

21st Century Soul Guides: Leveraging Myth and Ritual for Game Design

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes its departure from the observation that myth and ritual once served the important psychological function of helping us come to grips with the Givens of Existence: death, isolation, freedom of choice, and meaninglessness. It explains the transformational and meaning-generating power of myth from an existential, archetypal and depth psychology perspective and proposes games as potent vehicles for myth in the 21st century. It provides suggestions on how game designers can become modern Soul Guides by accessing their unconscious to birth viable symbols and create emotionally resonating experiences for others, and how they can glean inspiration from different types of rituals to inform mythic gameplay experiences that can contribute to a meaningful life.

Keywords

Game design, myth, ritual, existentialism, psychotherapy

INTRODUCTION

This paper asks how we can make games that contribute to a meaningful life. We are approaching this question from an existential perspective. According to existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom, the human experience is characterized by anxiety, stemming from the Givens of Existence or Ultimate Concerns: death (life is finite), freedom (we have to make choices and it is unclear what they should be based on), existential isolation (we are all ultimately alone in this universe), and meaninglessness (life has no inherent meaning, we have to find our own) (Yalom, 1980, pp.8-9). We know from Victor Frankl (1984) that finding some overarching meaning in life is one of human's deepest motivations. We believe games can help in that regard.

Note that this paper does not claim to be a recipe for the design of meaningful or transformative games. Also, the games envisioned here are not meant to be psychotherapy, and the kind of impact they might have is so complex and personal, it should not be expected to be measurable (see Paolo Pedercini's "Making Games in an F*** Up World", 2014). Rather, this paper is a passionate call for game designers to envision themselves as 21st century Soul Guides (a concept that will be explained in more detail shortly) and to draw on myth and ritual as inspiration sources for the design of games that can contribute to a meaningful life. We will explain the function of myth from an existential, archetypal and depth psychology perspective and how games' particular characteristics make them powerful modern vehicles for mythical engagement. We will pay particular attention to different types of rituals and how

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they can inspire symbolical gameplay actions that reinforce a games' mythical content.

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

The intersections between myth, ritual, games have been investigated and charted by the giants the field of game studies is based on: Huizinga (1970), Caillois (1958), Turner (1967; 1982), Sutton-Smith (1997) (Schechner 1985; 2003; 2006) etc. However, most of this research is anchored in anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. Our focus requires adding a psychological and spiritual perspective to the investigation of myth and ritual. Beyond structural characteristics of these forms or their function in society, we are particularly interested in myth and ritual as personal tools for addressing existential questions and enabling meaning making. Sebastian Möhring makes a case for the a-priori existential nature of games, due to them revolving around existential themes such as struggle, war, love and failure. His argument, though, actually de-emphasizes games' potential to deliberately shed light on the human condition or reconcile players with the Givens of Existence, as he posits that existential concepts are inherent in the structural characteristics of games through spatial representation and conflict, and thus nothing special. This perspective is aligned with many play theorists' view on play as an existential activity, inherent to being human and an essential part of the human condition. Möhring (2013) provides a great overview of play theorists' and existential philosophers' take on play, drawing on Huizinga, Sutton-Smith, Fink, Gadamer, Sartre and Heidegger, elaborating on the notion that play is a pre-cultural, existential phenomenon that is inseparably linked to the human condition and the desire to stay alive. He states: "[...] one has to say that computer games always already embody the human condition in that they show essential existential structures such as caring, fear and spatiality." (p. 296).

