Anamaria Todor

VIDEO GAMES AS

MYTH RECONSTRUCTIONS

TRANSILVANIA **UNIVERSITY OF BRAŞOV**

FACULTY OF LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

DEPARTMENT OF AMERICAN STUDIES

VIDEO GAMES AS MYTH RECONSTRUCTIONS

B.A. PROJECT

Candidate:

Anamaria Todor

Supervisor:

Conf. dr. Liliana Hamzea

Braşov
2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

To associate myths with computer games may at first appear as nonsense, as a random connection between two concepts that loosely stand together. Firstly, because myths are most of the times treated as "cultural realities" that belong to a "traditional and archaic society" (Eliade, 1963:120). Secondly, because computer games are products that emanate exclusively from contemporary society, they represent the ultimate form of digital entertainment and cyber-reality expression. The two concepts seem separated not only by time or space, but by the very nature of the human societies that create them. In my project I will try to build a coherent link between the two apparently incompatible terms and, at the same time, I will try to obeserve this link on some of the most thorough games of all time, *Bioshock* and the "indie genre darling" *Braid*.

The first step in the process is defining "myth", mainly from the comparative perspective of Campbell (1988) and Eliade (1957), while also trying to link their findings to the rest of the academic literature. The second step is building a theorethical framework that can help in the analysis of video games, which are a relatively recent academic field of study. Using the theories of Buckingham (2006), Juul (2003), Pearce (2002), Newman (2004) and Aarseth (1998), I will explain what exactly is understood through video games and try to establish whether they are a pure cultural product of the American society. Once light is shed upon these aspects of the project, I will proceed to the actual video game analysis. My main concerns will be whether all video games replicate myth structures, and to what extent these structures are different from what can be found in traditional forms of media. I will also touch upon the social and cultural aspects of video games and see how gamers play an important part in myth propagation and transformation. The two fundamentally different games will be used in the analysis to trace the point at which games become self-conscious of their mythical role and question their own (sur-)reality.

My conclusions will not simply treat the findings of my project, but also try to predict the future evolution of video games. My discovery of the casual revolution which video games are going through will give a disturbing twist to my study: have I been talking about reconstruction or deconstruction all along?

INTRODUCTION

My choice to study video games in the American cultural context is of a very subjective nature. First of all, I have been part of what I like to call the 'geek' culture for almost twenty years, because as a child I have been drawn more to the sound of the keyboard and the intricate narrative structures behind the firs point and click games such as *Day of the Tentacle* or the *Indiana Jones* series than to playing with traditional toys. Secondly, working as a video game journalist for over three years, I have obtained a deep understanding of both game design techniques and the workings of the rising video game industry. Most importantly, in time, while analyzing games with a critical eye, I have come to discover that their appeal is neither superficial, nor limited only to their ludic attributes (their capacity to be enjoyed as play). It has become one of my personal goals to identify what makes video games so addictive and so fulfilling to their players, be they casual or hardcore gamers. The emergence of video games as an academic field of studies in the late 1980s has made my academic search for answers even easier. Of course, this was just a suitable beginning: from this point on, I have personally come to the idea that some sort of mythical structures are responsible for the deeper implications of gameplay. Thus, my project focuses on exploring the mythical dimensions of video games and their impact upon video game consumers.

i. Aims and Research Questions

The main aim of this paper is to present and analyze the nature of the myths which pervade most video games. Secondly, the impact of mythical structures upon players is also examined in detail. In addition, all throughout the project the limitations and difficulties encountered when using the analytical tools of a new field of study, which has borrowed many of its theoretical frameworks from other disciplines (like narrative theory, film studies, social semiotic theory and sociology) are underlined.

The research questions for my B.A. Project are:

1. At what level of video games do myths manifest?

2. Are all games myth reconstructions?

3. Is there a fundamental myth that transcends all video games?

4. Do video games alter myth structures?

These questions were meant not only to guide my project but to show my readers what its focus is. Thus, the first question tries to give an insight on which game elements are more prone to bear mythical significance. The second and third questions have the aim of generalising my theory. And the fourth question, while relating to those above it, also has the role of tapping into the social aspect of video games, as video game players are the ones who actively (and most of the time unconsciously) engage in interpreting, reinterpreting the myths behind the games they play and altering their structures accordingly.

ii. Structure of the Project

The paper is divided into four chapters, which include several subsections as well. The first chapter tries to define myths from the cultural point of view and its structure is based on the parallel between two theories: that of Campbell and Eliade. As I will prove, there is a basic difference between the works of the two academicians: Campbell, although being one of the first to give the concept of myth a sociological and anthropological impact, launches a powerful critique of the traditional Western theologies that is not present in Eliade's discourse. In his opinion, theology gets caught up too often in explaining the meaning of life instead of seeking an experience of being alive. But Eliade does not tackle the reality of divine justification in religion. For him, myth is absolute, "a paradigmatic model of all human activities" (Eliade, 1963:90). The most important idea that Eliade underlines is that myths are not extinct, that they have transformed and degenerated and can be found under any modern creative form. The categorization of myths encountered in movies I have included at the end of the chapter is proof to this theory.

The second chapter is an attempt to summarize the general theories that have been developed around video game studies. Key terms I explained here are ludic and representational qualities, the "gameness" of video games and video games as a cultural and social space. I have also observed the rise of the video game genre, the creative power of gameplay in language and last but not least, how video games sometimes constitute themselves as a counter-culture. Moreover, I have tried to give a statistical explanation for having chosen to limit my analysis to the American cultural space, which is both where video games originated and where they are efficiently

consumed nowadays. The conclusion of this chapter binds the theory upon myths and the one upon video games together. As computers gradually began to merge with popular media culture, stressing accessibility, pleasure and familiarity, it also became clear that video games can be identified as myth reconstructions. Advanced technologies and dense storylines build up a synesthesy of senses that the traditional man could only reach through deep meditation. Moreover, as Buckingham stresses out (2006:40), "because games are essentially fictional in nature, they are fundamentally set apart from ordinary life. Video games by definition set themselves in what Eliade calls the "illo tempore", outside time and space, preparing to become, through their level of realism, the very reincarnations of myths.

The third chapter contains the practical aspect of my project, a thorough analysis of two fundamentally different video games: *Bioshock*, a first person shooter and *Braid*, an apparently simple platformer. While trying to answer my research questions, I have discovered that in terms of mythical structures less can actually mean more, as *Braid* builds up a more intricate mythical structure than *Bioshock* does, through the use of symbols. Still, players find it easier to interpret the universe of *Bioshock* and thus, this game encourages the altering of mythical structures at a different level than *Braid*.

The fourth and final chapter of my project summarizes the findings of my practical study. I have concluded that mythical elements can be found mostly at the narrative level of the video game, but they can also be present in the level design or overall art direction. Then, all video games are myth reconstructions, because, to the least, they remind us of the fundamental myth of Creation. The answer to the last question is that mythical adjustment is unavoidable. Myth, being the story of a cosmogony, needs to adapt itself to explain the creation of all the particular virtual worldviews. But there is also a downside to this process of mythical alteration. The difference between the video game universe and a mythologically based one is that, as consumers, we understand that the digital fantasy world is designed for our entertainment rather than as reality. So, when playing video games, the sacred "reality" of the myth no longer applies to our frame of knowledge and the process of mythical purification through ritual is highly unconscious and might even not take place.

My study ends with an effort to predict the future of video games, which is dominated by diversity. I express my worry that video games are undergoing a casual revolution and this could

diminish the games' mythical importance. Finally, no conclusion can be reached because many researchers have criticized the theories upon myth as having no empirical support. Nevertheless, as long as the literature itself has not settled upon the nature of myths, one can still choose to observe the mythical function of games, in order to illustrate faces of digital entertainment different   from   the   debates   on   violence   and   education.

CHAPTER ONE: A THEORY ON MYTHS

1.6 What Myths Are and What Purpose They Serve

For the common man and in a person's everyday life, myths are defined as "an 'old wives' tale', a generally accepted belief unsubstantiated by fact" (Leeming, 1990:3). Thus, it is a well known and rather rude myth that blondes are stupid or that women rely more on intuition rather than thought to survive in society. When people do not use myths to refer to social (pseudo) realities, they like to identify myths with "the stories of gods and heroes of cults in which we do not believe, tales that once had religious significance" (Leeming, 1990:3). These kinds of stories are sometimes put together to create mythologies, and it should be underlined that they are almost all the time pagan in nature: people are attracted to the Greek romances between gods and mortals, to the Egyptian stories of betrayal and even to the Hindu and Buddhist myths of creation, but rarely have people spoken of the Jewish or Christian holy books as a collection of myths.

A question that almost immediately arises in connection with mythology is that of who wrote the myths, and maybe more essential, who was the first to tell them. Naturally, the instinctive answer that comes into mind is that of people themselves. The myth, similar to the fairy tale, originates in the collective "folk" mind. It may be possible that a certain individual, like a shaman, priest and later even a literary mythmaker, may have given a specific form to the discourse of myth, but different myths are still similar enough, irrespective of chronology and geography, to point to a collective authorship. We actually witness the effort of the global human mind to wrestle with the mystery of life, with the origin of earth or with the nature of death. It is an effort to personify Earth and to make it conscious of itself.

