pantheon.

Interpretatio romana: The process through which Romans translated and interpreted foreign deities into their culture and language.

Interpretatio ludi: A term I use referring to the conversion and use of deities in the context of a cross-cultural environment of play; the commercialization and (re)mediation of a traditional mythology and its system of divinities into play-forms. This can occur from within or without the originating culture.

Instancing: When a quest-area is regenerated each time a player enters its domain. The mechanism creates the illusion that each participant is the protagonist.

Kunstmythen: lit. “Artificial myths” of self-conscious artful elaboration. Such myths can be generated out of pure imagination and invention, or through a conflation of multiple “natural” or organic traditional myth; a product of extensive mythopoiesis. A myth or body of myths deployed for philosophical speculation or illustration, the poetic and artistic imagination, or for world-building in works of fiction (Kurt *Gnosis* 54).

Metalepsis: lit. “Participation” as discussed briefly in Plato, but more prominently features in Aristotle, Plotinus and Iamblichus. (Iam. *De Mysteriis* 1.18)

Metaverse, The: A term first used to designate a virtual world within Neal Stephensen’s 1992 novel *Snow Crash*.

Metaxy: The In-Between Reality as developed by Eric Voegelin. In Plato’s Symposium it came to be used as that which is between the mortal and immortal, Divinity and humanity.

Methexis: A Platonic term elaborated on by Voeglin to mean Participation, taking part in the idea of something. See *Metaphysics* 987b for Aristotles’ summation of the theory of *eidos* and Platonic ideas and participation *methexis*.

Mimesis: usually translated as imitation, but positively used to also mean representation (see Aurebach, *Mimesis*).

Mytheme: The minimal or gross constituent units of a myth (Lévi-Strauss “Structural Study of Myth” 210-11)

Mythic text: a text that elicits and recounts mythological narratives, motifs and themes in participation with the tradition of a myth (see Doty, *Mythography*; Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*).

Mythism: A term used in this study to distinguish the use of mythic qualities in world-building, architecture, environments, character design, and other representational elements in popular culture media which aim to render a myth-like, or myth-lite fictional world for commercial uses in the creative industry. The overuse of the

monomyth, or hero's journey, tends to lend itself to the symptoms of mythism as it limits mythic storytelling to distilled handbooks and manuals of storytelling in screenwriting and narrative design in video games. See *Folklorismus* and *fakelore*.

Mythos (Fan Culture): The collectively agreed upon and cumulative canon surrounding and attached to a character and world of popular culture fictions and their major figures (e.g. Superman Mythos, X-men Mythos, Mario Mythos...). Generally owned by a franchise and playfully modified by and shared amongst grassroots fan culture (e.g. Fan Fiction, Modifications [MOD]). Mythos can be both the conceptual elements of a mediated world, transmedial world, or fictional universe.

Out-of-Character (OOC): A term used in the context of role-playing which signifies a disengaged participant behaving or speaking from outside the fictional world.

Perma-death: Short-hand for perma(nent) death. Perma-death is a game mechanic often built into dungeon crawlers, specifically in the rogue-like genre, where the player cannot save their progress in-game and upon being killed will lose all items and be returned to the beginning of a level, or be forced to start entirely all over, depending on the rules.

Syncretism: Derived from synkretismos. First used by Plutarch in his *Moralia* 2.490 to mean the unified alliance of Cretans. Generally connotes the mixing of beliefs, pantheons, and ideologies into a unified or seamlessly amalgamated system or correspondences and equivalences.

World-building: A storytelling technique developed by Science Fiction and Fantasy authors that describes a story world through extensive digressions beyond the main plotline. Components like an Appendix on the imaginary religions, culture, history or politics (e.g. Herbert's *Dune*), or maps of imaginary lands may be incorporated to assist in the process (e.g. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy). See *Cosmopoiesis*.

