Verbal Markets and Games in the eValuation of Myth, With an Appeal to Hermes, Aesop, and Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

This paper treats the concepts of agora *and* agon *as formative principles in the conception and valuation of myths. A discussion of the Greek deity Hermes and legendary Aesop serve as heuristic figures for theorizing myths and their function. Finally, John Miles Foley's notion of three agoras is used as a framework for the analysis of oral, textual, and virtual arenas that exercise discrete, but contiguous transpositions of mythic discourse. KEYWORDS:* myths, agoras, Aesopica, video games, virtual worlds

A sculptor was trying to sell a marble statue of Hermes which he had just carved and two men were thinking of

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> buying it. One of them wanted it for a gravestone, since his son had recently died, and the other, an artisan, intended to set it up as an image of the god himself. It was late in the day and the sculptor had not yet sold his statue, having agreed to show it to the buyers again when they came in the morning. In his sleep that night the sculptor saw Hermes himself at the gate of dreams, saying: "So then, my fate is being weighed in your balances: it remains to be seen whether you will make me a corpse or a god."
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> —BABRIUS, *Mythiamb* 30

Myths capitalize on the wrestling of words. To this extent, Roland Barthes discerned the inevitability of the mythologist to resolve him or herself to a cascade of neologisms (2012 [1957]:230). I propose that myths are best understood as multivalent couriers of valuations subject to the cultural mechanisms and demands of marketplaces (*agora*) and contestations (*agôn*). For the former, I have adopted John Miles Foley's articulation of three "verbal marketplaces" (*agora*)—oral, textual, electronic/digital—as a viable framework for charting variations, continuities and inventions of mythologies across different media, old and new—we return to it as a closing synthesis of this paper. I offer a reading of the Greek trickster deity Hermes and the fabulist Aesop (and Aesopic tradition) as viable heuristic figurations that encapsulate and reflect many of the core problematics at odds in the construction and conception of "myth" from antiquity to modern times. I then consider how we might approach modern literary/cultural movements like cyberpunk (a bridging of Foley's tAgora and eAgora) as an "Aesopic" discourse on individual-society disparities, hegemonies vs. counter-hegemonies, subversion through individual agency, and the use of fiction and myths in discerning valences of meaning, truth, and values. Finally, two brief case studies serve to convey potential sites of living eAgora, *SMITE: Battleground of the Gods* and *EVE Online*, demonstrating distinct methods of virtual transposition of lore, economics and narrative ecologies. For

this study, I focus on the hermeneutic and semiotic capacities of myth, but also regard the folkloristic conception as increasingly applicable to virtual environments where ephemeral suspension of disbelief and performance ground artificial bodies of lore displacing the limitations of conventional fiction-based constraints for vernacular cultures.[1]

A discussion of marketplaces and virtual domains would be remiss without first bringing closer attention to the value of John Miles Foley's major transmedial work, The Pathways Project. Relying on a synergy between an interactive website and his "morphing book," *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*, Foley states thus, "[It] is the Project's purpose to point out fundamental analogies in how the two media-technologies [i.e. Oral Tradition and Internet technology] work: they operate by navigating through networks of potentials rather than tracking along a one-way route; they are emergent, co-creative, and forever under construction; *they mime the way we think*" (2012:24; emphasis mine). He then develops his media ecology of the three *agoras* ("verbal marketplaces")[2] manifested across oral tradition, textualist tradition, and internet technology, effectively termed oAgora, tAgora, and eAgora (2012:255-63)—a tripartite framing to be used for our analysis of myths and their migration across different media ecologies.

I foreground myths as a viable category not just for idle theorizing, but in the mobilizing context of new media, emerging technology and virtual worlds. Myths, like other forms of storytelling, tap our world-building inclinations (Niles 1999:2-3). Unlike other traditional stories, however, myths engender contiguity between a storied model of the world and the world as such. Embedded in ecology as much as conveying a cosmology,[3] myths leverage their resonance in a larger network of other myths forming an ecosystem, i.e. mythology (Bringhurst 2008, 2011). Our virtual worlds emulate these tacit strategies of myths by evincing a participatory edifice.

Money Talks: Myth as Conception and Currency

In an insightful study, Morris Silver (1992), historian of economics, described how coinage and its circulation in the time of the ancient Greeks came to be enshrined and encoded in story, in myths in legends. For example, he "decodes" the economics of the legendary Perseus as "an international commercial venture who exchanged the labor power of goods he brought with him from Argos in Greece for the 'head' of Medusa" (1992:45). At some fundamental level myths, like other folk narratives, are discursive vessels of codified information designed to circulate among a specific society or group (Barber and Barber 2004). They are, in other words, *stor(i)ed accounts*. Myths envelop their adherents so as to appear intrinsic to a system of values and a mode of existence. Thus, economy and ecology, i.e., the laws and logic of an *oikos*—at the domestic, societal and/or cosmic level—overlap in the work of a myth. The inclusion and involvement of divinities, lesser deities, culture-heroes, deep ancestors or primordial beings in the world of a traditional myth signify the cosmic consequences of the events recounted. When myths do not depict the deeds of *super*natural agents and beings, as they are apt to in seemingly *de*mythologized societies, their claims on human existence are no less trivialized or abandoned but rather function as a partial worldview lived as an ultimate reality (Cf. Barthes 2012). These qualities of myths, *inter alia*, set them apart from modes of fiction, fantasy and other traditional tales. For instance, the evaluative and alternative outlets afforded to legends which, according to Linda Dégh (2001:87), "entertains debate about belief," are significantly concealed in myths (See Oring 1986:125; Kinsella 2011:19-18; Ellis 2003). Consequently, *ostension* is to legends what *orientation* is to myths.[4] In other words, legends work descriptively, myths prescriptively.

