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A Heroic journey within videogames and the effects of player experience

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A HEROIC JOURNEY WITHIN VIDEOGAMES AND THE EFFECTS ON PLAYER EXPERIENCE

A Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

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Abstract: The popularity of videogames globally is increasing dramatically. The gamer explores first hand fantastic worlds. The story structure of many games follows the hero's journey-a rite of passage that social scientists view as a transformative experience. Although the content of the journey may be culturally specific, the similar structural components of the journey enable the hero to ultimately complete his/her journey as a changed person. I hypothesize that during the playing process, the gamer incorporates the experiences of his/her character and shares in some of these transformative processes. My research is based on participant observation and open-ended interviews with individuals who play 'Mass Effect'. Conclusions indicate that story driven games will have a social community forming effect, and impart moral messages on the gamers who play them.

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Introduction

Within videogames players are able to explore fantastic worlds. From slaying dragons, to saving the galaxy the player is able to explore rich story lines and meet innumerable interesting characters. No matter the game, the player takes on the mantle of the hero. The hero, driven to his quest by a wide array of motivations, greed, power, altruism is set upon the path of adventure. The player, being in the cockpit of the hero so to speak, is propelled into this adventure.

The purpose of my research is to use the model of the hero's journey, outlined by previous researchers in the context of heroic mythology and rites of passage, and apply this analysis as a theoretical framework in the exploration of similar processes in videogames and for members of gaming culture. The aim is to identify what transformative processes occur within the player during the experience of playing a videogame with heavy player involvement in the story's narrative. The game selected for this study is called *Mass Effect*. It is my belief that many videogames follow the hero's journey model, and that the experience of what occurs with the character within the videogame is a shared experience with the player. The experience of the game itself becomes the rite of passage, which initiates the player into certain sub-culture groups. Without the experience, the player is denied a place within these groups.

This research is important because of the growing impact gaming culture is having on not only our culture, but most cultures around the world. In the last decade it has become the dominant form of entertainment within developed nations. As will be discussed in the literature review, the hero's journey and rites of passage have numerous transformative

elements that impart information both socially and morally relevant to the individual and contribute in shaping them.

Background on Interactive Electronic Media

Before we can develop the theoretical framework in which to understand the user-game relationship, we first must understand key elements and principles within videogames. The term videogame though still used, is becoming less accurate as newer forms of electronic interaction break from the original objective based videogame model. Some modern interaction types no longer include a goal or final objective in the games structure. These “game’s” operate more like a medium of virtual social interaction. Because of this I use the term interactive electronic media (IEM), to encompass all electronic forms of entertainment which involve player actions facilitating a change within the game. The term videogame will still be used when talking more specifically about IEMs which still follow the objective based tasks with a definitive conclusion or ending.

As already stated, IEM has become a significant form of entertainment around the world. From early interactions with two dimensional Avatars such as Pac-Man or Pit Fall, to the more advanced interactions and complexities of today’s games, no one can doubt the impact IEM has had on the entertainment industry. As a Garner Inc report notes, the videogame industry earned 74 billion dollars in 2011, and is projected to increase its yearly earnings to 115 billion by 2015. This eclipses the next highest earning form of entertainment, Box Office movies, which earned 11.4 billion dollars in 2010 (Mccandless 2012).

The dominant growth of the industry mirrors the complexity of the IEM themselves.

Modern IEM encompass a number of interaction types, referred to as genres. Popular Genres include First Person Shooters (FPS), which involve the player interacting with the environment through the eyes of their avatar. Games such as *Call of Duty* and *Halo* are good examples of FPSs. FPS objectives typically center around the elimination of other players, or non player entities.

Another popular genre are Action Adventure games (AA), also referred to as platformers depending on the verticality of the environmental interactions. These games typically have the player viewing their avatar in third person, that is, they see their avatar fully represented on the screen. Popular games of this genre include *Uncharted*, *Tomb Raider*, and the numerous incarnations of the Mario Bros. franchise. These games normally have an objective of moving the avatar from one location to an objective location.

The last genre of note is Role Playing Games (RPGs). In a role playing game the player takes on the role of one or several characters. Interactions are more dialogue driven than the previous two genres, with an element of player choice normally found in how the game's content unfolds. RPGs have an experience mechanic, so as one progresses through the game their avatar or characters increase in skill, capability and unlock new abilities to better achieve in game objectives. In game perspective is more mutable than the previous genres. In some RPGs, such as the largely popular *Skyrim*, the player interacts with the game content in first person, much like a FPS. In another well known RPG, *Demon Souls*, player interaction is in third person.

These genres are in no way exhaustive. As the industry continues to mature new genres are developing, as well as niche specializations. A recent and popular game to hit the market *Angry Birds* defies traditional game genre, being classified as a puzzle game, however with numerous elements of classic platformers. This demonstrates that these definitions of genre are not concrete. Indeed today it is often hard not to see much genre overlap with regards to game content.

These narrowly defined genres are in the last six years becoming more hybridized. The game *Mass Effect* is an example of this hybridization, combining elements of these three genres. Despite this hybridization, in all these genres player choice has become a growing area of focus in their development. No longer are players the passive recipient of information, where they are led by-the-nose to and from objectives. Players have much more freedom to interact with in game entities, referred to as non-player characters or NPCs¹. They can largely choose in some cases, which objectives to pursue, and in what order to pursue them.

