

Navigating Existential, Transformative Game Design

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ABSTRACT

Games have the power to move players profoundly and ignite personal transformation and growth, as illustrated by our own gameplay histories as well as numerous anecdotes from our gameplaying network of friends, colleagues and students. The only way, though, to legitimately claim a game to be a game for change, it seems, is if said change can be quantified and measured. Measuring change, however, is most possible, if it is agenda driven and has clearly defined pre / post conditions. Such an approach is proposed by Culyba's (2018) Transformational framework, which has become the state of the art in the games for change community. This is problematic for two main reasons: 1) it limits the kinds of change we aim to design for to those that are measurable and 2) it precludes us from being able to acknowledge and meaningfully discuss powerful, but less clearly measurable, transformations. A large part of games' transformative potential thus remains either unrealized or invisible. In fact, as Paulo Pedercini (2014) noted at a keynoted at Games 4 Change, "the kinds of change we can clearly measure are not all that interesting". This work explores how we can intentionally design for personal transformation *without* pre-determining the kind of change the game should ignite or seeks to impose upon its players. It discusses how we can facilitate profound, organic inner shifts through our designs that allow players to "respond to them of themselves, with recognition, uncoerced." (Campbell 1991, p.3).

Such an alternative transformational game design framework shifts the locus of control in regards to a potential transformation to the player by basing it on the concept of emotional and "psychological resonance". Goodwyn (2016) states: "Psychological resonance is defined as a characteristic quality that can be applied to any image or narrative, that describes its mental 'stickiness', its tendency to spontaneously emerge, and / or its intergenerational staying power." (p.37) As C.G. Jung wrote about the transformative power of resonant expressions: "The auditor experiences some of the sensations but is not transformed. Their imaginations are stimulated: they go home and

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through personal fantasies begin the process of transformation for themselves." (Bonnett, 2006, p.27).

So far, we have identified 3 key design pillars upon which our framework and its emphasis on resonance rests: (1) drawing on the main themes and goals of existential psychotherapy, (2) harnessing the symbolical power of myth and ritual, and (3) focusing on experiential design and less directed interactions. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

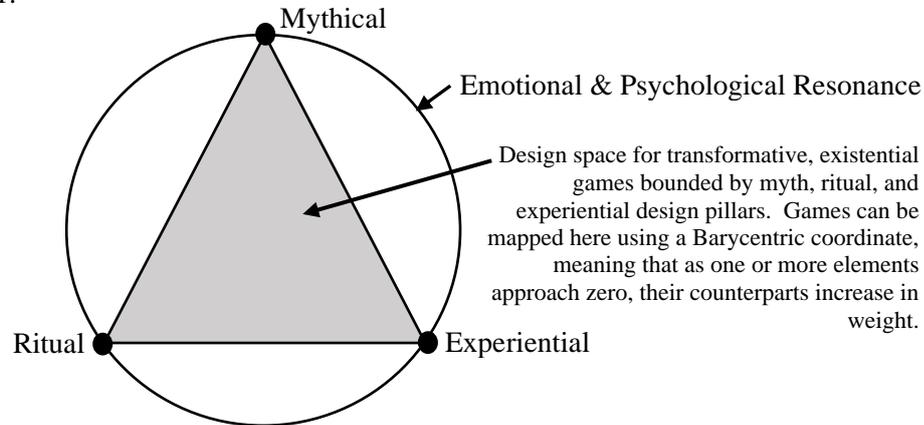


Figure 1: Mapping a design space for transformative, existential games

1) Existential psychotherapy is a useful source because it deals with the universal concerns of the human experience: According to existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom, the human experience is characterized by anxiety, stemming from the Givens of Existence: 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). Deep, transformative experiences are often connected to our approach and attitudes towards these givens of existence. We can learn from the themes and goals of existential psychotherapy and how it goes about achieving them to create games that facilitate contemplation of existential issues.

We can e.g. find existential ideas in games like *Walden, a game* (Fullerton, T. & USC Interactive Media & Games Division, 2017); *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012); and *Every Day the Same Dream* (Molleindustria, 2009). By way of analyzing the underlying themes in these games and finding parallels to existential psychotherapy, we aim to show the variety of incorporating existential thought into game design without being prescriptive.

2) Myth and ritual have been used as vehicles to orient ourselves towards universal, existential concerns and have thus been leveraged extensively in existential psychotherapy and depth psychology (May, 1991; Feinstein and Krippner, 1988, 1997; Larsen 1996; Hillman, 1996). As Rollo May (1991) wrote "myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world" (p.15). Myth and ritual with their imagery and symbolism speak the language of the Unconscious and base their transformative potential on psychological resonance.

Several existentially-themed games also tap into mythical imagery and symbolism to convey their deeper messages: e.g. *Night Journey* (Viola, B. and Game Innovation Lab, 2018), *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010), *Never Alone* (E-Line Media & Upper One Games, 2014), *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005)

Similarly, these games are deeply rooted in ritual. The walking of *Walden* and the pilgrimage of tombstones of *Journey* both speak to the way repeated patterns, symbols, and practices draw players into channels of thought and reflection. These games use myth and ritual as navigation and personal calibration tools that can prompt a players' own exploration of existential themes.

3) Games capable of igniting this kind of individualistic transformation are often a form of 'experiential' game in which there is no explicit or elaborate narrative or overtly stated theme. These games seek to be *felt* rather than *read*. This emphasis is aligned with the non-literal, symbolic communication of myth and ritual, which reinforces addressing the Unconscious. Resonance in that sense hinges upon the nature of the game itself as it is played, the experience emerging from the moment-to-moment engagement in the game's structures and mechanics. E.g. *Elude* (Rusch, D. Singapore-MIT GAMBIT GAME LAB, 2010) and *Fragile Equilibrium* (Phelps, A. & MAGIC Spell Studios, 2018) speak to depression and anxiety abstractly through experiential metaphor and analogy, deliberately circumventing cognitive thinking for the sake of a more immediate, emotional response that hinges upon a player's receptivity more than on procedural argument.

For a transformative, existential game design framework, we need to gain a clearer idea of how to design for experiential resonance. To accomplish this we build upon interpretations of flow (Kiili *et al* 2012), and on theories and models that describe experiential learning (Kiili 2005, Papert 1991, Phillips 1995). Experience is put first and foremost from a design consideration, and then linking these concepts to mechanics, aesthetic, and atmospheric conditions.

By incorporating existential psychotherapy, myth and ritual, and experiential design, this framework considers how games can transform players by inviting contemplation and reflection of universal concerns as well as affording a possibility space to explore how to position oneself towards them, without delivering pre-packaged answers.

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