In fact, the word "myth" actually comes from a Greek term, *mythos,* which means "story". And probably the most important function of a story is to give a meaning to human experience: "human beings have traditionally used stories to describe things that they could not otherwise" (Leeming, 1990:3). This is how myths actually overcome their condition of stories, how they become more than mere descriptions that have the sole function to amuse or entertain. Leeming continues by admitting that that "ancient myths were stories by means of which our forebears were able to assimilate the mysteries that occurred around them" and that is why myths were surrounded with a deep aura of respect. And, if myths can be seen as "narrative patterns that give

significance to our existence" (May, 1991:15), it can be said that this respect is well deserved. In fact, these mythological patterns are so old, that some authors like Bierhorst (1985:6) believe them to have become „woven into the structure of man over the course of thousands of years". The patterns in myths do not seem to define only the individual, but they go to the extent of offering meaning to a people, enough cohesion to hold them together and make them a people.

But, if a myth can actually stand as the basis of a people, that is, if a myth can give them cultural identity, myth must be more than a false invention or mechanism of the human imagination. Myth becomes an abstract reality, just as powerful and complex as religion or science. In this respect, Bierlein (1994:5) actually tends to assimilate myths into the above mentioned forms of knowledge and perception of the world, by describing them in four ways:

1. as the "first fumbling attempts to explore how things happen" – the beginnings of science
2. as attempts to explain why things happen – religion and philosophy
3. as history - the history of prehistory
4. as literature – imaginary stories

1.2 Myths and Culture

The hibridity of the function of myth underlined above points to another very important aspect: the understanding (and thus, the meaning) of myth has gradually broadened, such that studying myths is no longer involved with the primitive nature of man, but rather with what defines a person, family and even culture – the core reality that lies as the foundation of human existence. Myth is no longer a pagan tale, but an entitity that concentrates religious, national and aestethic essences. Rochelle (2001:20) identifies deep mythic implications in the discourses of architects like Bruno Zevi, or in the opposing of "new physics" scientists to the Newtonian system of thinking. Common people can also grasp the concept of myth when talking about the American Dream, for example. Nevertheless, "in each case we are considering something intangible, perhaps not literally real, that is 'true' in some higher sense" (Rochelle, 2001:22). In other words, myths are now seen as conveying valuable information, rather than being just an odd example of primitive superstition. They are the only way in which humanity and nature can be psychologically reconciled and this is demonstrated by the fact that, although mythic tales

belonging to different cultures have their particularities, they all point to a common, shared, but less tangible mythic substructure.

Another reason for myths to be taken seriously as cultural phenomena is pointed out by the interest of a great number of twentieth century anthropologists and psychologists in the subject. Individuals like Frazer, Boas, Malinowski, Bastian, or Cassirer believed that myths can be used to study and deeply analyze the human nature. But probably the soundest examples are those of the two founders of modern psychology, Freud and Jung. The concretization of psychology into a science has had the reinvention and redefinition of myths as a direct consequence. Both Freud and Jung identified motifs and patterns that could be found in the mythic universe and in subconscious worlds as well. Rochelle (2001:25) exemplifies with phrases such as "Oedipus complex" and "Elektra complex," which have been coined in the Freudian psychology, but are now a part of our general vocabulary. Moreover, Jung (1963:347) used myths in the construction of his definition of the "archetype" (or the inherent psychic tendencies in the "collective unconscious"). In this respect, myths point out the archetype through the common forms, motifs and themes contained. So, there is a deep connection between dreams and myths that actually helps in the proper understanding of the mythical phenomenon. Modern psychology sees dreams as a symbolic language that can be translated by the dream analyst (whom we could consider a modern day shaman) into a personal mythology. And, if we were to compare many of these individual dreams, we would reach a universal dream language, of symbols with a common meaning.

Campbell (1988:60), while also seeing myth as a tool for understanding human psychology and as an expression of man's relationship with the divine, or that which is beyond words, is one of the first to take the concept of myth even further, giving it a sociological and anthropological point of view. He assigns four basic functions to myth:

1. to instill and maintain a sense of awe and mystery before the world
2. to explain the world as a mythology, as a system of effect symbols, signs evoking and directing a psychic response
3. to maintain the social order by giving divine justification to social practices and institutions

4. to harmonize the individual with society, the cosmos and himself by linking him with everything both outside and within.

As it can be immediately deduced, mythology gains another, more pragmatic function: it becomes the base of a cultural framework in which a society or people can educate their young. It also provides comfort of passage through the different stages of life, from birth to death. And, because it includes religion and history as part of the development of culture, mythology is invariantly bound to the society and time in which it occurs and cannot be alienated from this cultural environment. Even when different cultures expand their spheres of influence and eventually come into contact with each other, the outcome of the collision, be it conquest, subjugation, or amalgamation, will be evident in the resultant mythology.

So, it can be admitted that for Campbell, unlike Jung, myth is indispensable: the human being, as a social being, cannot survive without it. That is why Campbell (1988:120) links the contemporary "malaise of meaningness" and disconnection to modern man's indifference to myths. In comparison, Jung puts a lot more emphasis on the function of myth as a key to understanding the unconscious than on the myth itself. If they were to follow the Jungian view upon myths, individuals would only be able to open up to fragmentary parts of their selves. In Campbell's terms, on the other hand, "to accept myth is to accept it wholly, to identify oneself in myth". (Campbell, 1988:132) Myth becomes something far larger and more encompassing that Jung could have envisioned: abandonment to myth is the perfect therapy for the ailing soul, is "necessary and sufficient to deepest human fulfillment".

As a phenomenologist, Campbell questioned the essence of classic myths. Because he never separated scholarship from life, he was eager to see mythology in the service of world peace and human understanding. That is why he always reached beyond the myths specific to a given culture toward planetary mythology: "we need myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet" (1988:50). Campbell saw the universal perfect human being, which he identified in the Hindu truth he often quoted: "I am the mystery of the Universe." If the stories of the gods are about the individual, if the story of the hero always ultimately turns us back to our own experience, then there is the danger of reducing the impact of the sacred

narrative to the individual reception of it. The "me" can become more central than the transcendent mystery to which it points, in which case the sacredness of this simple truth is lost.

Even if we fall into the trap of minimizing the scope of human mythical experience, one thing remains certain. That "the chronicle of our species, from its earliest page, has been not simply an account of man the tool-maker, but -- more tragically -- a history of the pouring of blazing visions into the minds of seers and the efforts of earthly communities to incarnate unearthly covenants" (Campbell, 1990:3). Thus, myths should not to be regarded lightly, because they are cultural versions of universal tendencies. They are sometimes funny, occasionally bizarre, but they must always be taken seriously.

1.3 A Paradigmatic Model

While I could go on with a full analysis of Campbell's work, I decided to better delve into the intricate concepts of another comparative mythology theorist, Eliade. I must admit that my choice is, first of all, of a personal nature (I've been addicted to Eliade's clear style since highschool and he is also a Romanian theorist). But I also believe that, Eliade, as the most widely known and acknowledged authority on myth, symbol and ritual, can answer one of the most essential question that Campbell's work poses: how can we see ourselves as a people for whom myth is life and breath?

Still, there is a basic difference between the works of the two academicians: Campbell launches a powerful critique of the traditional Western theologies that is not present in Eliade's discourse. Trying to dispose the holy texts of their metaphorical nature, these religions really make a fuss out of validating any given social order as divine. How Campbell simply puts it, flexibility is abandoned for the sake of certainty and theology gets caught up too often in explaining the meaning of life instead of seeking an experience of being alive.

But Eliade does not tackle the reality of power-play and divine justification in religion. For him, myth is absolute, and reveals an absolute sacrality. It relates to the creative activity of the gods and unveils the sacredness of their work, which means that the truth of myths dramatically irrupts as sacred into the profane world. This is the only way in which the profane, material world can be

established as reality.It is due to this fact that Eliade defines myths as "a paradigmatic model of all human activities" (Eliade, 1963:90).

This is where Eliade also makes the distinction between The Sacred and the Profane World, concepts which I will develop my analysis upon in the following sections. For the moment, what is essential is that Eliade believes that relating a sacred history is equivalent to revealing a mystery and that, "whatever belongs to the sphere of the profane does not participate in being, for the profane was not ontologically established by myth, nor has it a perfect model"(Eliade, 1957:95). In consequence, what an individual chooses to do on their own, without adhering to a mythical model belongs to the sphere of the profane and is obviously a vain and illusory activity. "The more religious the man, the more paradigmatic models does he possess to guide his attitudes and actions, the more does he enter into the real and the less is he in danger of becoming lost in actions that are subjective, thus aberrant" (Eliade, 1957:99).