We concur with Möhring that there is a natural relationship between games and their portrayal of salient aspects of the human condition through their existential structures. However, if games ubiquitously embody existentialism, this quality becomes invisible. Like the water is invisible to the fish. It doesn't lend itself to deliberate exploration or insight. This might be contradicting Janet Murray's (1997) view on games as symbolic dramas that allow us to enact our basic relationship with the world. This view is most famously exemplified in her interpretation of *Tetris* (Pajitnov, A. and Pokhilko, V., 1984): "Tetris allows us to symbolically experience agency over our lives. It is a kind of rain dance for the postmodern psyche, meant to allow us to enact control over things outside our power." (p.144). But how often is *Tetris* played by players blissfully unaware of its symbolic potential? We seek out games for the experiences they afford and their symbolic structures may have a lot to do with our choices – shooters to experience potent, targeted action to counter our powerlessness and the chaos of everyday life; tower defense games as ways to enact preparedness and keeping the sea at bay; puzzle platformers as enactments of finding our way on the bumpy / patchy road of life – but how aware are we of our underlying motivations to play these games and how much do these games truly help us navigate feelings of chaos, powerlessness and confusion beyond immediate gameplay, in a way that informs how we live life? If we want to make games that contribute to a meaningful life and allow players to ponder the Givens of Existence, banking on the always already existential qualities of games doesn't seem enough, or every gamer would already be a master of the art of living meaningfully.

This is why we propose drawing on myth. Previous research on the role of myth (and ritual) in games emphasized myth's social, cultural, narrative, or aesthetic function: how mythology can inform quests and a sense of world-ness (Krzywinska, 2006; Howard, 2008); how players of role playing games use ritual like performances to

enter and exit game-spaces and construct their identities (Copier, 2005); how they create their own mythologies based on their adventures together, fulfilling myth's social function as a vehicle of "belonging to a tribe" (Cragoe, 2016; Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008); and how aesthetic choices such as lighting in games can increase the symbolical signification of game objects and contributing to a sense of the mythical (Fernandez Ruiz, Niedenthal and Armenteros, 2013).

What we have not come across in all this insightful work, though, is an exploration of the psychological or spiritual function of myth in games, particularly in regards to navigating the Ultimate Concerns. The research most closely aligned with our undertaking, is an article by Velázquez, Soares and Mendes. Their paper "Technology in Games. Myth as Encouragement to Experience the Real" (2015) is similarly positioned in a psychological discourse of mythology that emphasizes myth's potential for emotional resonance that sparks a desire for change in real life. Their argument is purely theoretical, however, with little regard for application to game design and more targeted towards education than Inner Work.

WHY MYTH?

There are many theoretical debates about what myth is, what characterizes it and what function it serves as an aesthetic, socio-cultural or psychological phenomenon. In her book *The Magic Mirror* (1996), Elizabeth M. Baeten's analyzes the four main theories on myth by Cassirer, Barthes, Eliade and Hillman and states that they "could hardly be more different in terms of fundamental assumptions." (p.17). Our approach to myth is informed by archetypal, existential and depth psychology. Existential psychologist Rollo May (1991) states: "A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world" (p.15). This corresponds to Campbell's (2004) view on myth as a vehicle to "reconcile consciousness to the preconditions of its own existence; that is to say, the nature of life." (p.3). On a less cosmic and more personal level, myth establishes communication between our thinking and our feeling selves. When that communication is broken, we are out of sync with our purpose and who we truly are. Life – despite achievements – feels lackluster at best and meaningless at worst because it lacks congruency. Our true selves might surface "during dreams; reveries; bodily feelings; play; passion; slips of the tongue; ritualistic behavior; and spontaneous music making, dance, writing, drawing, and painting." (Larsen, 1996, pp.xv-xvi). But these sporadic, spontaneous messages from the soul – if not cultivated and further investigated – are not enough to point the way to our true north, to a meaningful life. Myth amplifies those messages. It works through emotional resonance with our deeper selves. When the right myth comes along, it speaks directly to the unconscious through its archetypes, symbols and metaphors. "Living mythological symbols may be thought of as "affect images" (Campbell, 1972, p. 89) that bypass surface analytical cognition and talk directly to the deeper intuitive and emotional layers of intelligence." (Horton-Parker and Shelton, 1996).

Myth doesn't just hold up a mirror, though. It also provides "pathways to bliss" (Campbell, 2004) – actual guidelines, albeit encrypted, on how to navigate the Unknown Forest of our inner worlds. Myth is more than mere story. It is story "created by powerful and mysterious inner processes." (Bonnet, 2006, p.4). These inner processes spring from a model of the human psyche, which has been developed over thousands of years of telling and retelling stories that shed light onto the human condition, into the potentials, pitfalls and procedures of personal transformation. Mythic narratives are narratives in which motivations and conflicts come from within, they spring from the psyche, even if they are conveyed through metaphors that look like external things. Their true meaning is still an internal process. (Kirmayer, 1999).