Appendix B: Figures and Illustrations

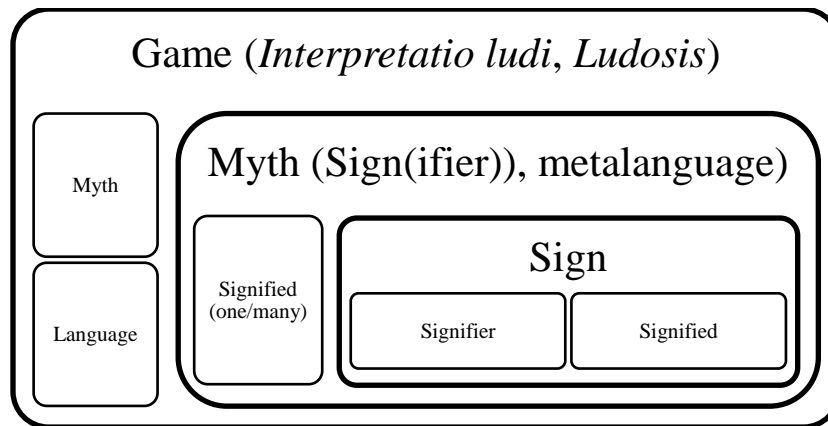


Figure 1. *Interpretatio Ludi*. Based on Roland Barthes second-order semiological system (*Mythologies* 224). Figure created by Robert W. Guyker, Jr.

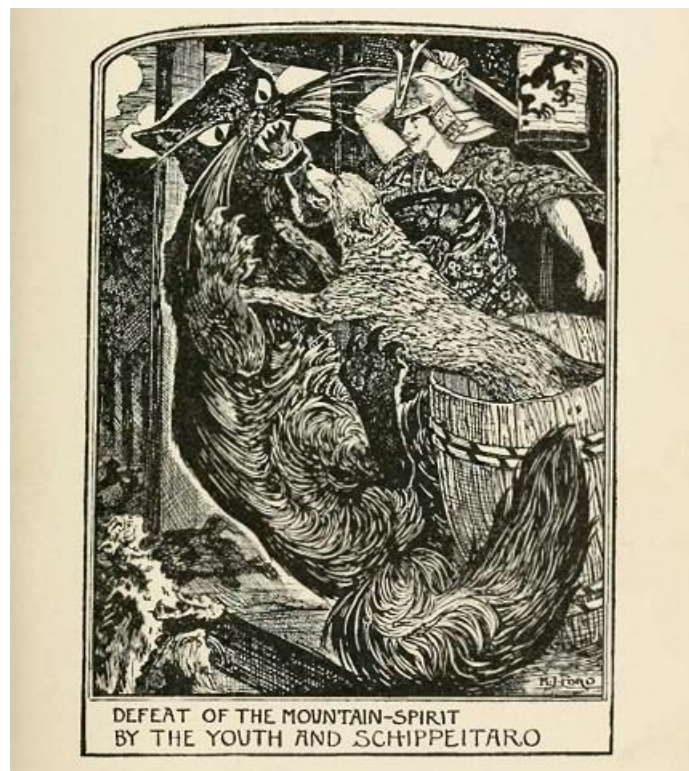


Figure 2. "Defeat of the Mountain-spirit by Youth and Schippeitaro." Ford, H. J., illust. In *The Violet Fairy Book*. Ed. Andrew Lang. 1906. 37. *Internet Archive*. Internet Archive.com. 23 Apr. 2012. Web. 21 May 2015. Public Domain.

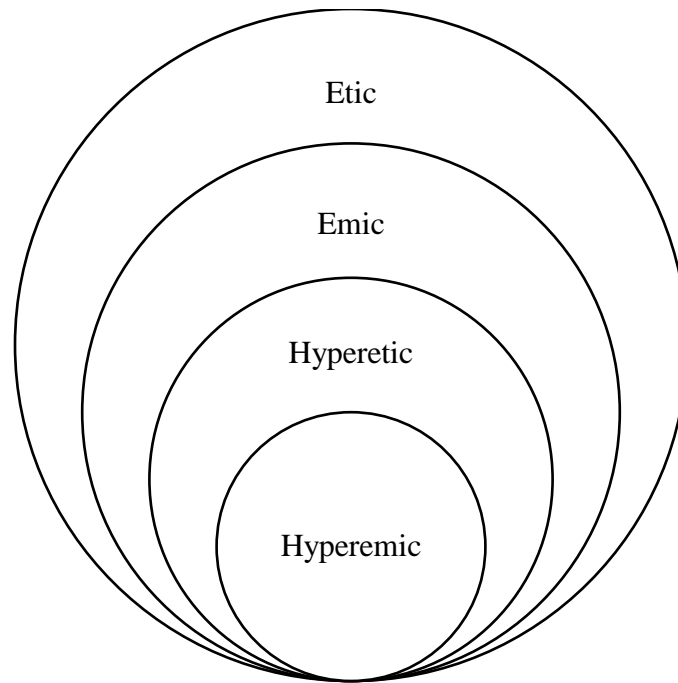


Figure 3. Model of Positionality, demonstrating the ethnographic relations between primary and virtual worlds. Figure created by Robert W. Guyker, Jr.