So, Eliade underlines two basic functions of the myth as "paradigmatic model":

1. To preserve man in the Sacred, hence in reality
2. To sanctify the world by continuous reactualization of the divine gestures

In Eliade's vision, the religious man continuously struggles to match a transcendent model. By approaching the divine matrix, he can become, in The Sacred, something else than he is on the plane of profane experience. There is here a similarity between religious and modern desacralized man: they are both defined as the products of history. Just that their histories are different, chronological flow has nothing to do with the sacred history that can only be revealed through myth.

While Mircea Eliade states at one point that absolute myths belong mainly to archaic societies, he underlines at the same time that the reality they construct is somehow universal and unaffected by the temporal flow: "myths narrate a sacred history, they relate an event that took place in the primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'. Myth is always an account of a 'creation'; it relates how something was produced, began *to be*." (Eliade, 1959:60) Because the characters in myths are always supernatural beings, creatures that do not live by any rules, but rather create them, myths themselves become "true stories" (Eliade, 1959:72) and sacred truths. Take for example the cosmogonic myth, the story of the creation of the universe, which cannot be false, as the world is here to prove its existence.

1.4 Where Myths are Now

The question arises if whether the perfect communion with the Gods that Eliade identifies can be lost. The author once again has an answer: the consequence of this resonance with the Gods is that what happened must never be forgotten. So, the only true sin is forgetting.

And this is exactly what happens in modern cultures, which deny such a "participation mystique." Myth is no longer operative, but functions only as a dimension of primitive consciousness from the modern point of view. And indeed, the whole history of Western culture can be seen as a history of demythologization. This process appears in the more highly evolved societies and consists in the intellectual elites progressively detaching themselves from the patterns of traditional religion. The problem that arises is that the perspective upon life changes completely when the sense of religiousness of the universe is lost. "The periodical sanctification of cosmic time then proves useless and without meaning. Gods are no longer accessible through cosmic rhythms. The religious meaning of the repetition of paradigmatic gestures is forgotten. And repetition emptied of its religious content necessarily leads to a pessimistic vision of existence" (Eliade, 1963:107). Time no longer regenerates, but leads irremediably to death and the eternal return to origins now becomes a cosmic illusion, a prolongation of suffering and slavery. In consequence, the nonreligious man of modern societies finds it increasingly difficult to "rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man in the archaic societies". (Eliade, 1957:13) An explanation for this would be that the modern human being dissects the act of discovering the cosmos into a sum of exlusively psychological phenomena. For the primitive, consciousness is never simply physiological. It is, or can become a communion with the sacred.

Still, Eliade sees the completely profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos not as a reality, but rather as a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit. Because of scientific thought and the spectacular evolution of physics and chemistry (especially due to the concept of relativity), modern man somehow likes to distance himself from his material entity and admire his own Fall from the Sacred consciousness. As Campbell also underlines, the dominant Western story people have been telling themselves for 3,500 years has been a painful tale of children who, in their progress toward maturity, have steadily cast off their illusions. Modern man sees himself as a courageous individual come of age, in the clear light of reason and critical insight. This is

where Campbell points out that this story of demythologization is itself a myth, another story offering us energy and meaning. It is "the myth of a mythless humanity" (1990:35), which proves that we are incurable storytellers, molded by the power of myth. People speak of chaos, the disorder, the darkness that will overwhelm "our world". All these terms express the abolition of an order, a cosmos, an organic structure, and the reimmersion in the state of fluidity, of formlessness, of chaos. This clearly proves that some paradigmatic images live on in the language and clichés of nonreligious man. The profane existence is never found in *its pure state. "*To whatever degree he may have desacralized the world, the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior. Even the most desacralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world. Something of the religious conception of the world still persists in the behavior of profane man, although he is not always conscious of his immemorial heritage". (Eliade, 1963:50)

1.5 The Sacred versus The Profane

For Eliade (1957:14), "the S*acred* and the *Profane* are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history. These modes of being depend upon the different positions that man has conquered in the cosmos".

One mode of being is the religious one and, despite the fact that there are various historic-religious forms, this mode is easily recognizable. Irrelevant of the historical context in which he is placed, the religious man (Eliade likes to call him "homo religious") will always try to live according to an absolute reality, the Sacred, which transcends the material universe but clearly manifests itself here, thereby sanctifying it and certifying its reality. Religious man also believes in the sacred origin of life and that human existence realizes all of its potentialities in proportion as it is religious and participates in reality. The condition of religious man may appear paradoxical, because this traditional man sees himself as real only to the extent that he ceases to be himself (for a modern observer) and is satisfied with "imitating and repeating the gestures of another. In other words, he sees himself as real, as 'truly himself' only as he ceases to be so, when he becomes archetypal, even paradigmatic". (Eliade, 1957:34) His reality is acquired only

through repetition and participation, which means that everything which lacks a model is meaningless to him.

The opposed mode of being is the nonreligious one. This philosophy refuses transcendence, embraces the reliativity of reality and often even doubts the meaning of existence. The man who assumes the nonreligious existential situation regards himself exclusively as the subject and agent of history. For him, humanity has no model outside human condition. Man simply makes himself, and he can only "make himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world". (Eliade, 1957:203) In this context, the Sacred is the main obstacle to personal freedom. Modern man will not "be truly free until he has killed the last god" (Eliade, 1957:210).

To further differentiate between the two modes of being, Eliade defines The Sacred Space and The Sacred Time, with their profane counterparts.

1.5.1 The Sacred Space

For religious man, "space is not homogenous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others". (Eliade, 1957:20) Space itself defines the primordial experience and, because there are various types of cosmogonies, there are at least two ways of transforming the profane space into a cosmos, of giving it the value of an "imago mundi" (an image of the world):

1. Through assimilating it to the cosmos by projection of the four horizons from a central point or by symbolic installation of the "axis mundi" (the central axis of the world)

2. Through a ritualistic repetition of the paradigmatic acts of the gods by virtue of which the world came to birth. Blood sacrifices are also possible because space, in order to endure, must receive life and soul, must be animated.

It is this disruption in space that allows the world to be created, because it provides the fixed point, the central axis that will bear the whole of existence. This detection of the center is equivalent to the creation of the world. But spatial disruption also reveals a super-abundance of absolute reality that opposes "the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse", it reveals The Sacred. And because religious man desires to live in it, he reproduces the work of the Gods, the paradigmatic model and puts order into chaos. For him, life is not possible without an opening towards the transcendent. Without it, chaos would instill and people would become paralyzed by the relativity of purely subjective experiences. The effective, real (in the modern sense) world makes existence impossible because it kills the illusion, the thick and rich potentialities of the irruption of the sacred into the concrete world. It is also worth noting that the multiplicity or even the infinity of centres of the world is not problematical for religious thought. For it is "not a matter of geometrical space, but of an existential and sacred space that has an entirely different structure, that admits of an infinite number of breaks and hence is capable of an inifinite number of communications with the transcendent" (Eliade, 1957:40).

Profane space, on the other hand, is homogenous and neutral. Although, just like geometrical space, it can be split quantitatively into any number of pieces in any direction, profane space does not differentiate qualitatively. While sacred space facilitated the existence of a central point for orientation, the profane space maintains its relativity. Because the fixed point no longer has an ontological status, true orientation is never possible. The central point is simply tailored to human needs. For example, the house is no longer a micro-cosmos, but as Le Corbusier suggested, a "machine to live in": it is flexible, changeable but most tragically, disposable.

Still, this does not mean that profane space has totally lost the values that to some extent recall the nonhomogeneity so characteristic to the religious experience of space: the modern man still builds his private universe, which for him is as close to sacred as it can get. And in all modern societies settling in a new house is accompanied by a time of festivity and rejoicing that can only remind of the primitive exuberance of the beginning of a new life.

1.5.2 The Sacred Time

Eliade will get to the same conclusion of the redundancy of sacred elements in the profane existence while analyzing the Sacred Time too.

Religious time, just like religious space, is neither homogenous nor continuous. Actually, religious man simultaneously lives two kinds of time:

- the sacred one, which is circular, reversible and recoverable, an "eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated by means of rites, the time of the festivals" (Eliade, 1957:67). It remains equal to itself as it cannot change or become exhausted. The gods founded sacred time, because time contemporary with a creation was necessarily sanctified by the presence and activity of gods.

- the "profane time, the ordinary temporal duration in which acts without religious meaning take place"(Eliade, 1957:68).

Through well established rites, religious man can pass from one time to another without danger, constituting his life into a coherent "succession of sacred eternities" (Eliade, 1957:104). As religious man refuses to live solely in what in modern terms is called the historical present, he tries to regain a sacred time that can be identified with eternity and regenerates his existence by returning to the time of origins: thorugh annual repetition of the cosmogony, both time and man become contemporary with the "illud tempus". It can then be assumed that the cosmogony serves as the paradigmatic model for all sacred times.