When a myth resonates – when we recognize ourselves in the little girl with the matches, that lights one after the other in the bitter winter cold without ever receiving sustaining warmth until we're all burnt out and internally dead – we wake up to our inner voice, we start paying attention and we begin to wonder: “what if...?” This is the magic that sets transformation in motion. As C.G. Jung put it: “The auditor experiences some of the sensations but is not transformed. Their imaginations are stimulated: they go home and through personal fantasies begin the process of transformation for themselves.” (Bonnett, 2006, p.27). They seek out a more nourishing environment, they start saying “NO!” and “YES, more of THAT”, they start living more congruently, authentically, meaningfully.

WHY GAMES?

If myths are so great, what do we need games for? For one, myths do not permeate society the way they used to. Larsen (1996) states that myths – once corner stones of collective meaning making – have become disintegrated and replaced by science, laws, religious doctrine and social customs. What has enjoyed great popularity in recent years, however, are videogames! We believe there is an opportunity to bring myth into the 21st century through games, and to provide new kinds of mythical experiences to new audiences. Campbell (2004) explains one function of mythology as games people play: “how to make believe you're doing thus and so. Ultimately, through the game, you experience that positive thing which is the experience of being-in-being, of living meaningfully.” (p.6). Campbell is speaking of games metaphorically: when hearing / reading the story, we pretend we're in it, we pretend we're the hero, and we look at the world through his / her eyes and through experiencing their trials and triumphs, we gain clarity of what we want in our own lives and what we must do. But we can just as well understand Campbell's statement literally: games allow people to explore new ways of acting and being - of "owning" the myth in a manner not previously possible in non-interactive, linear media. In a game, we can literally act upon the world and experience the consequences to our actions in a first hand, embodied fashion and through projective identities (Gee, 2003). Games' existential structures map well onto themes of the human condition and fundamental transformational processes. Games free us from social norms and conventions and allow experimentation with those norms. They are – similar to the rites of passage analyzed by anthropologist van Gennep and written about by Turner (1967) – “liminal spaces”; spaces of in-between-ness or inter-structural situations (p.46). They exist within a magic circle in which the rules of everyday life are suspended and for a while new rules apply, power dynamics can be reversed, and you're free to be someone else. Note that we are not proposing a simplistic media effects argument of “whatever you get to do in the game, you will want to do in real life”. We argue that by engaging in different fictions, performing symbolical actions and playing new roles in myth-infused games, we can experience a deep emotional resonance that allows us to see life with fresh eyes and ignite the desire for personal change.

LEVERAGING MYTH FOR GAME DESIGN

There are a myriad of games out there that borrow heavily from mythology, e.g. *God of War* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2005), *Darksiders* (THQ Nordic, 2010), *Apotheon* (Alientrap, 2015), *Dante's Inferno* (Electronic Arts, 2010) etc.. Do they all contribute to a meaningful life? Well, you never can tell what someone gets out of a game (especially due to the a-priori existential nature of all games), but if a player has a profound aha!-moment while hack 'n slashing gods and mythical beasts, it might be more to their credit than it is to the game's. In these titles, myth mostly serves as a backdrop to conventional gameplay action, activating the amygdala rather than the soul. The characters might be Gods, the setting might be some kind of mythical

realm, but rather than being insightful, evocative portrayals of inner processes or vehicles for life's wisdom, these games emphasize action experiences, often with exchangeable fictional skins.

Games like *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012) in which players are thrown into the valley of life without a map or explanation, have to find their own way and are invited to contemplate the nature and value of relationships as well as their own (in)significance in the greater scheme of things; *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005), in which the player kills nature guardians (=colossi) in order to revive a dead lover and faces the consequences of trying to cheat death, or *Never Alone* (E-Line Media and Upper One Games, 2014), in which the player plays as the Inupiaq girl Nuna that draws on the inter-generational wisdom of her tribe to discover the source of a mysterious blizzard which destroyed her village – these games are mythical in a very different way. The two main distinguishing characteristics that warrant further investigation in future work, and which we can only briefly introduce here are 1) they possess a “soul guiding” quality and 2) they de-emphasize game structure for the sake of contemplation.