Furthermore, as Michael Kinsella has observed in legendry, legend-telling invites communal discussion, appraisal and contesting of a legend's factuality (2011).[5] Comparatively, we might adopt "myth-telling" as an operative translation of the

Greek *muthologia*, denoting a myth's method of transmission via specific forms of communication (see Bringhurst 2011, esp. 368-69). Contestation, or agonistics, is prevalent in myth as it is in legend, but whereas legend-tellers and their audience contest *credence* in a legend, mythtellers and their audience are situated beyond issues of belief, but contest *valences* of a myth.

The moralizing Aesopic fable is one such rhetorical strategy to scale down a myth's ambivalence to a micro-manageable "univalence" by supplying a moral while concentrating on brief encounters between gods, humans, and animals—anything further is but poetic adornment and embellishment to the fabulist.[6] The grammarian, Aelius Theon (c. 200 BCE-100 CE), supplies us with a concise definition: "A fable (*mythos*) is a fictitious story giving an image of truth," while adding the significant caveat that such a definition pertained exclusively to a fable anchored by a single meaning stated before or after the fable (Kennedy 2003:23; See Perry 1940).

The term *mûthos*, from which our English word "myth" derives, had a general appeal in Homer's epics as powerful words or authoritative speech, typically delivered in battles or agonistic assembles (Lincoln 1999:17). The meaning of *muthoi*, to be sure, remains far from a universal consensus in modern theories of myth (Von Hendy 2001). Conservatively, the term derives from a traditional body of lore and knowledge that evolved among the ancient Greeks (Detienne 1986).[7] Plato attempted to add *logos*—persuasive, "accountable," and "verifiable"[8] speech—to *muthos* and "coined" the neologism, *muthologia* (mythology; alt. "mythtelling") as well as other linguistic compounds.[9] To keep a "log" of myths is at once to sanctify them, and subject myths to a reckoning. Platonists and Neoplatonists (especially Plotinus, Sallustius, and Emperor Julian) strained their allegorical and hermeneutic systems to sanctify myths, exercising, in effect, high (re)valuation of their traditional tales.[10] In our modern folkloristic conception, "myth" has come to be referred to as "sacred narrative" (Dundes 1984; Oring 1986:121-22), but in the time of Herodotus (2.51),

hieros logos (literally, "sacred tale") would have been the rough equivalent of a specific tale tied to a specific ritual, while *muthos* would designate unverifiable here-say, or at worst, deceptive stories (Detienne 1986:49). Folklorist and scholar of oral epic traditions, Lauri Honko keenly observed that there is the myth amongst folk religion and official cults and those framed by scholarly references among the elite, yet the two rarely see eye to eye (Honko 1972:12). Mythologist Gregory Schrempp has observed that there persists today "polar semantic valences of the term *myth*—our salvation vs. our downfall" resulting in "Mythics" (*mythos*-centric) and "Skeptics" (*logos*-centric), two general groups supported by "conference extravaganzas," or what he refers to as discrete "Agora-spheres" (2014:34). Theories about myths—whether on their ultimate origin or function, or their alignment with sacredness or scandal—are as rife with contestation and privileging as the myths themselves. I have come to refer to these various fields of tension, in academic *and* vernacular contexts, as the *inherent agonistics of myth*: there is no final end to myths, no mythless condition, only the depreciation of some in favor of the prospering of others.

In practice, the authorizing of a particular myth-account largely depends on the societal position of the institution that declares it, or the disenchanted who seek change. Historian of religions Bruce Lincoln, for instance, suggests three main paths of myth-modification instigated by "those agitating for sociopolitical change": 1) challenging the status of an established myth, 2) investing in and elevating another category of narrative (e.g. history, legend, fable) to mythic status, or 3) apply novel hermeneutics to a given myth (1989:25).[11] For example, in Aesopic tradition, especially as revealed in *The Aesop Romance*, or *The Life of Aesop* (c. 100 CE), a fable can serve as a catalyst towards instigating such modifications and be encoded further into a "metafable," a fable about fables and, in the case of *The Aesop Romance*, the patron fabulist, entangled in political discourse (Patterson 1991). Prior to Lincoln, renowned classicist, Walter Burkert, shared a similar sentiment

discerning "myth" from "fable" by means of the societal status and function of traditional tales (1979:23). But I would argue that we, today, also have negated certain key phrases like Plutarch's verbiage *Aisopeia mutharia*,[12] only to approximate the diminutive *mutharia* with our modern construction of "fables" rather than, say, "modest myths." Instead, let us conceptualize myths as a scalable category subject to shifting cultural systems, valuations, and word-economies. To illustrate this quality of myths, we begin with a case from antiquity conveying the struggle between two gods and a fabulist caught in between. The function of *muthoi* and the talent for mythtelling are significant throughout, since they empower Aesop and Hermes in their respective tensions with Apollo.

Mythological Contracts and Contests: Hermes, Apollo, and Aesop

Philostratus (ca. 170-245 CE) in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 5.15 features an origin myth about myths,[13] of Hermes learning "fables"—the Greek *muthoi* is used throughout—from Aesop, the fabulist of legend said to have lived around 620—546 BCE, and so securing a department for Aesop in the House of Wisdom whilst gifting him the art of "mythtelling" (Gk. *mythologias*) (Conybeare 1912). According to the *muthos*, Hermes was petitioned to distribute gifts to the various schools of learning and so decided to appoint each a department in the House of Wisdom, establishing in effect a taxonomic schema. Having exhausted the vacancies, he nearly forgot Aesop and his fables. Hermes recalls a memory from his youth when he was nursed by the Horai ("Seasons") and he heard an Aesopic fable about a cow conversing with a man, which subsequently fueled his desire to steal Apollo's cattle, an event narrated in the *Hymn to Hermes* (Evelyn-White 1920). However, Hermes is also reminded that it was from this *muthos* that he learned his first lessons leading to higher wisdom.