Modern man too experiences a certain discontinuity and heterogeneity of time. For him also there is the comparatively monotonous time of work and the time of celebrations and spectacle, the "festive time". He too lives in various temporal rhythms and is aware of times of different intensities; But there is a fundamental difference between the two perceptions of time: religious man "experiences intervals of time that are sacred and have no part in the temporal duration that precedes and follows them, that have a wholly different structure and origin for they are primordial time, sanctified by the gods and capable of being made present by festival" (Eliade, 1957:70). The ability to periodically arrest time is inaccessible to a nonreligious man. For him, time is intimately linked to the deepest existential dimension. It is linked to his own life, so it has a beginning and an end, which represents death. However many temporal rhythms he experiences, man knows that they always represent a human experience, in there is no room for divine presence.

Eliade underlines that this is why the modern man sees the religious man as paralyzed by the myth of eternal return. He wrongly considers that the premodern man refuses to assume the responsibility of a genuine existence, with its inevitable end and omnipresence of death. The author then goes to underlining that, on the contrary, primitive man assumes the greatest of responsibilities, that of collaborating in the creation of the cosmos and of creating his own world. It is true that this responsibility manifests itself on the cosmic level and contradicts the moral, social and historical responsibilities that are regarded as valid in modern civilizations. For modern man the cosmos is not alive, it is simply the sum of material reserves and physical energies of the planet, so the periodical escape from historical time may appear to be a refusal of history, hence a refusal of creative freedom that opposes human progress and creative spontaneity. Still, this is only true in part. The religious man does not refuse progress, he just bestows a divine dimension upon it. It is safe to assume that progress is just another form of divine revelation for him.

What modern man forgets is that the sacred, mythical time also originates and supports existential historical time, for it is its paradigmatic model. "By virtue of the divine and semidivine everthing has come into existence. The origin of reality and life itself is religious" (Eliade, 1957:89). This is most visible, Eliade admits, in Christianity that changed the concept of liturgical time because of the historicity of the person of Christ. Through the incarnation of the Son of God historical time becomes sanctified, competeing with the mythical time, which is an original time (it came into existence all at once) and isn't preceded by anything.

When referring to the Myth of the Eternal Return, Eliade also notes that the human mind functions in virtue of the destruction of historicity and the mythicization of events. Events in themselves only remain in the popular memory if they approach a mythical model. He also quotes Chadwick, who observed that "Myth is the last -- not the first -- stage in the development of a hero." Eliade attributes this to the fact that popular, collective memory cannot relate to individual events and figures. Its functioning is based on different structures: categories instead of events and archetypes instead of historical personages. As a consequence, the historical personage is substituted by his mythical model, while the event is identified with the category of mythical actions.

This brings us to the conclusion that "the memory of the collectivity is anhistorical" (Eliade, 1957:44). Events are reduced to their basic touches down to our day. Through popular memory (in the popular culture sense of the word, this time around) even the historical personage of modern times unconsciously becomes an imitator of the archetype and reproducer of archetypal gestures.

1.6 The Most Exploited Myths of Modern Culture

And it is in this respect that myths have managed to survive up to the present. Eliade, though a historian of religion, was fully aware of their cultural dimension. He observed the initiatory patterns of psychoanalysis: the descent into the self was nothing else but an initiatory descent into hell, a symbolic confrontation with the demons. At the same time he underlined that even reading has mythological functions, "not only because it replaces the recitations of myths in archaic societies and the oral literature that still lives in the rural communities of Europe, but particularly because through reading, the modern man succeeds in obtaining an escape from time effected by myths"(Eliade, 1957:140). Just like a veritable sacred ritual, reading manages to project people outside their personal time and absorb them into rythms distinct from their own.

Most importantly, a true visionary, Eliade saw the cinema as "a 'dream factory' that takes over and employs countless mythical motifs", in the times when the Hollywood industry was still emerging. Truth is that the cinematographic medium is very suitable for taking up the paradigmatic figures of myths. This is due to the fact that films are the modern equivalent of one of the world's oldest art forms, the oral epic (Sowa, 1973:online). Specific to ancient Greece, Mesopotamia, Egypt and India, the oral epic was formulaic and unlike most poetry, it was improvised live before an audience. Similar to movies and TV, it was "an audio-visual experience that was both a form of public entertainment and a vehicle for popular education" (Sowa, 1973:online). The motion picture resembles the oral epic both in form and function:

1) Movies are improvised. Due to the large number of people responsible for their creation, they have a collective nature which resembles the communal character of the oral epic to whose construction many generations of audiences and bards have contributed.

2) Movies include both tragedy and comedy, parodiating other movies or myths to bring a relief to our anxiety upon life, somehow temporarily disrupting the world order.

3) Movie characters supply exemplary models of living, hinting to the culturally specific concepts of right and wrong, sexuality and social behavior.

This is why I consider that movies are perfect to illustrate the continuity of myths and their functions in modern times. By analyzing movies some of the most common myths that are overused in modern culture can be identified, either to consciously serve a socio-cultural or political aim or to unconsciously appeal to a shared public conscience. To carry on, I suggest an inexhaustive list of popular exploited myths to illustrate the complex impact they still have on modern societies:

- The myth of the journey: basically, any movie that boasts a trace of narrative will, at some point, feature the myth of the journey, which is older than the Greek Odyssey. Because characters are supposed to evolve throughout the motion picture, the only effective way to achieve that is through a complex rite of passage that only the journey can trigger. Journeys are sometimes directly suggested in the plot of the movie, for example in fantasy and adventure movies like *The Lords of the Rings* (2001), where Frodo the hobbit sets off to destroy the cursed ring. In most movies though, journeys are implied thorugh a series of challenges. For example, trying to give up drugs (*Requiem for a Dream* - 2000) or negociating with terrorists (*The Inside Man* – 2006) is just as much of a journey as strolling through Mordor is, just that it takes place in a different plane, the psychological, respectively the rhetorical one.
- The myh of succession and the myth of resurrection: because it chronicles the passing of power from generation to generation, the myth of succession is one of the oldest myths of mankind. A typical ancient example of this myth is Hesiod's *Theogony*, but nowadays this myth is a favourite theme for sagas like *The Godfather* (1972) and usually also implies some form of revenge. Sometimes, the myth of succession is replaced by that of resurrection, when the killed character explainably or miraculously comes back from the dead to punish his murderers (*Kill Bill* – 2003).
- The myth of Creation: movies rarely treat the Genesis itself, or how the world came to be. But a lot of movies are obsessed with the concept of Utopia, or with the idea of the Garden of Eden, the originary place where the human being was pure, the perfect haven before the Fall. Many movies appeal to the idea of Heaven on Earth, to the possibility of

regaining the innocence of the originary times here in the material world. The myth of the Wild West is one fine example that derives from the myth of creation (*No country for Old Men* -2007). The Far West, with its cow herds and sweltering sun, is the symbol of another chance to start over, this time right. But the connection between cattle and creation did not begin with the Old West. As we look into ancient mythology, we find an important connection between the two, for example in the "mythology of ancient India, Indra, the young Hero-god, kills the demon of darkness, Vritra, who had imprisoned the Cows of the Waters, whose moisture is necessary for creation. Indra frees the cows and impregnates them, and they give birth to the Sun, which provides warmth for creation. Indra and Varuna then create the world. Cattle have always occupied an important place in the mythologies of people who keep cattle, as symbols of fertility, virility, and creation--as well as being one of the oldest forms of property. Stories about cattle--the stealing of cattle as a heroic enterprise, and the taking of cattle from an enemy settlement--are prominent in their epic. In our own culture, too, cowboy stories are a Creation myth". (Sowa, 1973:online) This explains why the Western has thrived as a myth of nation-building--"How the West Was Won." What is important to note is that the human mind thoroughly associates nature with the idea of Eden and perfection. A serene life can only be achieved through a deep link with nature.

- The myth of destruction: the counterpart of Creation, this myth is the obsession of most post World War II movies. While motion pictures are never too colorful in depicting the moment of Creation, the Apocalypse is surely more picturesque, its aim being to impact the public. Whatever they choose to focus on, the moment of final destruction (*2012*-2010) or life after The End (*The Book of Eli* -2010), these movies have lost the regenerative dimension that total obliteration has for the religious man. For the modern world, death is final and tragical, not a promise for a better form of existence.

- The myth of the good hero that opposes an overwhelming evil force: the hero is the only one that stands in front of destruction, his destiny being to drive back Chaos and reinstate Order. Whoever we are talking about, be it Indiana Jones fighting the Nazi, Batman trying to silence Gotham city, or just your average lawyer, the hero will most likely have to confront with a countless, almost impossible number of enemies (*300* – 2006). But at times, the hero only has to manage to shed some light upon his or her interior universe, in

order to bring the world to a state of equilibrium. Amelie Poulain (*Le fabuleux destin d'Amelie Poulain* -2001) realizes how pointless and invisible her life is on the day of the death of Princess Diana. She only has to overcome her own self-image to be able to make everyone around her see the magic of life.