“Soul Guiding” Quality

By “soul guiding quality” we mean that these kinds of mythic games intentionally act as conduits between the waking consciousness of “Ordinary Reality” and the hidden reality of the “Other Worlds” – the world of the unconscious. Simply put: re-establishing communication between the “upstairs” and the “down below” can guide the soul towards its truth and towards living meaningfully. Our understanding of the elusive and mysterious notion of “soul” and its workings is informed by the writings of archetypal psychologist James Hillman. In his book “The Soul’s Code” (1996), Hillman introduces the acorn theory, a myth that focuses our attention away from hereditary or social factors that coin our personality, and reorients us towards the idea that we are born with a character that has its own, unique truth imprinted upon it – just like the oak is already inscribed in the acorn. However, we don’t know what this truth is, as we forget all about it in the process of our souls traveling to earth. We are being born without conscious knowledge of who we are or what we are supposed to do. Yet, our soul-companion – our daimon – remembers. The daimon lives deep in the unconscious and our job in life is to hear its whispers and heed what they are telling us about our deeper truth. You may notice how neatly the acorn theory aligns with the purpose of myth as pathways to bliss as described by Campbell and discussed above.

What contributes to the soul-guiding quality of games? As Joseph Campbell stated: “Myths derive from the visions of people who have searched their own most inward world.” (2004, p.24). Game designers who delve deep into their own selves – or draw on others who have done so (e.g. the elders of the Inupiaq people who informed *Never Alone*) – and create games that express what lies beneath with the intent of bringing it to awareness for conscious contemplation, fulfill a soul-guiding role. Through modeling these dramatic “underworlds”, they allow players to ponder the realities these worlds are governed by, thus facilitating an exploration of how those realities might relate to their own: do they treasure their lives and the encounters they make along the way (*Journey*)? What is their take on death and accepting it as a natural part of existence (*Shadow of the Colossus*)? Do they experience a sense of belonging to a community and connectedness to their environment, and how does that help them navigate outer and inner ice deserts (*Never Alone*)?

Game designers as 21st century soul guides cultivate self-awareness. Understanding their own unconscious is the first step to understanding the unconscious of their

society and forging imagery, symbolisms and archetypal structures that hit the nerve of the time. Here are some starting points for self-exploration tools. Some of the most useful techniques were developed by Krippner and Feinstein. They designed a course at Saybrook University for psychology students that was then turned into two books which provide practical exercises to leverage dreams, imagination and ritual to uncover the myths and archetypal patterns at work in our lives (Krippner and Feinstein, 1988; 1997). Robert Moss' book *Dreamgates* (1998) has helped with dream incubation as a way to access the unconscious. Game designers interested in crafting mythical content can also benefit from creative writing tools such as Bonnet's *Stealing Fire from the Gods* (2006). The book is based on the idea of the "golden paradigm" – the psychological model underlying myth – which provides guidelines on how to identify the archetypal patterns that underlie personal transformation. Conner's *Writing Down Your Soul* (2008) and Jone's *Way of Story* (2004) offer more guidelines on how to cultivate communication with the deeper self and identifying transpersonal stories.

De-Emphasizing Game Structure for the Sake of Contemplation

The other characteristic we observed in mythic games with this soul guiding quality is that they de-emphasize game structure. They are still games, of course, and as such provide frameworks that structure play, but they prioritize contemplation. Timothy Welsh (2012) observed in a blog post on contemplative gaming: "In most contemporary video games, we have other goals. We have a mission to complete, things to collect, kills to rack up, levels to master, etc.". Contemplative games, however, invite us to wonder and explore an environment, a carefully crafted game-world that reflects belief-systems and values, and thus shifts our attention to the mythologies that underlie them. Challenges, rules, points etc. take a backseat to that. When we look at *Journey*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Never Alone*, these games contain challenge to a greater or lesser degree, but it is never an end in itself. The point and potential of mythical games is the exploration of the game world and how it reveals (through consequences to actions, artistic design, narrative elements) the existential viewpoints and questions that have informed it in the process of subcreation (see Wolf, 2018, pp. 3-7).