What this shift in player choice has done is to make game content more story driven. The story telling becomes central to the progress of the game. Objectives center around the advancement of the story. These game narratives have developed to the point where the cinematography and story flow rival, if not exceed (due to a lack of time constraints) Box Office movies. Players can become more emotionally invested in their avatar and NPCs than in movies because the line between passive observer and active participant is ambiguous.

¹ NPC's are in game personas; the people the avatar interacts with to obtain game objectives, and accrue or distribute resources. They are often involved in some degree in the game's plot; their interactions with each other or the avatar facilitating the advancement of the game's story.

It is this ambiguity which leads players to identifying, and sometimes incorporating the role of avatar into themselves. They become the avatar, feeling and experiencing the avatar's journey through its eyes. This interacting between player and avatar is paramount to my research because it is this synthesis which contributes to the player incorporating the experiences of the avatar as their own. Within the literature review I will explore research done in the field of psychology that gives evidence that IEMs are not only transformative, but also provides conditions which help facilitate these transforming effects. I will also examine and explain what a rite of passage is through the work of several anthropologists and folklorists. I will conclude the literature review with an explanation of the hero's journey model of a rite of passage. I will then analyze the game *Mass Effect* from the perspective of the hero's journey, to demonstrate that the game follows this model. In my methodology I will outline how I conducted my research, and provide qualitative evidence that players are incorporating the experiences of the avatar, are coming away with a common message and that the game initiates them into certain social groups.

Literature Review

Videogames as Transformative

Literature which focuses on IEM has dominantly been written by members of the psychology community. The focus has centered around behavioral changes (typically criminal) that occur within those who play videogames. Researchers at the University of Rochester explore the pros and cons of IEM. Violent videogames tend to increase aggressive behavior in individuals who play them. However, along with this there is an increase in perceptual attention skills. The ability of IEM to be utilized as a teaching tool of great promise was also expressed by members of the research team. They found that videogames are powerful tools in imparting information and emotion (Daphne Bavelier, et al. 2011).

Researchers at a north western US university examined Self-Concept Clarity and Flow with regards to video games and gamers (Aiken et al 2012). Self-Concept Clarity (SSC) is defined by Campbell et al (1996, pg 142) as "the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable." Those who have high SSC tend to be more independent, self assured and confident, whereas those with low SSC are more dependent and uncertain and ambiguous in trying to define who they are as a person. Those with low SSC look for external sources in which to seek an identity of self and videogames provide an excellent tool in which to build on one's SSC.

The other concept utilized in the study was flow. Flow is a state of mind where an individual achieves a level of maximum enjoyment and loses a sense of self awareness.

Occurrences such as time distortion, a loss of external sensory awareness not related to the IEM experience are typical of the flow state.

Aiken, Hung and Lee (2012) found that there was not a significant difference in the levels of SSC between gamers and non-gamers, however, it was found that those with low SSC among gamers typically engaged in more hours of gaming than high SSC gamers. They also found that as the amount of time played increased, so did the number of instances of flow.

What these two studies suggest is that IEM can create a sense of immersion where the player's identity and that of the avatar lose distinction. IEM is also capable of imparting information that is informative, emotional and moral in those who engage in IEM and affect socialization as well as one's self identity. This is relevant to my research because rites of passage and the hero's journey do precisely this.

Rites of Passage

I begin my examination of literature related to rites of passage and heroic journeys with Arnold Van Gennep. Van Gennep's work explored the transitions between stages of life. Van Gennep said that life is a series of passages from one stage in life to another. As one matures he/she pass from young child to young adult, and from young adult to adult. Each one of these transitions is marked by some sort of period of flux, where the individual is both his/her old status, as well as the new one. This transitory time is where the rite of passage occurs.

Van Gennep began his analysis with the initial separation, the event in which the individual leaves his/her old status and begins the transition towards the new one. Separation

can take many forms. The most obvious is terrestrial separation, where the individual physically moves to some other geographical location to begin the transition. An example of this would be a young military recruit going off to boot camp in order to transition from civilian to soldier.

However, this need not be the case, as in a wedding or *bar mitzvah* where the individual in a status transition is not changing geographical location. However, even within these events are periods of separation. The bride and groom within a wedding, or the young Jewish boy are separated from each other as well as the invited guests/community as preparation for the next phase of the rite of passage: the transition.

It is during the transition that the individual achieves the status change (Van Gennep 1960). It is during this period the military recruits learn how to use a rifle, is put through physical training to condition them into becoming a soldier. It is during this period that the bride and groom recite their wedding vows, or the Jewish boy reads from the Torah. In this period they have not achieved their new status, rather they are within the shift between the old status and the new.

The final component of the rite of passage is incorporation. It is at this point that the recruit becomes a soldier, is given his rank and assignment and joins the ranks of his fellow soldiers. Here is where the vows are complete and the couple is now man and wife, and the ceremony moves to the reception. And the Jewish boy is considered a man, and a celebration with peers, family, and friends takes place. In all examples of the rite of passage the individual's transition is completed through incorporation with the community. In this respect a rite of passage is always a communal event.