The list above is by no means complete, but it helps illustrating how myths still permeate even the most profane of existences. Modern consumerism is nothing else but an addiction to the fundamental stories of myths. It is obvious that we have a tendency to form patterns that help us organize reality, that make familiarizing with new or inexplicable events of our life easier. But are these mythical categories of thought inborn, a part of our brain structure, or are they inherited as part of our culture? The answer leads to the chapter's conclusion.

1.7 Conclusion

Eliade himself concludes with the idea of myths as an unconscious heritage: nonreligious man "assumes a tragic existence and his existential choice is not without greatness", but this does not mean that he has fundamentally strayed from the ways of the religious man. At one point in his past, the nonreligious man (and his ancestors) began with the same situations assumed by the religious being. He is an inheritor, and cannot restrain himself from unconsciously thinking inside the mythical pattern. He cannot help preserving some vestiges of the behavior of religious man, though they are emptied of religious meaning. That is why Eliade admits that nonreligious man in his pure state is a comparatively rare phenomenon, even in the most desacralized modern societies. He still behaves religiously, even though he is not aware of the fact. But he still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals. He cannot utterly abolish his past, since he is himself the product of his past. He forms himself as a series of denials and refusals, but he continues to be haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied. To acquire a world of his own, he has desacralized the world in which his ancestors lived.

Unfortunately, this series of denials and the process of desacralization have brought nonreligious man to the point that he is now defined as opposing his predecessor, by attempting to empty himself of all religion and all transhumant meaning. Modern man is not liberated from religious behavior, but it is true that it has degenerated to the point of caricature and hence it is hard to recognize for what it is. These things are not reflected solely in little gestures, but also in ample

movements that openly avow themselves to be secular or even antireligious. Eliade himself gives the example of nudism and sexual freedom that are actually "a nostalgia for the lost purity of the Eden", a "desire to reestablish the paradisal state before the Fall, where sin did not yet exist and there was no conflict between the pleasure of the flesh and conscience". (1957: 200)

Moreover, the modern human being has lost the capacity to live religion consciously, so he can no longer understand and assume it. He has reached the state of a forgotten consciousness, as he still retains a memory of the religious thought that only manifests itself as impulses that come to him from the depth of his being, from the zone of the unconscious. Though modern man boasts to be a purely rational construct, the concept of pure rationality is an abstraction. As Eliade admits, the human being will always be driven both by their "conscious activity and their irrational experiences". And it is at the level of the structure of the unconscious that the similarity between mythological images and mental contents becomes obvious. The unconscious undoubtedly has a religious aura, because it is the result of immemorial existential situations, because "on archaic levels of culture being and the sacred are one" (Eliade, 1957:110).

To delicately shift to a personal conclusion, it must be underlined that both Eliade and Campbell's work, due to their accessibility, are subject to oversimplification. The complex truths formed in a community can be easily reduced to the vague discourse of an age of individualism. Campbell himself witnessed this with his own theory, when George Lucas admitted that the movie Star Wars was inspired by his series "The power of Myth" ("May the force be with you"). It is obvious that the vigorous myths that have managed to cheat the destructive effect of time deserve more than a simple commercial exploitation. The world of myth is not a maze of falsehood, but an impressive metaphor that breathes life into the essential human story. It is what Campbell (1990:19) called "the wonderful song of the soul's high adventure".

The undeniable veridicity of myths as the building blocks of the soul is the base of what Mircea Eliade defines as "hierophany", or the manifestation of the Sacred into reality (in Greek "hieros" means "sacred" and "phainein" means to reveal (Mircea Eliade, 1957:21)). Thus, myths actually record these hierophanies, by fitting them into the fixed form of ideal models (the actions and commandments of gods, heroes and so on). Only when confined into the borders of these ideal models can the sacred give the world a value and purpose, can "ontologically found the world".

(Mircea Eliade, 1957:21) The immediate effect of this theory is that anything that can encircle the Sacred into an ideal model can be regarded as a myth. We will call these distorted forms of the myths, which still retain the essence, myth reconstructions. The reconstructions do not only prove that myths are not obsolete, that they have rather transformed. They also prove that the Sacred is still part of human life, even though the modern crises of identity, the two World Wars that have brought about the destruction of the coherent individual construct the new human being as an aimless, profane and inherently destructive one. I will once again refer to Eliade, who regards the Sacred and the Profane as two sides of the same coin. We could not discern the Sacred if we bathed in it all our lives. But, by his perpetual living in the Profane, the sexed mortal, the cultural being, the result of the intervention of the Gods, has to imitate the sacred models in order to "acquire his reality, his identity, which directly depends on the extent of his participation in a transcendent reality" (Eliade, 1957:21), to live and re-live what Eliade calls "The Eternal Return". This is how myths become significant to all human activities, ranging from the sacred rituals and chants of Navaho Indians (who believe they do what "the Holy People did in that way in the first place" (Kluckhohn, 1942:66)) to the profane reading of today's newspaper.

CHAPTER TWO: VIDEO GAMES AS AN AMERICAN CULTURAL PRODUCT

2.1 Defining Video Games: Ludic Qualities versus Representational Dimension

In this project, I use the term 'video games' and not 'computer games', to refer to both games played on a Personal Computer or on specialized gaming consoles such as a Playstation or an Xbox. It is important to note that some theorists choose to make sound distinctions between the two terms. Buckingham (2006), for example, prefers the term 'computer games' because he finds it "more inclusive" in meaning. Feinstein (1999), on the other hand, argues that 'computer games' rely more on wits and strategy than 'video games', which are purely emotional, social and driven by action. Still, although some differences exist between PC and consoles games, the video games I will analyze in my project are cross-platform and therefore, distinctions between the different variants of the games are irrelevant to its aim.

To carry on, as the title of this chapter suggests, I will try to see video games as part of the wider popular culture. Still, before defining video games as a form of cultural discourse that replicates the texts of either literature or cinema, video games should be at first studied as such, as *games*. In this respect, though, games still are a fuzzy concept. Nevertheless, as Buckingham (2006) admits, we can argue that games are defined through play, the framework of which is sketched out through rules. Games, in contrast to other forms of media, "are not self-contained and they involve a different type and level of participation from that of reading a novel or watching a movie" (Buckingham, 2006:14). But, besides this participational aspect of play, it is disputable what other aspects should be encompassed by the term "video game". Game designer Pearce (2002:113), for example, also attaches the following elements to the game framework: a goal, resources, rewards, penalties and information. Others (Juul, 2003) go as far as defining the "gameness", as a collection of game-like characteristics of games. According to Juul, all games share at least six common features in their "gameness":

1. Games are based on rules, aspect that we have already agreed upon.

2. Games have variable, quantifiable outcomes.

3. Different values, either positive or negative, are assigned to these outcomes.

4. The player invests effort to achieve the desired outcome.

5. The player is emotionally attached to the outcome.

6. Games have negotiable consequences for real life.

Once again, the distinction between game and play is clear: in order for play to concretize itself as game, it has to develop according to some rules. The player himself is restricted to act according to these rules, as he effectively becomes a character in the game ("digitally embodies" an avatar). But, as Juul himself underlines, his theory is far from sufficient. There are many games out there that cannot even be described from the point of view of his definition. For example, *The Sims 3* (2009), which the producers, Electronic Arts describe as a life simulator game, has no other outcome but living a life similar to the normal, real existence. Also, other video games, like *Magic the Gathering* or well known strategy titles like the *Age of Empires* series, actually have negotiable rules and variable outcomes that the players are free to define and carry out accordingly.

So, this "gameness", this collection of ludic (ludic comes from the Latin *ludus*, which means game) qualities in a game, rather than helping us realize what games have in common, is more prone to demonstrate to us how video games differ from each other. Most importantly, these differences do not restrict themselves to the formal level, but affect play itself. Thus, two games like *Dragon Age: Origins* (a prestigious Role Playing Game, launched in 2009) and *World of Goo* (an acclaimed puzzle game which made it to the shelves in 2008) are not only distinguished by visuals (3D versus 2D graphics, or a third person perspective versus an all knowing God-like one) or narrative (open or multiple endings versus linear flow of events) but also by whether they support multiplayer, they allow multiple difficulty levels, or encourage exploration of the game world. Games also have their own economies (as suggested by Pearce's collection of framework elements mentioned above) and this is best seen in Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) games like *World of Warcraft*. Blizzard, the developer, continuously strives to maintain a stable in-game economy, despite the continuous flow of cheating users that try to flout the rules. The following excerpt is taken from the official forums, on the sixth of September, 2006:

> In keeping with Blizzard's aggressive stance against cheating in World of Warcraft, we banned over 30,000 accounts in the month of May, and with that removed well over 30 million gold (GP) from the economy across all realms. The banned accounts were taking part in activities that violate the game's Terms of Use, including using third-party programs to farm gold and items, which severely impacts the economy of a realm and the overall game enjoyment for all players.

> We will continue to aggressively monitor all World of Warcraft realms in order to protect the service and its players from the harmful effects of cheating. Please note that selling World of Warcraft content, such as gold, items, and characters, can result in a permanent ban of the involved accounts from World of Warcraft.