Contemplation is a crucial quality for mythical games to fulfill their psychological function of getting us back in touch with our deeper selves, our souls. We often cannot hear our authentic inner voices, because they are very quiet in comparison to external (or internalized) demands and expectations. It is "easier" to submit to an imposed rule system, because it more clearly rewards and punishes us, than to figure out what it is that we truly want and to go for it, no matter how delayed or absent external gratification might be. When playing a game, we will always submit to the boundaries of its possibility space, but how prominently "in our face" the game's structures are, determines where our attention goes: outwards to what the game expects us to do to win, or inwards to mull over what we encounter. The "louder" the game's structure, the more pronounced its pressures and system feedback (e.g. visible points, achievements, badges, kill counts etc.), the less contemplative the experience, and the less the game's mythical content actually invites our psychic participation.

RITUAL: MYTH IN ACTION

Much has been written about the intersections between games and ritual mostly from an anthropological, sociological or cultural perspective, of which Gazzard and Peacock (2011) provide a solid overview in their article "Repetition and Ritual Logic in Video Games" (pp. 502-504). They also note an inherent tension between game and ritual:

Games have rules which when followed will produce unpredictable or open outcomes, and within the rules there is space for individual ingenuity, interpretation, and improvisation. Rituals have rules which when followed precisely will result in predictable and closed outcomes and there is no room to maneuver. If a ritual is not precisely performed, no transition will occur, no greater power will be invoked, nothing will happen. (p. 503).

In mythical games, however, the boundaries between myth and ritual are blurrier. In games you are not just told a myth. You perform the myth. The actions you take – even your moment-to-moment core mechanics – become part of the myth and the way to experience the myth is through enactment. Campbell (2004) states: “Ritual is simply myth enacted; by participating in a rite, you are participating directly in the myth.” (p.xix). We do not claim that mythical games are the same as ritual. The action in these games can still gravitate more towards “game” at times and more towards “ritual” at other times. If they are designed congruently, though, their actions will always support and reinforce their mythical themes and as such take on a stronger symbolic, ritualistic quality than core mechanics might already have. We do not want to engage in a theoretical discourse on the exact nature of ritual within mythical games (maybe in a future paper). Instead, we will now focus on how ritual is used in psychotherapy to gain inspiration for themes and symbolic actions in mythic games.

From the perspective of psychotherapy, rituals are “symbolic rites that help people do the work of relating, changing, healing, believing, and celebrating.” (Parker and Horton, 1996, para. 9). Ritual is understood broadly as conscious and unconscious activities. Both can have grounding and balancing qualities such as using affectionate nick names, couples talking together in bed before sleep, tucking children in with special good night phrases and a favorite stuffed animal, or celebrating anniversaries. Rituals create “protected space” that nurture our inner world. True ritual, however, is more than a repetitive behavior pattern.

It is logocentric, or meaning creating. Borrowing from Comstock's sociofunctionalist analysis (1972), one might state that working rituals have the qualities of being validating, heuristic, integrative, symbolically rich, and curative. (para. 9).

For our purpose of informing mythical game design, conscious rituals – the ones that are created deliberately and with a specific intent – are most relevant. “To derive power from a ritual it must, in some way, stand apart from our ordinary lives.” (Beck and Metrick, 2012, p.18). As we know from Huizinga (1970) and Caillois (1958), games also stand apart from ordinary lives and mythical games, as explained above, have a contemplative quality that promotes mindfulness. Both are important pre-conditions for ritual to do its work. In psychotherapy, however, rituals are designed together with clients, oriented towards their individual needs and drawing on elements that are symbolically potent for them. This level of customization is hardly possible in games, which is why game designers are called upon to play the soul guiding role artists, poets and shamans played for the larger community throughout history, and to invent the symbolic signs and structures that will resonate with their players. As Campbell (2004) states:

These people [artists and poets] can look past the broken symbols of the present and begin to forge new working images, images that are transparent to transcendence. Not all poets and artists can do this, of course (...). Yet there have been great artists among us who have read the contemporary scene in ways that allow the great elementary ideas to come shining through all the time, portraying and inspiring the individual journey. (p.20).