Victor Turner (1967) further develops the idea behind the transformative period between separation and incorporation. He calls this transitory period the liminality. It is within the liminality that the traditional world as it is understood breaks down. An individual's old status is irrelevant, and if the rite of passage is communal, prior status of the participants is irrelevant; all participants are at equal mercy to the events of the liminal.

It is during this time that the individual is most liberated from societal norms, he/she is malleable. They are capable of self exploration as they endure the trials typically associated with liminal period. College within our own society conforms to this aspect of liminality. The student leaves home to live on or near campus. They are no longer under the watchful eye of their parents, and are free to express and explore themselves. However, during this time they endure a set of trials: college courses. It is through these experiences they are shaped into who and what they will become.

Also during some liminal periods the world becomes distorted. Traditional cultures make use of several *Sacra* during the liminal. *Sacra* are ritual objects or costumes that often contain exaggerated features of monstrous quality (Turner 1967). These monster's purpose is to provide contrast between liminality and the mundane reality, and to stir thoughtful and provocative thinking on the part of the one being initiated. Monsters challenge your preconceived concept of the world, and force you to reflect on what you know and understand. If you place a man's head on a lion's body it may force you to think about the human head with a different light. Within the liminal everything is symbolic and viewed with an interpretive eye (Turner 1967).

Mircea Eliade (1958), working along a similar research track as Van Gennep, focuses on rites of initiation. Rites of initiation are virtually the same as a rite of passage, the difference being chiefly semantic, however, the focus is with the specific actions of joining a group, organization or fraternity. The change in status is less concerned with milestones of one's status in life, and more on the obtaining membership.

Eliade examines the mythological story of Sigmund, a hero to the Germanic peoples in pre-Christian Europe. Sigmund sets out with the goal of avenging the Volgunds, who were slain by his brother-in-law. In order to do this he must join the ranks of the bezerkers, ferocious warriors who feel no pain or fear. Like a rite of passage, he departs and hides in the woods within the home of his sister. Here he is eventually born a son by his sister. At age of 10, his son is tested by having his shirt sown on and ripped off. Showing no fear of pain the son passes his first trial. Sigmund and son set out to the home of two brothers who wear the skins of wolves and become wolves while doing so. Sigmund and his child find the wolf skins within the home and decide to put them on. They become wolves themselves and set out slaying their enemies as wolves, because they do not know how to remove the hides. After 10 days of battling the hides finally come off, and now is the point in which Sigmund is ready to seek his vengeance against his brother-in-law.

Here I see that the rite of initiation is often a journey, marked by a departure from the normal, into liminal period defined by Turner (1967). Within this liminal period the individual is tested, and experiences supernatural and strange events, often imparting power to the person

on the rite. He returns with this power or knowledge and is able to fulfill his task. It is only then, after he returns from his journey are they fit to join the ranks of other heroes.

The Hero's Journey

The three previous theorists incorporate the idea of a journey being involved in a rite of passage. This idea of the hero's journey is explored by Joseph Campbell (1968) in greater detail. In his analysis all would-be heroic journeys begin with the call to adventure. This is often unexpected and sometimes involves personal tragedy of some sort. The hero is ripped from what he knows and is set on the journey which will shape him. Often this call to adventure is initiated by the protagonist of the myth, the enemy that the hero eventually will need to overcome. This call to adventure is the departure in the rite of passage, the leaving of the known world and the entering into the strange and wondrous realm of the liminal.

The hero is often aided by powerful and supernatural agents. Sometimes a trickster will provide the hero with a magical boon in order to help him overcome his task. Other times it is a god or goddess. What is clear is that the hero goes on his journey alone (sometimes in the company of companions, but the burden is his alone), he does not do so without the tools required to complete his task.

Within the liminal the hero overcomes trials and adversity. The liminal is a sacred realm, the place of supernatural beings, gods and demons. Sometimes his path forward is blocked by a gate keeper, represented by one of these entities, who will not let the hero proceed until some requirement is met. This sometimes involves the collection of an item. Other times the hero

needs to demonstrate a quality of character the gatekeeper is looking for. Finally the gatekeeper himself is the trial the hero needs to defeat in order to proceed.

During the journey the hero eventually meets a lover of some sort. This usually occurs at a point in which the hero has just overcome some milestone in his journey, maybe he has found a revealing piece of information or defeated a gatekeeper opponent. This romantic interlude is both a reward and symbolic of the hero's mastery over life. The hero is capable of staving off death and insurmountable odds.

Romantic interests also take the form of tempters and temptresses. These beings aim to lead the hero off the path of adventure and into a position of complacency. When Ulysses is on the Isle of the witch, he temporarily abandons his quest for home and remains the lover and companion of the witch for a time. Despite these temptations, the hero eventually returns to the journey and his quest.

The final element of the journey before return and incorporation is the Apotheosis, the climax. This is the point in which the hero discovers what he needs to do in order to complete his journey. This can again be an item, such as the golden fleece sought by Jason, or critical information as in the childhood story of Rumpelstiltskin. Here is where the hero is fully transformed into the figure worthy of being called heroic.