Players themselves react to these decisions and sometimes choose to actively comment as specialists, just as they would do in case of a real life economical event. For example, a user with the nickname Gaston, on www.notaddicted.com, talks about the unfairness of such economic regulations and security measures, while defining concepts like Scarcity and even making some comparisons to Wall Street Journal topics. It then becomes obvious that games also implement a system that balances between elements of chance and elements of strategy. Players are confined by very precise limits, the developer and at a different level, the game, defining which elements can be controlled and which cannot be.

This creates the image of the player as a human being that slides constantly between feelings of engagement, frustration, immersion or boredom. The rules and limits of video games may generate both pleasure and displeasure and are in direct dependence to the above defined gameness. But the feelings derived from video games should not be solely attributed to the quality of play. There is also a deep echo inside the player that must be taken into consideration: the various elements of the game are actively interpreted and can appeal differently to the vast array of player enthusiasms and preoccupations. In other words, while "what players and reviewers call playability is certainly an important dimension of games, what attracts and motivates players may also be the visual spectacle of game, the storytelling, the emotional appeal of the characters, the use of humour, the sense that the game is somehow relevant to their own lives and so on" (Buckingham, 2006:10). In other words, games also have a very complex representational dimension, they are complex worlds in themselves and their capacity to create universes and ideas is crucial to the sense of immersion they convey into gamers.

2.2 Video Game Culture

A new question that arises is whether the overwhelming richness of the game world determines the player to share his digital journey and the way in which he resonates with the imaginary ludic universe with others. In other words, can gaming become a complex social activity?

Until recently, both popular and academic discourses have fallen into the trap of regarding gaming as a solitary activity by excellence. This is due not only to some cultural prejudices but also due to the tools employed in the study of videogames: most scientists choose to focus on the lone player in interaction with a forcibly isolated version of the videogame discourse, intentionally ignoring the existence of collaborative play and the presence and influence of numerous social contexts that surround the video game medium. As Newman admits (2004:145), this is "understandable given the text-centred nature of the methodologies deployed in these studies".

Certainly, the interactive potential of most single player games (like *Assassin's Creed*, *Braid* or even *Mass Effect*) is literally limited by the keyboard command, which prohibits input from more than one player. In addition, Aarseth (1998:online) believes that most single player titles are tributary to the theme of "man against the environment" which encourages the gamer to explore and battle alone against the enemies, obstacles and spaces of the gameworld, in order to save the day and restore the previously disrupted equilibrum. While this theme is also common to most Western narrative, it obviously limits the scope for collaboration and collectivity in the interpretation of video games.

Yet, there's a long way from the solitary button-mashing to the image of the hard-core gamer, lost somewhere outside society and fighting his impossibility to engage in human interaction: "the gamer is differentiated from the rest of the people by the absence of friends and alternative leisure opportunities; he resorts to solitary media for distraction and entertainment" (Klein, 1984:396). It seems that videogames do not only appeal to loners, but actually encourage people in personal isolation. Players appear as vulnerable victims that have fallen to the inevitable seduction of videogames, as to the songs of the Sirens of Antiquity. Some authors, like Turkle (1984:50), blame this irresistible appeal of video games exactly on their representational qualities that I mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter. Games open up an apparently

ordered, rule governed and highly controllable world to the gamer, one that seems far less chaotic in comparison to the "real world". In this respect, games would only offer a means of escaping from annoying responsibilities, the virtual shoulder to cry on for millions of teenagers upset with the absurdity of real life. And the apparent liberty and higher-sense depicted by all videogames would only lead to a disrupted behavior in society. Even some of the most prominent figures of modernity share this exaggerated view upon the danger of video games. For President Obama, for example, they are almost a nation wide-handicap, the number one threat to democratic education. In his speech to the NAACP at its 100th anniversary celebration, Obama said that parents cannot demand achievement in school and then "fail to support them when they get home. For our kids to excel, we must accept our own responsibilities. That means putting away the Xbox and putting our kids to bed at a reasonable hour."

But are these accusations founded? Firstly, the seductive character of the game universe as a means of escape from reality is also characteristic to other representational forms, that are even non-game, for example books (although books are less popular than digital entertainment these days). Secondly, Sherry, in a study that tackles with the solitary character of play, presents a wholly different conclusion: people play videogames in order to displace another mundane and highly undesirable activity, but by no means do they play to forget the presence of other people. In fact, the result of Sherry's study suggests that videogaming is inherently social as an activity: "frequent game play appears to be highly social; perhaps the practice of standing around on the street corner has shifted indoors to video game play" (Sherry, 2001:11-12). Moreover, this does not only apply to the casual gamers that only consume family titles, but especially to the heavy players who have a reputation to maintain and contests to attend to. Finally, other research also leads to the conclusion that no current findings can strengthen the hypothetical link between videogame play as a lifestyle and social withdrawal (see Funk, or Weinstein). So, the image of the isolated, socially paralyzed gamer is more of an urban myth than the highly believable finding of an academic study.

For the cultural role and identity of video games to become even clearer, let us now assume the fact that games should not be analyzed only at the moment of play, but beyond the initial interaction. Newman himself suggests that "videogames and videogame play do not exist in a vacuum. Even if they are played alone, these texts and the experiences of them are located within

a set of interpretive practices" (2004:150). So, if one succeeds in regarding the video game world as a culture, they can immediately picture for themselves the vast array of means through which videogames can stimulate social activity and the production of an impressive cyber material and spiritual culture. Still, the discussion does not end here: although I have proved that videogaming is no longer asocial, the fan culture that most videogames generate rarely coincides with the dominant aesthetic trend. In popular culture, gamers are not seen as "nerds" or "geeks" for nothing. They most of the times present an anomalous interest for trivial, low cultural texts, fact which can only be explained through the intimate nature between the adorant and the object being adored, which results into an aesthetic blindness. The consequence is that fans are most of the times marginalized, accused of being deviant or perverse, but they nevertheless find their own social universe and cyber-culture to which they feel they belong.

2.2.1 Video Games as Social Space

While I mentioned above some of the academic literature that questioned the solitary nature of video games, none of them actually provided any concrete examples of social interaction in gaming. But the identification of such types of activities during play is not that much of a difficulty. And, because Saxe is one of the first writers to underline the benefits of studying video games in their natural context rather than in an abstract research environment, I have used Saxe's study upon violence in videogames as a basis for my categorizations and I tried to give personal examples of games that facilitate the different kinds of interactions:

- Participants, either as players or spectators, tend to gather together around the same videoscreen, which becomes a form of shared play space among individuals who might in other situations not participate in communal activities. Arcade games such as *Mortal Kombat* or *Street Fighter*, as well as acknowledged popular internet-café games like *Counter-Strike*, *Starcraft* or the popular *Warcraft III* mod, *DotA* encourage this kind of behavior, because they startle the competitive spirit of video games fans in the vicinity.
- Players create real small-scale or Internet-based large-scale social networks centered on gaming. The nature of these networks is non-confrontational and they act as knowledge-bases. For example, players share funny intertextualities between games and other cultural products (something they call "easter-eggs"), they write extensive FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) to help new players learn complex games or even full-

fledged solutions, strategy or technique descriptions. Players also make use of commercial websites to power their own social networks. Many of them, for instance, prefer the "show and tell" method they can reach using YouTube.

The first conclusion here is that not even single player video games are solitary by nature, but rather that they constitute a motivation for social interaction and brainstorming on the subject of games. It is actually a vicious circle, as players will always reach out for praise and admiration from their peers, admiration which in turn will motivate them to keep on playing. When talking about multi-player games, the social space video games create becomes even more obvious:

- "Hotseat" games allow players to compete against eachother in real time, on the same display, computer or console. Games such as the *Need for Speed* series allows two-player racing, while one-on-one combat games like *Street Fighter* are almost exclusively designed for player confrontation. In these modes of play, accent is put upon learning the strategy and tactics, strengths and weaknesses of the other player and their command and mastery of the simulation. Modern consoles, like the Xbox and Playstation have up to four ports for controller connection, which allow not only confrontational play, but also cooperative matches.

- Multiplayer games use an Internet connection to put players together and feature somewhere between two and 32 gamers in the same match. They have become popular with the ascension of the First-Person Shooter (FPS) games (for example, *Quake III Arena* on the PC or *Halo* on Xbox). Just like hotseat games, they allow both confrontational and cooperative play. In this manner, two modes of competition can be observed: direct competition and competition mediated by the computer-controlled opponents. In many games (*Left 4 Dead*, for example) while also cooperating, players race in being the one with the highest score, most kills etc. As such, competition translates into the ability to explore the parameters of the simulation both in terms of the handling and performance of the player's character and the AI of the opposition.