This mythic occasion has a recursive, mystifying quality since it hardly clarifies the origin of myth—what Hans

Blumenberg refers to as a "mythogony" (1985:52-57). Instead, it's a kind of *meta*-mythogony, a myth about myth's origins. On a historical level, it functions as a justification for the inclusion of Aesopic *muthoi* in the education of youths in rhetoric and composition of prose from Plato's time to the Hellenistic period.[14] In his writings, Emperor Julian arrived at the opinion that the quest for the origin of myths was as fruitless as trying "to find out who was the first man that sneezed or the first horse that neighed" (Wright 1913, *Oration* 7.205c-d).[15]

Returning to our metamyth, we must ask: If Hermes learned myths as an infant divinity, was he somehow raised in a world already inculcated by myths? Does the human precede the deity, or vice versa? The above encounter highlights these matters: the god of *muthoi* and *logoi*,[16] and singer of a "theogony" himself,[17] bestows honors on the enigmatic figure of Aesop. Hermes in this sense gives a self-theodicy (a justification of himself as a god) and a "mythodicy" (a justification of myth): myths and their patron mythteller are sanctified and will continue to sanctify, in this instance, Hermes the mythtelling deity. While the issue of who the true *proto heuretes* ("first-inventor") of myths is remains foggy at best, their worth is elevated by the nod of a deity.

At first glance, the *muthos* may be contradicting the notion that fables teach "morals." This particular instance, however, offers something deeper than that. By arousing Hermes's thievish nature towards Apollo's cattle, the myth told to the then-infant god did in fact reflect a greater agonistic dimension through which Aesopic myth (sanctioned by Hermes thereafter) stood in contestation with Delphian Apollo.[18] Classicist Leslie Kurke has also observed that there are "recurrent motifs in the Aesop tradition of Aesop challenging Apollo's oracular monopoly and demystifying the peculiar sacrificial economy of Delphi" (2011:47).[19] This critique of Delphi, evidenced in Herodotus (2.134) and voiced by Aesop in his "origin myth" about the Delphians from their slavish ancestors the Hellenes (Daly 1998, Ch. 126; Perry 1965:380-83), resulted in Aesop's fatal demise

at the hands of the Delphic priesthood who framed Aesop for temple theft and sentenced him to death. These all having been instigated by Apollo (Ch. 127) himself when Aesop failed to consecrate a shrine properly to the Leader of the Muses, but instead exclusively to the Muses and Mnemosyne—they who, according to *The Aesop Romance* (Ch. 100), gave Aesop his voice and gift (on the authority of Isis). Ben Edwin Perry has gone so far as to argue that Aesop's death may contain remnants of an ancient Delphic ritual involving a *pharmakos*, or "human scapegoat," while suggesting that "the whole story about Aesop at Delphi must be regarded as a myth" (1965:xlii-xliv). A victim of sardonic fabulation, Aesop came to symbolize an individual who spoke truth to power with his cryptic animal fables, only to be reduced to a sacrificial human-animal. In the final chapters of *The Aesop Romance*, the Delphians come to embody antithetical traits to that of Aesop: a people ignorant of their slavish origins, steeped in dogmatic superstitions, and trapped in a state of servitude. According to the *Romance*, Aesop's fables had already spread through word of mouth prior to his arrival at Delphi. The fables were thriving beyond their fabulist. Historically, Aesop's fables have become a long-standing tradition, surpassing the final oracles uttered at Delphi, in part due to Aesop's own forethought in having his fables committed to text and stored in a library (Daly 1998, Ch. 99-100).[20] From the perspective of Foley's concept of agoras, Aesop, or the curator(s) of Aesopic tradition, was left with no option but to transfer the oral narratives from an oAgora to the tAgora.

But what of Aesop's abiding affiliation with Hermes? In order to understand a deity like Hermes and what he would expect of his followers, one might also, as the Barbers suggest, investigate divine kinships, opponents, and adversaries "to help determine the domain of a deity" within the greater context of a system of divinities (2004:44-51). Through his conflict with half-brother Apollo, Hermes was still able to negotiate a favorable result, at least according to the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (Evelyn-White 1920). The young gods' rivalry permeates the

Hymn so much so that Norman Oliver Brown derives from it the notion, "When two cults are in competition, mythology becomes a vehicle for propaganda" (1969 [1947]:95). Hermes had a much greater "adversary" in Apollo's mother Leto, a female Titan, and as Patron of Contests (Gk. *Enagonios*), Hermes and his cult were poised for a formative task.

According to the allegorist Heraclitus (ca. 100 CE), the *theomachia* ("Battle of the Gods") of Book 21 in Homer's *Iliad* was a philosophical and elemental *agôn* that defined the qualities and stations of each deity involved. Heraclitus relates Leto to "forgetting" (LSJ s.v. "*lethē*"),[21] e.g. the River *Lethe*, and so while Hermes had established himself in certain domains of culture, he had not attained dominion over aspects of memory. Heraclitus (55.1-2) states it thus: "Hermes opposes Leto, because Hermes represents speech, which is the interpreter [*hermeneus*] of inner experiences, and Leto (change one letter and she is Letho, "forgetfulness") fights against speech, because what is not remembered cannot be reported" (Russell & Konstan 2005). It remains in Hermes' self-interest to keep in good stead with Leto, mother of Apollo (and Artemis), Apollo (Hegemon of the Muses), and the Muses themselves who are daughters of Mnemosyne ("Memory"). Thus, it is a telling detail at the closing of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (ln. 429-30) that Hermes' "theogony" begins with Mnemosyne and his father, Zeus—Memory and Authority—which further recalls Aesop's own fateful decision to honor Mnemosyne and the Muses while neglecting Apollo. In so doing, the cunning young deity recalibrates the hierarchy of divinities for his own benefit and interests, but also endows significance to the role of memory and authority in relation to mythic discourse.[22] As the *Hymn* further relates, Hermes's lyre, the instrument of his own invention,[23] on which he sung his "theogony" entices Apollo, a lover of "the bright path of song,"[24] to strike a deal with the younger god and encourages Hermes to "respect the words [*mûthos*] of your elders."[25] Hermes accepts Apollo's words, while taking the opportunity