The hero's return can be abrupt. As Campbell (1968) said, sometimes the hero is propelled back to the starting point of his journey nearly instantaneously through a supernatural means. Other times the hero does not wish to return or is incapable and the aid of another is required to bring him back. The journey back often is just as shocking and stunning

as the means of entering the liminal to begin with. The return is, like other elements of the journey, deeply symbolic, often representing a return from the realm of the divine, or the realm of the dead. In a sense when the hero returns it is a rebirth. The person who left is gone, and replacing him is the transformed hero, no longer merely a mortal man, but a liaison between the realms of sacred and profane.

The hero's journey is thus complete. He/she began as inexperienced or uninitiated, and through the processes and events within the liminality through the conclusion of the journey he/she is shaped into a new person. This new being is the embodiment of important ideals within the culture that the hero is from. This new identity carries with it the honors or prestige associated with it. The old status is gone forever. The young adult is no longer a child, he/she embodies the ideals of adulthood, and can never be a child again. The soldier is no longer a civilian, is the embodiment of honor and duty, and though he/she may leave the military he/she will never be an uninitiated civilian again.

Hypothesis

The aim of my research was to explore how the gamer avatar experience has the potential to alter the gamers' perception of themselves. I believe that IEM are modern day rites of passage, and have the same transformative effects as more traditional forms of passage. Within my thesis I will analyze the player/avatar experience as a modern day heroic journey. It is my belief that the processes of imparting and assimilating information within videogames mirrors the same processes that occur within the rite of passage of the hero's journey. The player, while within the medium of IEM leaves the world of the profane (reality) and upon engaging in IEM enters the realm of the liminal. It is here that the experiences of the player/avatar have a transformative effect, and upon completion of the IEM the player is reincorporated into reality changed by the experience. I will examine what these transformative changes are within the context of a specific game called Mass Effect.

Methodology

Analysis of Mass Effect as a Hero's Journey

In this study, the specific video selected for analysis is called Mass Effect. The game centers around the story of a central avatar named Commander Shepard. The game was selected for study because it aims for players to develop a personal attachment to their avatar. One has the ability to choose the avatar's sex, facial features, race, and class (class being a list of predefined skill sets that focus on particular elements of game play). This game has heavy player involvement in the decision making of Shepard, and the content of the game unfolds differently as a direct result of player choices. These features produce a synthesis of player and avatar creating an ideal environment of player involvement with the character to study.

I began my research by analyzing the content of Mass Effect, determining if the story follows the model of the hero's journey. This is important because it establishes if the avatar's interactions with the adventure are transformative, which is important in understanding if these transformations are being shared in any capacity with the player. I will provide some contextual background information as well to make things clear.

The background story of the game is that in the year 2148 humanity discovers the remains of an ancient alien race's outpost on Mars. This race, known as the protoheans, is long extinct, however, humanity is able to use the technology they left behind to greatly accelerate the development of human technology to the point where intergalactic exploration and colonization is possible.

Humanity and the other sentient species of the galaxy utilize a system of large devices called mass relays, which preexist the current civilizations of the galaxy. The mass relays utilize a principle known as the mass effect to accelerate a vessel to distant points all across the galaxy. Early on humanity ends up making contact with numerous alien species. Many of the species are part of loose affiliations, similar to our United Nations centered within a massive artificial world called the Citadel.

At the start of the game, humanity is seeking a place on the Council. The council is made of representatives of a select few races within the galaxy. It is the council which ultimately sets interstellar policy, and humanity wants to take a larger role within the galactic politics. This has put humanity at odds with many races. Humans are a relatively young interstellar race; at the point of the game only having entered into interstellar travel for a mere 30 years. Many species which have no representation on the council have possessed interstellar travel for centuries.

The call to adventure begins for Shepard on board the Normandy, an advanced Alliance vessel developed with the help of another race known as the turians. It is the ship's maiden voyage/shake down run. However, the crew and Shepard suspect something is amiss because on board is a turian Special Tasks and Reconnaissance agent(or Spectre for short) named Nilus. Spectres are elite agents, with unlimited jurisdiction within the galaxy and almost no limits or restraints on what they can do in pursuit of their tasks.

As in the case of the hero's journey, Shepard has the opportunity to refuse the call, lashing out that the Alliance and Council have no right to make this decision for him. Also, as

outlined in the hero's journey, despite Shepard's refusal, the calling is greater than the hero himself.

At this point an emergency distress is received from the colony the Normandy is heading to. The Normandy arrives on Eden Prime to find that it is under attack by a massive ship, which in appearance is reminiscent of a giant squid. Hundreds of artificially intelligent machine humanoids called the geth are systematically slaughtering the colonists looking for an ancient prothean beacon, an artifact which contains stored data.

In the course of the mission on Eden Prime Nilus is murdered by another turian Spectre named Saren. Saren is working with the geth to find the beacon. Saren reaches the beacon before Shepard and accesses it. Saren then attempts to have the colony destroyed, and with it the beacon, using a timed nuke. However, Shepard prevents this from happening. After securing the beacon Shepard inadvertently triggers the beacon. He is shown visions of destruction and death at the hands of an ancient machine intelligence known as the reapers. The vision is so intense it renders Shepard unconscious.