- Massive Multiplayer Online games feature a persistent world that is shared by millions of players. The MMO game is unavoidably public and highly multimodal: players can change clothes, go on quests, take part in social events, interact with dozens of other players both through avatar emotes and in-game chat or just stop to listen to the music and

admire the scenery. A particularity of MMOs is that two categories of gamers can be distinguished in such titles, those who play and those who role-play. Role-playing has its roots in the American table-top Role Playing Game culture and is observed by Fine (1983:207) to generate a similar rift in the classic communities of table-top games: "the gamer plays the game as himself, while the player who wishes to lose himself to the fantasy is the true role-player – he plays the character."

- Handheld devices such as the GameBoy or Nokia N-Gage have appeared at first to answer the need for privacy in competitive face-to-face gameplay. In communal competition, the risk of cheating was rather high, because the status of all players in the gameworld was constantly available on the player screen. Complex strategies and evading the opponent were impossible from start. Although the intial scope of handheld devices was clear, *Pokemon*, the most commercially successful application of this type of connectivity underlined the negotiation and bargaining potential of the GameBoy. The game was published worldwide in two versions: Blue and Red. Neither version contained all the Pokemon creatures, so the player who wanted to collect all of them had to somehow access the version they didn't own. This was achieved through physical cable connection between two devices running the different versions that allowed both battling and trading. Thus, the GameBoy proved to be just as social in nature as it was ludic.

Video games seem to encourage a wide array of social interactions and this brings up a fairer conclusion upon their nature. Even the most obvious single-player game has a social dimension. No matter how isolating the game might be, people always find a way of playing together. They may literally take turns in completing the same levels, in order to compare scores. They might as well just tackle the game world together, taking up roles in the process: for example one takes direct control of the digital avatar while the other plays the role of the "puzzle-solver" or "lookout" (always giving advice, warning the other of possible danger etc.). In fact, as Green has highlighted, the "non-active" participants in single-player games develop a deeper understanding of the mechanics of the game. They start being aware of the simulation and its parameters, something Green refers to as the "meta-knowledge of the programming principle of this particular game" (Green, 1998:30). Human beings have an inherent fascination for games, to the point of being contaminated by their rules even when not actively involved in the play process. In

fact, games are so obsessively indispensable that, as we will see below, people create a whole cultural discourse around them.

2.2.2 In the Shadow of Culture

Video games are not only a social space, but a cultural one that is not strictly delimited by the duration and context of the game. It may be that, at first, people interact in this rather tight ludic space in order to play together and share the fun either through collaboration or competition. But afterwards their minds embrace a cultural scope of video games that extends beyond the period of play. Not only would it be ridiculous to imagine that sociality and interaction come to an abrupt end with the game over screen, but there is also a lot of activity and material culture (creative content) that supports and amplifies the idea of videogames as culture. For example, Jessen identifies an existing children's computer culture: "Contrary to appearances, the computer and the games are absorbed into the existing children's culture. This happens very much on that culture's own terms - and often in ways that are quite contrary to the interests of the toy market" (Jessen, 1995:6). Others, such as Jenkins, Lewis or Brooker go as far as comparing the videogame culture to the participatory cultures of media fandom associated with *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Battlestar Galactica* or *Lost*. And, just as those fans, video game players discuss and interpret the game world not only to cyclically reinvent their favorite characters and sustain their imaginary existence, but also to express their feelings towards video games (ranging from disappointment and frustration to praise).

So, gamers are far from being isolated and incapable of defending their tastes and preferences against the attacks of popular criticism. They have access to means by which they can vocally defend and share their enthusiasm for their passions and they are animated by the idea that they represent not only themselves, but a larger social and cultural community of fans. That is why various and varied videogame fan cultures exist, in spite of the widespread public deprecation of the videogame play and players. As Jenkins notes:

To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labelled a subordinate position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutionalised authorities. Yet it is to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic.

(Jenkins, 1992:23)

As can be concluded, while powerful, fan communities are part of the underground culture. Their members operate from a position of social weaknesses and marginalization and their activity can be seen as a struggle with media industries to reinstate preferred cultural icons.

2.3 The Creative Power of Video Games in Language

But video games are not limited to the cultural scope. Multiplayer video games by excellence, for example, have a very pronounced socio-linguistic character and, to a certain extent, they even have the power to generate new language and new meanings. A news article published on www.Kotaku.com, proves that the language generative power of video games is well underestimated:

The millionth word in the English language could be... noob. That's right, noob. The Global Language Monitor has stated the one millionth word will hit June 10th, 2009 at 10:22 am, British Summer Time. Austin-based Global Language Monitor tracks the English language. Once new utterances are used 25,000 times by media outlets, social networking websites and in other public sources, GLM declares the term a new word. That's not to say these words automatically appear in Oxford dictionary. There are other words like "defriend" that could become the millionth worth, but British papers like *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun* and *The Independent* are all declaring it as truth. For people that don't know what noob means, the always delightful Urban Dictionary defines "noob" as "someone who is new to a game, or website, online game, or something."

*(*Ashcraft, 2009:online)

If even the mass media is aware of language change generated by computer games, video games must be a rather complex socio-linguistic phenomenon. But it is not only the press that underlines the power of computer games to coin new terms. Yates and Littleton, in "Understanding Computer Game Cultures: A Situated Approach", have underlined the need to examine the cultural context of player interactions. McAllister, in "Game Work" examines these processes of meaning-making and power negotiation both in computer games themselves and in the industry that surrounds them. He concludes that "playing games of one sort or another is an important,

even necessary, part of life. The extent to which the language of gaming and play saturates our discourse also testifies to their social importance." (McAllister, 2005:97) And Crawford stresses out the interactive character of video games, which are thus "alive," evolving constantly as a result of all the interpersonal material generated and thrust into the game environment (Crawford, 1984:8– 10).

Then, a video game is really not just the game you buy, it also represents the activities of the whole group of people who interact over the game by mutual play, talk, writing (e.g., FAQs or Forums), chat rooms, and websites. But, in playing and learning video games, language is almost exclusively situated in images, actions, interactions, and less in dialogue. As Kress suggests, because of digital entertainment, the very nature of language has already shifted: "The landscape of communication of the 1990s is an irrefutably multisemiotic one; and the visual mode in particular has already taken a central position in many regions of this landscape" (Kress, 1999:69).

Video games, then, tend to generate a new type of language, a descriptive, highly concentrated one. They generate a language that emphasizes the core ideas and not the stylistic value of words. But are words coined in a video game context a form of degenerated and degenerative language, or should they rather be seen as language adaptation to new socio-cultural contexts? In other words, do gamers use video games terms in other socio-cultural contexts? Or do new terms belong exclusively to the video game lexical field? Do gamers ever extend the meaning of terms? And what cyber socio-cultural phenomena facilitate the production of new words?

Let us try to analyze the longevity of gaming words, the power of gaming words to permeate language and if they have the capacity to establish themselves in the basic lexical core. As we well know, lexical entities are always continually shifting in and out of language, according to speaker needs and to cultural trends. Multiplayer games can easily adapt to the dynamics of language, as they both reproduce and challenge everyday rules of social interaction while also generating interesting innovations in verbal dialogue and non-verbal expressions. When you play a multiplayer video game, like *World of Warcraft*, you enter a complex social world, a subculture, bringing together all of the problems and possibilities of power relationships dominant in the non-virtual world. Understanding these innovations requires examining player

in-game behavior, specifically the types of *textual* (in-game chats) and *nonverbal* (logo design, avatar design and movement, etc.) actions. The complexity of these elements reveals that play is not just "playing the game," but "playing with the rules of the game". This is best shown in the diversity of talk, the creative uses of such talk and player behavior within the game, which I could narrow down to five general categories: creative game talk, game conflict talk, insult/distancing talk, performance talk and game technical/external talk. Out of these categories, probably game conflict and creative game talk generate most new words. They are both responsible for names, naming and identity talk, joking, irony and word play and they also include popular culture references (for example, *Star Wars*, *Family Guy* etc.)

Conventional game-specific language used by players of online games (for example, "afk" for "away from keyboard") work to create elements of camaraderie and comradeship. But, the use of internal language should be considered separate from what we are calling creative game talk. The creative use of names, jokes, language and other expressions, rather work to generate a different sensibility among players, often one infused with humor. Because gamers actually get to perceive the diverse aspects of reality differently, through this new sensitivity, we can admit that they use different language in all social contexts. Some gamers, for example, have a lot of trouble finding a job in their town because of their language, which other non-gamers perceived as weird or inappropriate. However, we must note that not all terms are as widespread and known as "noob". For example, the meaning of "1337" (which stands for "leet" or "elite") is known only to a small percentage of gamers. This points to the fact that language change initiated by games is one of adaptive nature, and that terms which do not serve a widespread function have the tendency of being rejected by the speakers of a language.

2.4 A Short History: The Rise of Video Game Genre

In the previous three sub-chapters I have considered video games as games, as culture and as language generators. Because of this very hybrid aspect of their nature, the academic literature has regarded a generalized theory of video games as being inefficient in establishing game studies as an academic field. Just like in the case of film studies, an approach based on genres is considered more suitable. And, because genres are intimately tied to the video game history, we

have to study the rise of digital entertainment to a certain point and its continuous growth in complexity.