Similarly, one function of the shaman in tribal cultures, was traveling into the Lower World (via psycho-technologies such as journeying and other trance like states induced through breathwork, drumming or psychoactive substances (see Harner, 1990) to emerge with symbolism and imagery that would provide spiritual guidance and meaning-making not just to one person, but to all members of their tribe. As Feinstein and Krippner (1988) observe: “The shaman was an artist in relation to the culture’s guiding mythology, adept at guarding, transmitting, and transforming it. (p. 39). According to Sandra Ingerman (1991), a counseling psychologist and leading authority of shamanistic practices in contemporary psychotherapy, “[i]n all shamanic traditions the concept of telling healing words and healing stories to clients and the community is prevalent.” (p.x) These stories, so Ingerman, were meant to stimulate imagination and set healing in motion.

Drawing on Different Notions of Power

Reading descriptions of how and why rituals have psychological power shows the strong parallels between ritual and games. In games as in ritual, we enter a state of timelessness, where ordinary experience is suspended and our usual frame of reference is temporarily altered (since we are submitting to a different rule and sign system). This allows us to explore new ways of acting and being and to become “receptive to other patterns of association and modes of mental functioning that are conducive to problem solving”. (Beck and Metrick, 2012, p.19). Ritual is empowering, because when we perform a ritual consciously, we are “at cause” (Beck and Metrick, 2012, p.2). We have a purpose and an intent and we are “*doing* rather than *being done to*.” (Beck and Metrick, 2012, p.21). Games, too, afford us agency and empowerment, but we often only think of one way this can manifest. Jenova Chen said in an interview about *Journey*:

Most of the online console games are based upon existing single player mechanics, like shooting, like fighting, like role-playing games. And most of the single player games are about empowerment, because the majority of the users are younger males. That particular demographic has a very strong thirst for the feeling of freedom and empowerment. (Ohannessian, 2012)

According to Rollo May, there are five kinds of power:

Exploitative: subjects the weak to the strong with no concern for the needs of the weak.

Manipulative: power *over* another that requires the collusion, collaboration, and cooperation of the weaker.

Competitive: power *against* another.

Nutrient: power used *for* the other to meet the needs of the other.

Integrative: power used *with* another to build a better life for both. (Beck and Metrick, 2012, pp. 2-3).

Chen was referring to the first three kinds of power that are over-abundant in games: exploitative, manipulative and competitive. Game designers can take inspiration from the concept of nutrient and integrative power and ask: how does my game allow players to be powerful in ways that meet the needs of others? How does my game afford opportunities to be empowered together with others, to create together?

Drawing on Different Types of Rituals

Another potent source of inspiration for mythical game design is to look at different types of rituals to harness them for themes and symbolic actions. What all rituals have in common is that they center around transition – “changes that have happened, are

happening, or may happen.” (Beck and Metrick, 2012, p. 37). Games, too, usually revolve around some kind of change from one initial state to the win state at the end. There are many different ways in which the transition can be approached, though – what kind of change is being enacted and how it is brought about. A common pattern in games is to overcome a conflict represented symbolically as enemies or obstacles by way of fighting and / or navigating one’s way through to the other side. Parker and Horton (1996) extrapolated three main types of rituals from a phenomenological overview of rituals in various religious traditions, including Judeo-Christian, Asian, the Western Magical tradition and Shamanism: liberation rituals, transformation rituals, and celebration or commemoration rituals. They state:

Liberation rituals are paradoxical in that they can use an act of destruction to effect healing. In liberation rituals, restoration is accomplished via the symbolic removal of or disengagement from obstacles to healing. Negative influences are symbolically terminated, dissipated, or "cursed," and closure is attained. The goal of liberation rituals may therefore be regarded as release. (para. 22).