The beacon and Nilus's death combined to force Shepard on the journey. The beacon, with its arcane and supernatural appearance is a magical boon, which imparts knowledge of the impending doom if the hero does not act. Captain Anderson takes the Normandy and its crew to the Citadel, the heart of galactic government. There Shepard attempts to prove that Saren, a council Spectre, is working with the geth to bring back the reapers. However, having no evidence other than testimony the Council dismisses Shepard's accusations. This low point is (missing something)

While on the Citadel Shepard meets several helpers, people with particular skills who can help him on his journey. One of them provides Shepard with information linking Saren to the geth. With this knowledge Shepard again confronts the Council who recognize that Saren is indeed working with the geth, however, they do not believe in the imminent return of the reapers.

In order to gather his proof, and to track down Saren the Council initiates Shepard into the ranks of the Spectres, granting him the power and resources he'll need on his journey. In this capacity the council acts as the supernatural guide. Shepard is also granted the *Normandy*, another boon, as his ship with which to pursue Saren. The Council also provides Shepard three locations to begin his search for Saren and Saren's plot. It is in this capacity that the council serves the role of mentor and guide. This theme of guidance being provided by the council will continue throughout the game.

It is at this point that Shepard crosses the first threshold. Armed with the knowledge provided by the beacon, the resources of a Spectre (provided by the council), and the ship *Normandy*, Shepard finally enters the traverse, leaving the familiar world, entering into the journey and liminality.

As in the hero's journey, a series of trials awaits Shepard in the traverse. Exploring the three worlds suggested to Shepard by the council provides both insights and tests of Shepard's resolve. On one world he meets Liara, a non-human female with knowledge of the protheans. She fulfills the capacity of the goddess as detailed by Campbell. Her species has the ability to link minds with others. It is through the union of her thoughts and Shepard's that clarity of

what Shepard saw in the vision is achieved. It is also through understanding the peril which not only humanity, but all intelligent life in the galaxy faces that Shepard begins to display reverence and love for life- human and non.

Thru these trials Shepard discovers that Saren is searching for the Conduit, which is key to facilitating the return of the reapers. At this point the council, Shepard's mentors, return with information that Saren has some sort of facility on the planet Virmire. On Virmire Shepard confronts the father figure in the form of Sovereign, the name of the massive ship which attacked Eden Prime. Here Shepard learns that Sovereign is not a ship but an actual reaper. Sovereign reveals that the reapers return every time galactic civilization reaches a certain level of advancement. They systematically wipe out all advanced intelligent life, sparing non-space faring civilizations. These cycles of extinction have been occurring for millions if not billions of years. Sovereign conveys the inevitability and hopelessness of resistance. Sovereign and by extension the reapers hold the power of life and death over not only Shepard, but all intelligent life. Through the confrontation with Sovereign Shepard gains access to another Prothean beacon, which reveals the location of the Conduit on a planet called Ilos. This is the boon Shepard needs to complete his journey and stop the return of the reapers. At this point Shepard's transformation is not complete, he lacks the conduit and complete understanding of what is occurring both within his mind from contact with the prothean beacons and how the conduit and Saren fit into the return of the reapers.

The final test for Shepard on the planet Virmire occurs when he is confronted by Saren. After a brief battle Saren flees after knowledge of a bomb planted by Shepard's comrades is

going to destroy the facility. At this point two of Shepard's crew are trapped and Shepard only has time to rescue one of them. This choice changes Shepard, he becomes even more driven by a need for vengeance. Though the hero has not died, some part of him was left behind on Virmire.

Shepard returns to the citadel to seek the resources of the council, specifically a small fleet to attack the planet Ilos and take the conduit from whatever forces Saren has. However, when Shepard returns his ship is grounded and is taken off the mission. The council believes that since Saren's facility on Virmire has been destroyed, the threat Saren poses is now inconsequential.

Shepard eventually escapes from the Citadel with his crew and the Normandy and heads to Ilos to stop Saren. To get to Ilos Shepard must use the Mu Relay, which is in a section of space called the terminus systems. Passing into the terminus systems is the symbolic death of the hero because these systems are known to be dangerous and many ships from Citadel space never return.

On the planet Ilos Shepard meets a gatekeeper, a prothean artificial intelligence which reveals the nature of the conduit. It is a miniaturized mass effect relay connected to the citadel. The citadel itself is a giant mass effect relay linked to Dark Space (the area between galaxies) where the reapers dwell waiting for the next extinction cycle. Saren wants to use the conduit as a backdoor, allowing him to gain access to the Citadel controls and After imparting this final piece of knowledge the artificial intelligence lets Shepard continue onto the final part of the journey: the return.

Shepard uses the conduit, which sends him back to the citadel. The conduit is the magical flight in which the hero returns from the journey with the knowledge to complete his task: stopping the reapers. Sovereign with a fleet of geth ships attacks the Citadel at the same time that Saren uses the back door to gain control of the Citadel controls. Shepard confronts Saren, and if willing, provides Saren a chance to redeem himself. Regardless of the choice Shepard defeats Saren, who has been a puppet for Sovereign. The killing of Saren weakens Sovereign, which allows the arriving reinforcing human fleets to defeat Sovereign and the geth.