to gift the older god the lyre he invented from the turtle shell. The discursive exchange between the two gods is also very telling, in that Hermes's response of "crafty words" (*muthoi-sin ameibeto kerdaleoisi*), is met by, in the words of Hermes, Apollo's "well-ordered utterances" (*kosmon epistamenos ag-oreuein*).[26] In this exchange between the two gods, there is not only gift-giving and the bestowing of honors, but recognition of the others' skill-sets and *mode of discourse*. Hermes speaks through the eloquence of language in a world of multiplicity; Apollo speaks through the power of oracular utterancein a world of singularity. Thus, the two young gods forge a mythological contract, in the *Hymn* despite their agonistic relationship.

If we continue in the spirit of Heraclitus's allegory, Hermes knew all too well the greater opponent in the female Titan Leto, the figurehead of forgetfulness and disuse. The Barbers, in accordance with their mytho-linguistic schema of principles, have assigned a similar cognitive phenomenon they call the "Lethe effect": "what is never said may eventually be forgotten" (2004:19). Thus myths, according them model, struggle with (and are equally shaped by) forgetfulness brought about by the silence emerging from assumed knowledge within a group. Writing and recording, those valuable instruments said to be invented by Hermes, have paradoxically equipped itinerant ethnographers and folklorists with the tools to bridge the worlds of their informants and fieldsites with a wider audience as well as study aspects of collective memories. Vincent Crapanzano in his 1992 essay, "Hermes' Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description," makes the following remark:

> The ethnographer is a little like Hermes: a messenger who, given methodologies for uncovering the masked, the latent, the unconscious, may even obtain his message through stealth. He presents languages, cultures, and societies in all their opacity, their foreignness, their meaninglessness;

> then like the magician, the hermeneut, Hermes himself, he clarifies the opaque, renders the foreign familiar, and gives meaning to the meaningless. He decodes the message. He interprets. (49)

This basic function of the ethnographer has now expanded into virtual environments with increased access to the Internet worldwide. But the virtual and the vernacular entangle in new *and* recognizable ways as ethnographers are discovering (See Howard 2008; Boellstorff 2008; Lau 2010; Yee 2014). The paradigmatic model of Hermes—especially as presented by Crapanzano—reveals this abiding gift and responsibility of the ethnological mind tempted by vistas with various pathways and trappings to map myths onto other worlds and others' words. Hermes serves as a heuristic figure for which we may determine best practices in our study of others.

Lore and Continuity in Imagined and Assembled Worlds: From Cyberspace to Virtual Worlds

Before ethnographers stepped foot into technologically advanced virtual worlds with their avatars, visionary writers of speculative and science fiction, especially the cyberpunk writers of the 1980s and 90s, led readers into near-future societies immersed in networked information technologies. These societies were often oppressed by hegemonic megacorporations who created and co-opted the technologies for their own interests. But the term "cyberpunk" also has some resonance with Aesop and his merger with "traditionality," in so far as cyberpunk is both the term for a literary "tradition" and the name of a particular kind of cultural trickster,[27] an author bent on subversive tactics against authority.[28] Cultural historian, Thomas Foster, for instance, uses the term to "capture the generalization of cyberpunk beyond the limits of print science fiction and into a multimedia cultural formation" (2005:xxviii). For Foster, the speculations and worlds of cyberpunk literature have become "recognizable social settings" (ibid.). Cyberpunk gave us vivid descriptions

and imaginative conceptions of virtualized spaces, including the "cyberspace" imagined by William Gibson, first coined in his *Burning Chrome* collection of short stories and later fleshed out in *Neuromancer* (1984). Author Neal Stephenson described a similar "Metaverse" in his novel *Snow Crash* (1992).

Both writers also recast mythological material in their own fictional worlds. For instance, Gibson's character Angela Mitchell (a.k.a. "Angie") in his 1988 novel *Mona Lisa Overdrive* has the ability to enter cyberspace directly, enabling her to investigate what Gibson enticingly terms the "folklore of console jockeys" (129). Through the guidance of an AI named Continuity, Angie is initiated into the concept of a "myth-form," where the characters encounter "hidden folk," like the *loa* of Haitian voodoo during deep dives into cyberspace, or they experience the rapture of an omniscient and omnipotent God inhabiting the matrix (128-29).[29] "Cyberspace," Continuity affirms, "exists…by virtue of human agency" (128). But like the remote, mythical past of a Golden Age when all beings gathered in a common *agora*,[30] the world of cyberpunk conceives of a near-future in which humans reconnect with the non-human and the numinous.[31]

Bringing Foley's three agora in-step with Foster's cultural outlook on the genre, cyberpunk finds itself precariously spread across a literary tradition (tAgora), the advent of cyberculture (eAgora), and an abiding grassroots culture (oAgora). In this regard, the imaginings of cyberpunk writers have long been grounded by the mundane-ness of virtual worlds like *Second Life* and the everyday reality of "an oppressive society dominated by computer technology and big corporations."[32] The fictional "console cowboys" frozen in cyberpunk prose, have given way to genuine cyber folk movements by "netizens" (Thompson 2012:52-53) on the one hand and "hacktivists" like the Cypherpunks (such as Eric Hughes and Wikileaks founder Julian Assange) and groups like Anonymous on the other, each using technology to speak (their) truth to power. As a compound, cyberpunk speaks to two levels of society with the

prefix *cyber*-pertaining to the art of governance from on high, while the suffix–*punk*, captures the rebellious spirit of counter-culture, and "the realm of high tech, and the modern pop underground" (Sterling 1986; cf. Baudrillard 2010:34). Media scholar, Henry Jenkins has supplied an apt summation,