Appendix C: On the use of Official Guides and Fan Guides Consulted

Compiled here are auxiliary official and unofficial/fan guides to games (wikia, blogs, etc.) that the researcher and interested reader may consult for further details on aspects of games included in this study. It is important to emphasize that these guides do not replace actual play-sessions; for reasons that should be obvious, but mainly because such neglect diminishes the phenomenological and experiential elements of gameplay. During the course of my research, I was often pleasantly surprised and encouraged by the level of detail that fans of video games go through to help other fellow players by compiling such rich *living* resources. These resources can function as both lore guides and practical tools for navigating the challenges and quests of the respective video game. I am of the opinion that any work of game studies, research and analysis, especially of lore and mythos (and vice versa, mythologists and folklorists focusing on video games), would benefit from consulting, including and citing the efforts done by grass-roots researchers, i.e. the players themselves. Wikia guides serve as important nodes in the network of intertextuality and intermediation; they contribute to the media ecologies that the fans/players participate in.

Appendix D: Fieldwork Forms

Consent Form to be signed by Participant (Designer)

Title of the study: Myth in Translation: The Ludic Imagination in Contemporary Video Games

1. I agree to allow Robert Guyker, Jr. to ask me a series of questions on the topic of my experience as an active team member of a game developing company.
2. Following the completion of a brief information form, I will participate in at least one 90 minute audio-taped or video-recorded interviews at a mutually agreed upon location (virtual or local). After the interviews are transcribed I will receive a copy and complete an additional telephone interview for additional comment and reflection. I understand that all interview materials will remain confidential.
3. The purpose of this study is to investigate the nature of my creative and conceptual contribution to the game developing process.
4. I understand that some questions relating to my vocation may cause discomfort, unease, or breach boundaries of intellectual property with my employer in sharing such content. I may take a break or discontinue the interview at any time. I understand that a pseudonym will be provided to insure my confidentiality and that my answers will only be used by the researcher and his committee for data analysis.
5. I realize that this study is of a research nature and may offer no direct benefit to me. The interview material will be used to further the understanding of online, computer and video game communities of users and developers.
6. Information about this study, the time and location of the interviews, and my contribution to the study was discussed with me by Robert Guyker, Jr. I am aware that I may contact him by calling (xxx) xxx-xxxx (9 a.m. – 5 p.m., Mon.–Fri., and Sat. & Sun. hours, if arranged ahead of time).
7. Participation in this study is voluntary. I may decide not to enter the study or to refuse to answer any questions. I may also withdraw at any time without adverse consequence to myself. I also acknowledge that the researcher may drop me from the study at any point.
8. I am not receiving any monetary compensation for being a part of this study.

Signed _____ Date _____

Consent Form to be signed by Participant (Player)

Title of the study: Myth in Translation: The Ludic Imagination in Contemporary Video Games

1. I agree to allow Robert Guyker, Jr. to ask me a series of questions on the topic of my experience as an active participant in the on- and/or offline gaming community.
2. Following the completion of a brief information form, I will participate in at least one 90 minute audio-taped or video-recorded interviews at a mutually agreed upon location (virtual or local). After the interviews are transcribed I will receive a copy and complete an additional telephone interview for additional comment and reflection. I understand that all interview materials will remain confidential.
3. The purpose of this study is to investigate the nature of my lived experience as a gaming participant.
4. I understand that some questions relating to my social group may cause discomfort or unease in sharing such content. I may take a break or discontinue the interview at any time. I understand that a pseudonym will be provided to insure my confidentiality and that my answers will only be used by the researcher and his committee for data analysis.
5. I realize that this study is of a research nature and may offer no direct benefit to me. The interview material will be used to further the understanding of online, computer and video game communities.
6. Information about this study, the time and location of the interviews, and my contribution to the study was discussed with me by Robert Guyker, Jr. I am aware that I may contact him by calling (xxx) xxx-xxx (9 a.m. – 5 p.m., Mon.–Fri., and Sat. & Sun. hours if arranged ahead of time), or email.
7. Participation in this study is voluntary. I may decide not to enter the study or to refuse to answer any questions. I may also withdraw at any time without adverse consequence to myself. I also acknowledge that the researcher may drop me from the study at any point.
8. I am not receiving any monetary compensation for being a part of this study.

Signed_____ Date_____