Shepard has returned, he has saved the citadel and galactic civilization. In doing so he has become changed by the experience, fortified with knowledge that the universe is more dangerous than imagined. He has faced the symbol of death, the reapers, and come away alive, and in doing so able to live. He has mastered both the visions in his mind and the threats which were presented in the traverse. This journey is complete, however, Shepard knows that the threat of the reapers is still out there, and he must still convince a complacent galaxy of this threat.

Data Collection Methods

Drawing upon the methodology of cultural anthropology my research data are derived from participant observation field notes and semi-structured interviews with six players. This human subjects research was approved by the Institutional Review Board. Participant observation was used because it has the advantage of experiencing first-hand the particular event studied, complete with context, and emotions invoked. As a participant observer I played through the game myself, and observed another player play through the game.

I played the game *Mass Effect* myself in order to gather my thoughts feelings and experiences within the game and to determine if I the researcher shared in similar experiences as the participant and to understand the participants point of view during interviews. This is important in order to understand the context of what is said within interviews, and to try and understand the perspective of the player first hand. My complete play thru of *Mass Effect* took approximately 22 hours, split into 5 sessions.

I observed the participant, who was male, age 24 and a student at the University of Northern Iowa before a play thru of *Mass Effect*. This is to ensure a baseline for comparison. I watched for elements of transformation as the participant played through the game, asking him to express his thoughts and feelings during observation. I minimized my own discussion while the participant was playing, hoping to increase the opportunities for flow to occur. I recorded observations during game play, and encouraged the player at the end of the session to freely talk about what most stood out in his mind, his feelings towards NPCs, his goals for the next session, and generally how he felt about the game and it's story. It took the participant approximately 24 hours to complete the game, broken down into 3-6 hour sessions spread out over 8 days.

Interviews with six individuals were conducted. The age range for participants was between 18 and 36. 5 individuals interviewed were male, 1 female. The gaming experience of all participants was varied, between 4 to 14 years, however all participants began playing videogames between the ages of 12 to 14. The 5 male participants were Caucasian of European descent. The single female participant is of self described mixed Italian and native American

decent. Recruitment of participants was initially done on facebook through the University of Northern Iowa's facebook page. From there I found it advantageous to use snowballing to recruit the remaining participants for the research. Each interview took between 30 and 50 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Findings

Analyzing my observations and interview transcripts most participants' responses were consistence along four major themes: The message the player derives from the game, the events in the game that most potently stand out in the player's memory and the impact of player decision making in the game, the relationship between the player and their avatar Commander Shepard, the player's relationship with others who've played the game Mass Effect.

Game message

Most participants indicated that it was the dual messages of the potential of humanity, and individuals to achieve greatness. The game gives them a sense that individuals have the potential to make great changes, and that individual determination can lead to the betterment of all. Specific examples along this theme include one participant saying:

In the first game that first moment of recognition that humanity and Shepard are to join the big leagues... I think it gives you that sense that you've earned your place your role in the galaxy.

Another participant responded the following way:

I think it's important to strive to be the best that you can be... One person is capable of great changes, is capable of doing a lot more than just one person might think they would be able to do.

Another participant initially said there was no message he derived from the game, however, during interview they said the following:

I guess if there was a message I was to take from that game as a whole is to just have the attitude of never give up and keep trying your best and always have the will to do what you can to make things better.

All players came away with this same message, despite what decisions they made throughout the game. This common message is the transformation which occurs for the player within the game. The player comes away from the game with this sense that people can make a difference, carrying it with them to other experiences.

Memorable Moment and Decision Making

When asked: what was the most memorable moment within the game, three of the participants responded that the decision between which character (NPC) to save was what most stood out in their mind. Some context is needed to understand this. Within the game, the avatar Shepard and his crew are on a planet where they have just armed a bomb to destroy a facility being utilized by the games villain. One member of your crew, a male, is unable to escape the blast radius of the explosion because he is trapped by the enemy. Another member of your crew, a female, is injured and unable to safely escape. You (the player) are left with not enough time to rescue both crew members and are forced to make a decision on whom to save

One participant said the following:

I think the most memorable moment was on Virmire, when you were forced to choose between saving Kaiden or saving Ashley and you have to basically have to make that decision of one of these two was going to die. One of these two has to die so which one am I going to save? And which one ah ah essentially I am going to kill... you really have the feeling of yes: I am saving one of them but I'm sentencing the other one to death.

Another participant said the following:

I was mad at Ashley at the time so I left Ashley, but after I cooled down a little bit and realized she wasn't killing Rex (for her own amusement), she's just doing her job then it became a real difficult decision of I like Kaiden for the fact that he is a bit more complex, he's not you know, he doesn't have the tortured back story but he's really up beat, he's a super nice guy and then you kinda talk to him about everything he's been through and its kinda surprising that he's held it all together...but with Ashley she's like the diehard; seen her whole platoon die and she's just right there fighting you know? And her grandpa was the only human to ever surrender a planet so she's been blacklisted this whole time and she still fights on.