> Cyberpunk's protagonists are hackers, rockers, and other cultural rebels, clinging to the cult of individualism in a culture characterized by corporate control and mass conformity. These protagonists are adept at appropriating the materials of popular culture and making them speak to alternative needs and interests; they also know how to tap into the vast digital database to access information about corporations and their secret conspiracies, or to spread resistant messages despite powerful mechanisms of top-down control. (1997)

In a mythological way of speaking, the cyberpunk is a hybrid of Apollonian self-knowledge seeker and Promethean liberator of knowledge. Like the thievish Titan hiding Zeus' fire in a fennel, the cyberpunk combats authority via encrypted data. Like Aesop, they are willing to use their marginalized position and gifted craft to hack language and disrupt hegemonic discourse. Aesop used his fables to encrypt his messages, while cyberpunks duly master encryption via program languages. In other words, they follow the ethic: "information wants to be free" (See Wagner 2003), even if it must first be ciphered.

Fortunately, folklorists are beginning to openly investigate cyberspace as a viable *vernacular* realm (e.g. Howard 2008 and 2013 Hansen 2009; Blank 2009; Thompson 2012). Furthermore, Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert, along with other fellow folklorists, have proposed the notion of the "folkloresque" to critically investigate "popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore" (Foster 2016:5); Tolbert himself offering "an attempt to demonstrate the viability of video games as an area of folkloric inquiry" (2016:125).

Roman Ohlendorf (2016) has applied aspects of legend studies like ostension to video games, while Jukka Vahlo (2018) has bridged insights from folkloristics and game studies with vernacular experiences of the medium. Indeed, the narrative design of video games can seamlessly model vicarious renditions of mythological elements while remediating familiar folkloric motifs (Guyker 2014). Over two decades ago, Sharon R. Sherman (1997) initiated this important discourse in bringing folkloristics and narrative theory to bear on video games like *Super Mario Brothers*.

As Anthony Buccitelli has effectively argued, digital technology is not a container or necessarily a receptacle for "offline folklore," but part of a process of evolving contextualization and "*places of performance*" (2012:73). Conversely, however, the playable traditional tales of video games like *Year Walk* (2013), *Never Alone* (2014), and *The Mooseman* (Beletsky & Shvachko 2017), for instance, are not simply imported goods and lore, but are gestures made by tradition-bearers, mythtellers and curators to embrace the "new" medium, instigating a recognition of, and case for, the adaptability of tradition—a notion not unlike what Robert Glenn Howard terms, "vernacular authority," a means by which "tradition functions discursively" (2013:76). For Howard, the conscious collaboration between tradition-bearers and game designers entails a motive for increasing the social value and impact of the tradition as a video game construct. We can consider the following two cases as other distinct strategies and modes of incorporating mythological matter into new media.

Mythplaying: SMITE: Battleground of the Gods

SMITE: Battleground of the Gods by Hi-Rez Studios (2014) is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) alongside celebrity competitor titles like *Defense of the Ancients* (or *DOTA*) and *League of Legends* (or, *LoL*). *SMITE* is uniquely set apart from these titles both in style and gameplay, while also drawing much of its "lore" from real-world mythologies and pantheons

from around the world rather than fantastical synthetic lore. But like its competitors, *SMITE* has garnered a following of devoted players ranging from hobbyist to professionals. Indeed, the videogame has a well-established professional rank of players and teams who compete in international eSports events hosted annually under the banner of the "SMITE World Championship." *SMITE* situates in the minds and mouths of players a mythological literacy, providing an opportunity to learn about and play as traditional gods that many games have rarely capitalized on with such dynamism in participatory form.

At the core of *SMITE* is a playable rendering of the *mythological* motif of theomachy, classified by folk-narrative scholars as A162 *Conflicts of the gods* in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (1932-36; second edition 1955-1958), with some motific variations.[33] We have seen how this motif manifests in the oral tradition of Homer, the *Hymn to Hermes*, and the textual commentaries of Heraclitus, but in the virtual arena of *SMITE* the motif is transformed into an interactive paradigm. In the virtual agora, Gods can be purchased with "favor," which players accrue via winnings, exceptional performance, or with "gems" which function as an in-game currency purchasable through micro-transactions and seasonal bundles.[34]

The mythological pantheons in the original release included the Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Hindu, Mayan, Norse, and Chinese. Since then, Japanese, Celtic, Slavic, Voodoo, Polynesian, and, most recently, Arthurian god-sets have been added. Each deity in the pantheon is accompanied with their "lore," in-game text and animation recounting a standardized myth or myths associated with the deity. Additionally, each deity is assigned to one of five classes: Magical, Warrior, Hunter, Assassin, and Guardian. These classes are what we might call an *interpretatio ludi*: a syncretism of deities through a merger of ludic and mythic elements. Gods and goddess of classical mythology take on either their Hellenic or Roman visage. For instance, Apollo belongs solely to the Greek pantheon, while Roman god Mercury is playable instead of Greek Hermes. Deities of other

pantheons generally avoid these overlaps and tend to follow traditional iconography and visual canons. Players are free to choose deities individually and are not restricted to keeping pantheons intact when playing in a team, unless a special game mode espouses a pantheon vs. pantheon configuration.

SMITE is a good example of the principles of agon and agora within the affordances of a media form. It offers a ludic, participatory extension of an agora of gods tailored for battle, providing players the opportunity to role-play imaginative encounters and scenarios using comparative mythology. Beginning in 2015, Hi-Rez launched "Odyssey" as an annual event alongside the build-up towards the World Championships. Odyssey gives players the chance to take on specific quests to earn points and earn special seasonal items. It also provides an overarching narrative about the gods. The general aesthetic of the video game's appropriation of divine mythology is akin to deities in the hands of a fabulist like Aesop or a satirist like Lucian of Samosata (120-192 CE). With its iconic panoply of traditional gods, the ludic mode and discourse of *SMITE* verges on parody in comparison to the earnest mythologizing of our next case.