While destruction is mentioned as an option to effect liberation – Parker et.al. even explicitly mention as an example the “zapping” of cancer cells “as in a videogame” to mobilize the immune system in cancer patients – it pays to investigate creative ways to symbolically represent this change other than killing / smashing things to pieces. Cutting strings, releasing something that has been trapped, dropping something that weighed you down, letting go of something you clung to, diffusing the darkness of a constraining force with light – these are all different takes on the symbolic enactment of liberation that imply the essential element of “working through”, yet do not require violence.

Another type of ritual according to Parker and Horton (1996) is that of transformation. This is confusing, given that all rituals somehow center around transition and there is no transformation without transition and no transition without transformation. In fact, Beck and Metrick (2012) only seem to focus on transformation rituals, sub-categorizing them into rituals of “beginnings, mergings, cycles, endings, and healings” (p. 37).

Transformation rituals are rituals of formation or rites of passage. Through them, something new is birthed, affirmed, blessed, and empowered. In transformation rituals, the elements of initiation and blessing are coupled. These two elements go together naturally and necessarily, as do birth and nurturance. (Parker and Horton, 1996, para.29).

While liberation can be viewed as both a process and an individual act, transformation is by its very nature processual. This might make it harder to envision core mechanics that support this type of ritual. To see the trees again (and not just the forest), it helps to zoom into individual aspects that can constitute a transformation ritual. For brevity’s sake, we choose the element of “merging”. In Sabine Harrer’s *Jocoi* (2015), a game on pregnancy loss inspired by the stories of bereaved mothers, players enact a mother sheep that is taking care of her lamb. They begin in a state of being merged with their young through a shared controller (the computer mouse). After the lamb is lost in an earthquake, the mouse button that was once assigned to caring for the lamb gets re-assigned as a self-care button for the mother. The loss is thus converted into a merging with “self” as a way to heal and become whole again. Another source of inspiration might be the concept of nurturance. What might be a nurturing game mechanic that promotes transformation in the bigger mythic structure of the game? Or what about game themes built around the notion of renewal and the death-life-death cycle?

Lastly, we want to draw attention to celebration and commemoration rituals. These are the ones most associated with religious worship, anniversaries, birthdays, and local cultural holidays. The term “worship” is particularly relevant here and should be understood in its original sense of appreciating the “worth-ship” of something. “In commemoration rituals something valuable is preserved or honored through remembrance or celebration.” (Parker and Horton, 1996, para.36). The fact that ritual is “timeless” – set apart from life’s unstoppable progression – allows the reliving and rekindling of that which is worshipped, treasured. These kinds of rituals can be imagined in a game context at transitional points between levels, where they slow down action and encourage the most contemplation. Sitting on the bench in *Ico* (Team Ico, 2001) with princess Yorda to save the game is a beautiful, little ritual that reinforces the game’s theme of companionship and celebrates Ico’s and Yorda’s togetherness: “We made it. Phew. Let’s take a sec.!” It is comparable to a couple’s ritual of reconvening on the couch after a day of separation through work and other obligations and actively cherishing that they made it home to each other, yet again. Celebration and commemoration rituals are ways to recharge, to power up, to gather strength, to focus before and to go gratefully inwards after a challenge. By playing a special song, repeating a phrase, lighting a candle, placing an object (e.g. flowers on a grave), revisiting a meaningful location, we can remember, reflect, hold dear, relive and reinforce the bonds with what connects us to ourselves, each other and the sacred. There are myriad ways in which this could be interpreted in mythic games and the stories it could give rise to.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we argued for the importance of myth to (re-)discover our true selves and to live a meaningful life. We made a case for why games are potent tools for mythical engagement and explored creative ways in which myth and ritual can inspire games that help us ponder the Givens of Existence, deepening our connection to ourselves and the world around us. We proposed tools for self-exploration to facilitate the game designer’s role as 21st century soul guide and investigated three kinds of ritual in psychotherapy – liberation, transformation, commemoration / celebration – to derive symbolic actions that can reinforce games’ mythic themes and expand their experiential bandwidth. Our goal was to inspire game designers to create mythic games, and provide them with starting points to that endeavor informed by existential, archetypal and depth psychology.

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