The participant I observed playing the game took approximately three minutes to decide who to save in this situation. He used criteria such as the function the member of the crew served, memory of previous interactions with that character, which influenced his preference for them, and finally the sex of the crewmember to determine who to save. The last criteria is interesting in that all the male participants in the study chose to save the female crew member, including myself.

Other difficult decisions included one made towards the end of the game, where the player has to decide whether to send arriving reinforcing ships to help save the council, or to commit them to attacking the reaper Sovereign. Players were split between saving the Council or reinforcing the attack on Sovereign.

The final difficult decision mentioned by participants involved the discovery of the last member of an insectoid species called the Rachni, who in the past waged a war of conquest with the rest of the galaxy. Here, the player has to decide whether to let this “queen” live, thus ensuring the survival and eventual resurgence of the species, or destroy her completing the genocide of an entire species. Players were split on this decision, with half favoring sparing the queen, and half choosing to slay her.

The common theme is that each one of these difficult decisions is involved in a life or death scenario, and players universally weight such decisions greater, and prioritize them more often. This decision making process lends evidence that the players are experiencing instances of immersion because of the use of real life criteria with in-game decisions.

Identifying With the Avatar

When I asked how participants identified with the main character, Shepard, the major theme that came up was the decision making. Participants felt they identified with Shepard because every decision was in their control. Evidence for this includes the following responses:

Yes because you know I am making those choices, I especially with my first play though I was able to go through and say ok, what would I do here what would I say.

You basically from the beginning you decide what type of background you have and stuff like that, you make (a) connection from the get go and you kind of go through the story of him becoming the story of Shepard, so you’re connected right off the bat cuz you’re making the decisions from the get go.

Another important theme with players identifying with Shepard was their feeling that Shepard represented an idealized form of themselves. Some participants expressed a sentiment

that they could not meet the potential that Shepard represented. The following quote illustrates this:

I've never been put into that situation I don't know necessarily how I would do...I don't know if I would be able to perform to the standards, but then again that is why I'm playing the game so that I can put myself into those shoes

As noted above, even though the player felt that he was not up to the same caliber as the avatar at performing the requirements of the mission, because he had control of the avatar and how actions and choices unfolded, he was "in those shoes," in control of the situation and connected.

Sharing the Experience

The last discussion theme relates to how playing *Mass Effect* affected how the participants related with others who have played it and with others who have not. Most participants said that they have a lot in common with those who have played *Mass Effect*. They felt that the game probably appeals to a certain demographic and thus similarities between players make sense. A common discussion point between players of *Mass Effect* is the variation of choices each player makes. Three participants sum up the experience with other players as follows:

I've experiences waiting in line for the second (game) and waiting in line for the third one... of sitting in a line with total strangers who you've never met and everybody had their own *Mass Effect* story and their own version of *Mass Effect*, that's the really cool thing.

It really does (give you something to share), I mean it because it got all of the options and different choices. When talking with other people who've played the game you can, you know, talk about the consequences of this or that favorite moment. it really kind of evolves the discussion more into a "you know what happens when this?", or "what happens after you do this?" for these people.

You can just sit and chat with a total stranger for a long time. Just going back and forth about what you liked and how you enjoyed it, what you did. I think the really nice thing is seeing the differences between your Shepard and theirs.

Several participants said that much of the focus of discussion about the game with other gamers was around morally difficult decisions. Participants said that probing questions as to the moral rationale of other players' decisions provided hours of debate and often was revealing about the criteria their fellow players use to make moral decisions. In the following quote, one player talked about when his friends first got Mass Effect how he felt excluded from conversation and socializing.

Yeah so people I knew were talking about it, and I hadn't played it yet you know? So I was not part of the conversation for months... I got pressured from everyone to get the game...I felt like I wasn't part of the group until I picked it (the game) up.

Without the experience of playing Mass Effect, the above participant could not engage with his peer group in certain discussions and activities. Like other rites of passage, without the experience of the rite he remained uninitiated and could not participate in certain activities. He was also socially pressured to play the game, which demonstrates the importance the experience was to his peers.

Discussion

The participants identify with the character of Shepard through the ability to choose the avatars biological sex, biological affinity, features and several aspects of his past. Having the control to make critical decisions throughout game play effectively allows the player to own these decisions, they are his manifested through the avatar.

This control of decisions facilitates greater instances of flow and the synthesis between the player and the avatar, making the experiences of the avatar a shared experience with the player. This is readily apparent with the tough, critical decisions that need to be made during game play. Like the avatar, the player finds these decisions difficult. This was most poignant with the decision of which NPC to save from the imminent explosion on Virmire. Every interviewee, the participant and the researcher indicated that this was the most difficult decision of the game. Life and death decisions are not made lightly or necessarily easily, and even though all participants in this research indicated that they empirically knew the scenario presented within the game was fictitious, as were the NPCs whose lives hung in the balance, they still wrestled with the decision using criteria we might use if this were a real scenario.