Mythrearing: EVE Online

Lucian in *A True Story* has often been cited having supplied the germinating material from which science fiction and epic space battles emerged. Likewise with his *Icaromenippus* (sec. 10), Lucian traces Aesop's animal fables as the inspiration from which Menippus acquired feathered wings to ascend the Heavens, instancing a mythic yearning for space travel in search of the Gods. The intersection of mythology and science fiction, however, has not escaped folklorists. Alan Dundes observed that:

> 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. (1976:1521)

EVE Online is a science fiction themed massive multiplayer online game (MMOG), created by CCP Games since 2003. It has already drawn some attention from economists studying free market micro-transactions. Players earn and trade with an in-game currency called Interstellar Kredits ("ISK"),[35] while also acquiring PLEX (Pilot License EXtension), an in-world commodity equal to thirty days of game-time which can be purchased/sold in-world or out-world. This interfacing between actual and virtual economies is what fuels and makes *EVE Online* the noteworthy and infamous news-maker it is, with thousands of dollars and hours invested in New Eden, the diegetic world of *EVE*.

Tales of conflict, corruption, blood feuds and politically fuelled warfare play out not just in the fictional writings designed for world-building by the developers, but in the careers and narratives of the players (See Groen 2015). "Lore" is not just supplied as product but performed as an unfolding, sometimes disjointed, process.[36] The generation of story and conflict are fueled by tensions over politics, economics, diegetic ideologies and sovereignty over sectors of interplanetary space. Marcus Carter (2015) has gone so far as to position EVE's (cultural) history as deriving from carefully tailored internal "propaganda" orchestrated by players and developers forming what he terms "emitexts," defined as "a form of paratext that emerges from within the game *as part of* gameplay, rather than from peripheral industries that surround it" (2015:331). In 2014-15, however, CCP developers capitalized on this player-driven, lore through the "EVE: True Stories" project, a player-voted, crowd-sourced, contest to elect various players' narratives of in-game experiences for a graphic novel published by Dark Horse Comics.[37] Through these various ecologies of media and texts, the EVE community plays

with the separation between fiction and fact, bringing about an ephemeral credibility and authority to a virtually mediated cosmos, its economy and its lore. This has led to the widely disseminated colloquialism, "EVE is real" (Carter, et al 2015). Inhabitants of New Eden not only enact a received science-fictional frontier replete with a common origin theory/myth reaching back to our Earth,[38] but charter emergent frontiers of mythmaking, crafting rich player-authored historiographies (e.g. Groen 2015) and tomes of fan-fictional lore (e.g. Mark726 2016; Valitonnen n.d.), generating a variety of textual genres in response to the somewhat open-ended nature of *EVE* itself and its narrative ecology.

In a sense, the world of *EVE Online* reifies and embodies John Miles Foley's notion of "stories consist[ing] of linkmaps" (2012:234-35), since players have a degree of freedom within limits to *map* their careers and carry out their activities in New Eden on pathways established by CCP. Following media theorist, Susana Tosca, we might characterize *EVE Online* as presenting the strategy of a transmedial world where "the story is not told, it is embedded in the objects of the game and [the player's] behaviours," and so "the strength of transmedial worlds is that of the lived, rather than the told, story" (2013:286). Myths, we should recall, engender contiguity between a storied model of the world and the world as such.

Agoras Old and New

At the core of Foley's Pathways Project is the homology of oral tradition and internet technology. As Foley states, "Pathways are the essence of the eAgora and oAgora, where surfing through networks of multiple possibilities is the core process that underlies all communication," and, importantly, "ePathways work for the same reason that the Internet works—because they actively support morphing and insure that reality remains in play" (2012:98). The condition of contingency through performance and subsequent performances also insures that within the e- and oAgora, repetition of the text "verbatim" in the tAgora is

replaced by recurrence: creative responses by users, tellers, and performers in dialogue with emergent meanings, contexts, and audience, and yielding variation. The "ideology of the text," or textualist traditions, aim for the finitude of a product, while oral tradition and Internet technologies thrive off of the rigor of process and the "survival of the fittest" to create a "self-sustained ecology of the web [and oral tradition]" (2012:95, 179). As folklorist Elliot Oring has argued, "Process is more fundamental than product. Traditions are traditions only by virtue of some process that makes them so. Process creates product. Without the process, traditions would be indistinguishable from all other cultural ideas and practices" (Oring 2013:25). Digital and virtual environments have the distinct advantage of integrating textual production alongside verbal and visual content, while also revealing the dynamic vitality of process and participation.

For example, with its living economy, annual player gathering "FanFest," and persistent sandbox (i.e. open-world) setting of role-playing capsuleers, *EVE* remains an instructive case for critical explorations of multiple agoraic and agonistic fronts. The domain of the eAgora does not just immerse us(ers) in virtual realities, but open up possibilities for, what Lynne McNeill calls "real virtuality" when virtual locations like "a wiki brings the features of *virtual* reality to reality" (2012:89). Foley has conversely argues that "oAgora and eAgora technologies…live and function in virtual worlds" (2012:256). But content can circulate from o- and eAgora to tAgora as in the case of the *EVE True Stories* series and fan-fictional lore migrating from an emergent player experience to an event sustained by social memory across forums to a tailored graphic novel. Foley's Pathways Project deserves continued attention for its applicability as a framework for interpreting platforms and genres like MMOGs, virtual worlds, and emerging technologies of communication. We are left with the opportunity to carry this task forward with a mindset that we can, as Foley may well have intended, to "reorient

ourselves and see how human communication actually works from a pluralistic, informed perspective," gaining "Citizenship in Multiple Agoras" (2012:3).

Cui bono: Agora and Agon in the Analysis of Myth

Through their multimodality, myths have thrived in oral traditions (oAgora), while surviving textual domestication (tAgora), but are poised to be revived by a future in Internet technologies and new media (eAgora). This process is both a restoration and a new pivot through which the detachment of myths by metaphor and what the Barbers call the "fogging effect,"[39] when the blurring of representation and direct experience of referent occurs, can be grounded in more concrete metonymies. For example, building on Foley's theory of *word-power* (itself, a potent English rendering of *muthos*), mythologizing in the context of eAgoras may attain "mutual attention to *performance as the enabling event* and *tradition as the enabling referent*" (1995:28; Cf. Niles 1999:28-30). In this way, myths are in a unique position in the context of eAgoras to reassert vitalizing qualities afforded by oral tradition.

What I have sought to draw attention to in this paper is an approach to myths that focuses on contestation in mythic discourse across media ecologies and verbal economies. Further discussion could extend to adjacent arenas in market research, organization studies, and popular business writings. I should like to briefly mention a few noteworthy treatments. Craig J. Thompson's recent formulation of "marketplace mythologies," for instance, evinces a relatable case-study (the natural health marketplace), and how several constellating "mythoi" (Gnostic and Romantic) articulate ideological agendas in a greater mythology (2004). The "agonistic,"[40] on the other hand, critically discerns relational tensions between hegemony and subversion, how one myth-variant can gain cultural interest/currency internally over another through the dynamics of performance, privileging, and reception. Conversely in popular business writing,[41] authors like Jonah Sachs (2012) see a world

of marketers-turned-mythmakers competing to fill "the modern myth gap" in our society while positing a coming "digitoral era" in which "new" myths will emerge. Nonetheless, agoras display panoply of myths subject to ambivalent consumer *choices*, while the principle of agonistics reveals competing *voices* in a volatile game theory of myths.

NOTES

1 See Bascom 1965:3-20; Alan Dundes 1984, and Oring 1986:124.

2 For the purposes of the Pathways Project, Foley emphasizes a conception of *agora* as a *verbal* marketplace, and thus, "a public space and nexus where ideas and knowledge are shared via whatever medium the community has adopted as the default technology" (2012:40-41).

3 See van Londen 1996 for an insightful case-study of mythology as "an ecological coping mechanism," 25. For other treatments of mythology as narrative ecology, see Bringhurst 2011 and, in particular, Bringhurst 2008, especially his insightful essay, "The Meaning of Mythology"; for a sample typology of narrative ecologies, see Gabriel 2016.

4 For the seminal notion of ostension in legend studies, see Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983. Doniger 1996 outlines related aspects of scaling and orientation in the comparative analysis of myth.

5 This would lend our word legend to the Greek *legein*, "to say, collect, and gather." See LSJ s.v. λέγω

6 The term "fable" is a conventional term that we use in a modernized sense with close ties to the Aesopic tradition, and with Latin roots in the term *fabula*. In the literature of the Greeks, however, different terms (*ainos*, *logos*, or *mythos*) were used by different writers of various eras, adding to the complexity of any definitive categorization of "myth" in antiquity. Sometimes *mûthos* was used (as in Philostratus), or *logos* (as in Herodotus) to designate a tale or a story. The early Ionic term *ainos* used by Hesiod might also be the better Greek equivalent for the English sense of "fable," since it generally means "story, tale" and specifically refers to "a tale with a hidden moral" (LSJ s.v. αἶνος). For an extensive discussion on *ainos*, see Leslie Kurke 2011, 373-76. Cf. Hansen 2002, 12; Lincoln 1989, 23-26; Von Hendy 2001, 1-3. Gert-Jan van Dijk 1997, 79-111, has provided a thorough survey of the terminology of genres in Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic eras; a chronology of "fable" that roughly follows a trajectory of *ainos*, *logos*, *mythos*.

7 For a thorough study of myth in a Modern Greek context, see Alexiou 2002, esp. Part II.

8 Here, I follow Walter Burkert 1979, 3.

9 On the uses of *mûthos* and its derivatives throughout Plato's Dialogues, see Brisson 1998.

10 For a thorough survey, see Brisson 2004.

11 Lincoln's general line of argument has been widely recognized by folk-narrative scholars as the relativity of genre classifications within and across cultural areas. However, he places "myth" and "fable" as diametrically opposite classes: myth attaining *truth-claim, credibility,* and *authority*; fable lacking all three. Compare G. S. Kirk 1970, 31-41, for an early, but still reliable, discussion on the "relation of myth to folktale"; also see, Bascom 1965, 7-8, where he points out the need for flexibility in analytical categories and native categories in the genres of prose narrative, but also the need for standards.

12 See *How the young man should study poetry* 1, *Moralia* 14e.

13 See the Prologue to part 2 of Babrius' *Mythiamb* (Perry 1965:138-141) for another example of another mythogonic fable.

14 See George A. Kennedy's translated volume of four *progymnasmata* ("Preliminary exercises") (2003).

15 Nonetheless, Julian speculated that they were likely invented by pastoralists (206a), and that "fable" (*ainos*) developed out of *muthos* (207a). Furthermore, he declares that the "Homer of myths…their Thucydides…their Plato" was, in fact, Aesop of Samos, a slave by birth but gifted the mind of a sage who relied on mythtelling "since the law did not allow him freedom of speech," and thus had to "shadow forth his wise counsels" (207c). See Phaedrus Book 3, Prologue 33-37 for his theory of fable as being invented by slaves to communicate through cryptic stories. Modern theorists tend to have different thoughts based in linguistics. Andrew Von Hendy 2001 has argued that since the introduction of "myth" into English in the 15th century, it slowly gave way to the term "fable" from the Latin *fabula*.