Since the avatar Shepard experiences the hero's journey through the game's story, and the player makes these critical decisions for the avatar, this allows them to share in Shepard's experience. The player is incorporated into the journey. The journey becomes the players, experienced through the medium of the avatar. When Eden Prime is attacked, the player leads the effort to save the colony. When in the traverse (the galaxy), the player decides which planets to explore in their search for a means of stopping the villains Saren and Sovereign.

When Shepard returns with the means to stop the villains, it is the player who decides how best to accomplish defeating the villains.

This experience is transformative as stated by Tuner. The player comes away with dual moral messages of how much a difference individuals can make and the potential greatness of mankind. These messages and experiences, like other experiences, shape the players facilitate their development of a greater degree of self concept clarity.

The completion of the game Mass Effect gives the player something to share with others who've played through and experienced the game. In this way videogames are a rite of passage and rite of initiation as defined by Van Gennep and Eliade. Those who've played Mass Effect have been through the phases of the rite proxy to the avatar and have been initiated into the ranks of those who've experienced the game and are able to participate in discussions with the community of players who make up Mass Effects fan base. This is similar to the experiences of players in other videogame communities such as World of Warcraft (Brignall 2007). Without particular experiences of certain events the player is left uninitiated, unable to be taken seriously or participate in certain activities or discussions.

Limitations

It is very possible that the small sample size is reflective of only these individuals and the results cannot be projected to a population at large. This is further compounded by the use of snowballing in recruiting participants. It could be that the results only reflect a limited local community of gamers.

The use of a single game also limits whether the results can be applied to videogames in general. It is possible that the results could be a product of the specific game utilized during research and that the results cannot be applied more broadly.

Participation has the potential for unwanted bias to enter into interpretations. I found myself caring for the well-being of the NPCs who followed me (Shepard), and I weighed the decisions as I would weigh similar decisions in life. It is entirely possible for a player to engage the game with a level of ambivalence and disregard for the consequences of their decisions. Though research needs to be done, I would speculate in these cases that the player is experiencing few if any instances of flow, constantly and critically aware that the experience is merely a game.

This ambivalence was apparent with second and third play-thrus discussed by participants. After completing the experience of the game once, their sense of wonder and exploring the unknown was over. A subsequent play thru of the game became almost a clinical exploration of the game's content. Much like reading a novel a second time, you may encounter things forgotten, or missed but the sense of entering the unknown is no longer there.

Further Research

A larger sample size from a broader demographic would allow for more definitive conclusions and limit sample bias in the results. Also with a larger sample size the particular nuances of specific demographic groups might become more apparent. Could women or men experience the hero's journey within a video game differently? Does a difference in age play a factor in how the player interprets the experiences within the game?

The next step which could be taken is to replicate the study using different video games. Could other story and decision driven games have a similar effect? Also, examining the effect of games where players have little to no influence on the decisions of the game would be worth examining. It is entirely possible that decision making has little effect in the shared experience between player and avatar.

If video games are found to have a transformative effect broadly within a population then experimental research may be utilized in determining the effectiveness of using video games as a learning tool. There are examples of interactive electronics being used as secondary tools for education now, however, with further research video games might be utilized as a primary form of education.

Conclusions

Rites of passage have existed in various incarnations throughout human history. It is through the rite of passage that a person's status within a community or social group is changed. The rite is transformative, shaping the individual through the process of the experience. Modern video games meet these criteria of a rite of passage. Videogames have demonstrated that they can shape individuals by increasing their self concept clarity. Videogames are also capable of imparting moral messages to the player.

My study demonstrates how *Mass Effect* is a modern rite of passage that follows the model of the hero's journey presented by Joseph Campbell (1968). The story follows a Commander Shepard and his journey to save the galaxy. The player is involved in every step of this journey, making every critical decision, making this journey their own. This helps the player

to identify with the avatar, which facilitates the experiences of the avatar being a shared experience with the player. Like other rites of passage, which are transformative and informative, the player during game play comes away with two messages: the difference individuals can make in the world and the shared greatness and potential for humanity.

Ultimately completion of the game initiates the player into the community of gamers who make up the fan base of Mass Effect. Those who do not complete the rite cannot participate in certain discussions or social interactions. This is apparent with one participant feeling he had to play the game so he could feel included. Without playing the game the player remains uninitiated and not part of the community.

Research like this is important in helping understand how moral messages are being informed to today's youth. It also shows how videogames are able to form social groups. I expect this trend will continue, especially as IEM continues to become a larger and more dominant form of entertainment globally.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

1. Describe your favorite aspects of the game Mass Effect?
2. What was the most memorable thing about the game?
3. What decisions did you find difficult to make during the game?
4. Did you identify with the character of Shepard, if so, how?
5. Does/did Mass Effect give you something you could share with other people who've played it?
6. Has Mass Effect in any way changed your experience with subsequent videogames?
7. Do you identify yourself as a gamer? If so what is a gamer in your own words?
8. Do you feel that you have more in common with others who have played Mass Effect than others who have not?
9. What was the climax of the game for you?
10. At the conclusion of the game, did you come away with a sense of completion/fulfillment?
11. Was there any message you felt Mass Effect conveyed? If yes, what was that message?