16 Hermes is the one divinity in Greek mythology that can seamlessly travel from Hades to Olympus, immortal realms to mortal residencies. In this way, Hermes is the Hegemon of *mythos* and, thus, gives the general category of "myth" a touch of divine authority. According to Iamblichus in *De Mysteriis* (1.1) and the (Neo-)Platonic tradition(s), Hermes was the Hegemon of *logos* (eloquence and discourse), as well (Clarke, et al. 2003). Through his journeys and appearances we learn the topical and thematic landscape that a myth can draw on through its verbal art.

17 See *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* lines 425-33 in Evelyn-White 1920.

18 In his classic study of the Hellenic Trickster, Norman Oliver Brown put forth the claim that the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* reflected a propagandistic agenda; situating the cult of Hermes and cult of Apollo in direct competition (1969 [1947] :95-97).

19 In her book *Aesopic Conversations*, Kurke offers a thorough survey of the development of Aesopic traditions in dialogue and competition with Sophists over the cultivation of wisdom; in a major way, Kurke argues that Aesopica, arising from oral traditions, offered significant critiques and challenges to cultural hegemonies emerging in Athens between 600 BC up to Aristotle.

20 Throughout *The Aesop Romance*, Aesop plays a vital role as guide, herald, and ambassador, perhaps in imitation and fulfillment of his supposed appeal to Hermes, the divine herald of the Olympians.

21 Silver (1992:266) has suggested that Leto's namesake might derive from *lētourgia*, compulsory labor (LSJ s.v. *leitourgia*, "public service").

22 Here we may employ Jacob J. Liszka's concept of *transvaluation* by which, "[Myth] is that imaginative space in culture which openly transvaluates order; mythic narration with its structure of hierarchical crisis is tailor-made for the displacement of the cultural values which constitute its framework," 1989:201.

23 See Silver (1992:266-72), particularly his reading of the turtle shell as symbolic of "'*bending of the back*' *in hard labor*" (270). The lyre, as we learn in an earlier episode of the *Hymn*, is assembled by Hermes from a turtle he discovered at the mouth of a cave, which he sacrifices and scoops in order to repurpose the shell as the body of his lyre, along with stretching ox-hide over the shell and stretching seven strings. Though minor in detail, it is a curious connection that Hermes attempts to establish with the turtle that he talks with in a child-like manner, perhaps reflecting Hermes's own love of Aesopic animal fables that he heard during his nursing. In the shared mythological world bridging the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* to the account in Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (5.15), Hermes would have just heard these fables that inspired him to set off for Apollo's cattle. And yet, talking animals—so characteristic of Aesopic tradition—become intricately enmeshed in the lore surrounding Hermes. The turtle is rendered *in*animate in order for the deity to sing the animal.

24 *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 451 in Evelyn-White 1920.

25 *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 457 in Evelyn-White 1920.

26 *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 479 in Evelyn-White 1920.

27 To this extent, early cyberpunk literature follows the tradition of science fiction of using futurist speculation to critique the present, while each cyberpunk author stood in agonistic relation to previous movements of science fiction, á la Harold Bloom's theory of *agon* (1983). See also Vincent Mosco 2004, 46-49. Mosco outlines a conception of the computer hacker as a contemporary trickster akin to precursors of mythological traditions.

28 See Bruce Sterling's *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1986) for the first major edited volume of cyberpunk short stories by the founding authors.

29 See Dani Cavallaro 2000, 41-71, for a reading of Gibson's cyberpunk literature and its use of mythological traditions and motifs.

30 See Babrius, "Prologue" in Perry 1965:2-5.

31 Here, Donna Haraway's influential conception of the "cyborg" is worth mentioning through which in "a cyborg world," the human being "is not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (1991:154).

32 See the Community description of the dedicated subreddit, www.reddit.com/r/Cyberpunk. Accessed May 1, 2018.

33 A162.1 *Fight of gods and giants*. (i.e. *gigantomachy*); A162.1.0.1 *Recurrent battle* (everlasting fight).

34 This brings to mind a line from Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (2.22): "but you are leading the gods into harbours and market places [*agora*s] just as if they were wares" in Conybeare 1912.

35 ISK also is also in direct reference to *Islenska króna*, reflecting the distinct Icelandic heritage of CCP and *EVE Online*.

36 In 2016, CCP decided to end support of the EVElopedia, an in- and out-world wiki database that attempted to offer a hub for lore. The player community quickly rallied to revive the database via backups like Backstage Lore Wiki @eve-inspiracy.com. The on-going status and function of EVElopedia within the EVE community is a particularly fascinating case of vernacular initiatives by players to archive and retain the resources as a significant part of *EVE Online*'s history as a cultural artifact and the internal history and development of the virtual world. Like many other internet communities, players coordinate and discuss matters on forums and threads, e.g. https://forums-archive.eveonline.com/message/6387496/.

37 See CCP Creative Director Torfi Frans' 2013 article announcement, "Can you help us find the True Stories of the First Decade?" at https://www.eveonline.com/article/true-stories-of-the-first-decade.

Accessed September 16, 2015. For an archived capture of the event page, see: https://web.archive.org/web/20130416061258/https://truestories.eveonline.com/

38 See https://wiki.evelopedia.org/Earth

39 See Barber and Barber 2004:107-112 and 141-142, for the consequences of the Fogging Effect on volcano myths.

40 See Lungstrum and Sauer, eds. 1997 for a significant expansion of agonistics. Roger Caillois's study (2001 [1958]) remains a seminal work in articulating a robust conception of *agôn* used throughout game studies.

41 Aesopic gestures thrive in other subgenres like Spencer Johnson's classic business fable, *Who Moved My Cheese?* (1998).

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