When thinking about the evolution of video games, we cannot, in any situation, separate it from technological advancement. "The history of the video game is, in parts, a history of technology" (Juul, 2001:online) because games rely on the processing power of technology to function, and even more extensively, to be visually represented. Some academic literature claims that the appearance of video games as such owes a lot to a cultural shift of perspective. But it is debatable whether this cultural shift was produced by an initial technological boom or that cultural development actually inspired new technology. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle, so that games appeared as a result of the mutual influence between culture and technology. To make myself clear, I'm going to quote Juul's example: "the computer game was originally developed on equipment designed for military and academic purposes. But today the computer game is the driving force in the development of much hardware such as 3d graphics accelerators."

The video game most widely accepted as being the first is *Spacewar!*, which was developed in 1962 at MIT (credits go to Stephen Russell). Although the graphics of the game were rather primitive (compared to today's standards, at least) the game itself was addictive: two players took controls of spaceships orbiting a planet. They had to exterminate eachother and they could shoot, accelerate and turn their ship in order to win the game. Besides being more of a scientific study, this game couldn't have become a market success because it required a computer the size of a car to run smoothly.

It took 11 years for the first commercially available game, *Pong* (developed by Atari, California, in 1973), to appear. It was perceived as a very simple tennis game because it featured two white blocks on a black background and a ball that would go back and forth on the screen. Players had to move the blocks so as the ball not to fall into the void. The player who let the ball fall out of the screen would lose the game. In the beginning, *Pong* was placed at entertainment venues, markets, and fun fairs all throughout America, next to mechanical games. Soon after its release, *Pong* consistently earned four times more revenue than any other coin-operated machine, which resulted in an increase in the number of the orders Atari received (Kent, 2001:38-39). And by 1974, it was already shipped worldwide.

But, most importantly, *Pong* is one of the first games to fight for the idea of the video game being played primarly at home, and not at an arcade hall. Due to *Pong*'s huge success, Atari developed a version of the game that could run using the home TV and managed to commercialize it in 1974. The key importance of the slide from public to personal space of videogames is that "developers could make games of longer duration, games that were not focused on the simple goal of having as many players insert coins as quickly as possible" (Juul, 2001:online).

But computer game evolution is not purely a fight between the technical and cultural. The linear, somewhat expected evolution of computer hardware is less surprising than how games have conceptually altered. I was saying that the first games were mainly what would now be called action-arcade titles. Video games that followed in Pong's steps, such as *Space Invaders* (1977) and *PacMan* (1980) all applied to these rules:

- A score was kept
- The player had to either avoid or destroy the enemy
- The game was real-time and required fast reflexes
- The player had a fixed number of lives
- The difficulty would increase with each level
- The game had no, or a minimal narrative bone

In these classical action games, the player couldn't really win, because the game would at one point go beyond his physical abilities. The most important thing one could achieve in such a game was to enter the highscore list. So, developers thought of an alternative to this lack of satisfaction that video games gave to players. What if the player would identify with the in-game avatar and his background story? In this way, the digital dreams and wishes would surely have an echo upon the individual's own feelings and thus the conclusion of the game would have a bigger impact on the player.

This is the reason for which the first "text adventure" game first appeared (*Adventure*, in 1977). Unlike the action game, "an adventure is not based on fast reflexes; the time of the adventure game is on pause when the player does not do anything" (Juul, 2001:online). The player does not use a specific set of keys to control the imaginary character, but rather uses basic words to

interact with the game universe. For example, he could type the direction he wants the character to move in:

> You are standing at the end of a road before a small brick building. Around you is a forest. A small stream flows out of the building and down a gully.
>
> >enter building
>
> You are inside a building, a well house for a large spring. There are some keys on the ground here. There is tasty food here. There is a shiny brass lamp nearby. There is an empty bottle here.
>
> >get lamp
>
> Taken.

These games are not only textual in nature, but also intertextual, because they are almost always based on very loose interpretations of famous fantasy books, such as those of Tolkien, from where a wide number of magical creatures originate (like elves, trolls, orcs etc.). This is why they generated a lot of confusion at the time of their appearance, to the point that the adventure game was actually renamed "interactive fiction" in the early 1980. According to Juul, the term "was never defined theoretically, but was basically used to claim literary qualities for a game" (2001:online). These games were the image of a fictive world, taken in the narrative sense of the term, they represented a universe you could interact with and in which you could get deeply involved.

What is interesting about adventure games is the fact that they continually defined themselves as opposing other types of video games and, as they evolved, they even managed to define themselves as opposed to the their early beginnings. Take for example the *Zork* trilogy (developed by Infocom in 1981-1982), which the developers described in their advertisements as an alternative to the fast-paced action game through rich textual descriptions and an intelligent sense of humor that was more satisfying for the player:

> We unleash the world's most powerful graphics technology. You'll never see Infocom's graphics on any computer screen. We draw our graphics from the limitless imagery of your imagination - a technology so powerful, it makes any picture that's ever come out of a screen look like graffiti by comparison. Through our prose, your imagination makes you part of our stories, in control of what you do and where you go - yet unable to predict or control the course of events.

(Infocom advert, 1983)

Note the ironic attack towards the representational power of other types of games. According to the advert, the video game should be closer to a novel, it should stimulate the imagination, allow the player to become part of the story and also make him part of the game universe.

But on the long run, these games could not compete with the flourishing visual culture of their counterparts. Because they were pretty rigid at the structural level, the only way in which they could catch up was through graphical advancement. As a conclusion, the last purely text-based interactive fictions were published in the late 1980's and, with the arrival of the mouse, even textual interaction was replaced by graphical interfaces (see point and click games).

There are two important aspects that should be underlined at this point of my game history. Firstly, the action game and text adventure constitute probably the first two video game "genres" that have ever been delimited. Secondly, these two video game genres are the ancestors of any modern video game, as they developed divergently, incorporating new kinds of mechanisms, probably because of the invention of the video card and the technological boom of graphical rendering. But, by the year 2000, a phenomenon of convergence has appeared, in the sense of the hybridization of genres.

Still, I haven't defined "genre" so far and, in order to make clear the current categorizations of video game genres, more explanations are necessary. Genre theory belongs to a tradition of classification often traced back to Aristotle who, in about 335 BC, laid out systematic criteria for the analysis of epic poetry, tragedy and comedy. For Aristotle, poetry was, above all, representation (or *mimesis*) and this serves as one basis for his classification: how do different fictions represent the world in different ways? He was also concerned with form as another basis for distinguishing between the various kinds of poetry, and with medium (voice, flute, or lyre). This balance between content, form and medium continues in genre theory to the present day.

The most influential modern theory on genres is that of Bakhtin, a cultural and literary theorist who saw genre as a form of social action. According to him, genres are the conventional uses of language by social groups, and are formed in the ceaseless exchange between speaker and listener. He accepts the Aristotelian model, but adds four new ideas to the theory (Bakhtin, 1981:120-135):

- genres can be found on all uses of language, not only in artistic text
- genre is not only found into text, but also in the social context that produces it
- genre is not a fixed set of properties; it is actually fluid, constantly remade from dialogue in order to suit the needs of the social groups who produce, define and contest its structures
- genres help both at producing and receiving texts

If the two visions upon genres are to be combined and rounded up, they lead to the image of some "ideological straitjackets that control how texts represent the world" or "structures whose patterns help us navigate through and beyond existing representations of reality, and to find communities of like-minded readers, viewers and players". (Carr, 2006:15)

It is important to note that games, in their modern form, appeal to the two theories upon genre, because, as I have underlined above, they have come to incorporate both primitive forms of video game genre: "action" has become a vital part of gameplay and the "interactive fiction" is part of its representational dimension. Truly, the video game can no longer be seen different from the idea of a story to interact with. For example, Laurel (1991:135-142) believes that the computer program must take on the role as author, while the game progresses. Any action by the player must lead to the system adapting the fictive world so as to make sure every story is well formed. Although the idea is a bit too ambitious, we have clear examples of some of the most successful videogames that base their appeal on this harmonious communication between action, storyline and player. A fine example would be the *Mass Effect* series, that actually has the second episode (which appeared several years after the first) adapt its story according to the decisions that the player took in the first game. Note that the program is incapable of literally creating a proper story, because it lacks sufficient knowledge of the real world. It cannot be a true story teller, not only because it cannot avoid the absurdity of the impossibility of creation, but also because it cannot create stories that can really suck the player in (it does not have narrative skill). The trick that computer-generated stories are actually based on is the coding of a basic knowledge of the needs and interactions of humans and their goals. The key factor is making the players part of a fictive world, which is fully defined and whose rules they have to respect in order to properly play.

But games also go beyond these theories on genre. Because games are (and will remain) fully hybrid in nature, even the genre classification cannot be generic. Generic classification that foregrounds one of the factors of video games (like rules, outcomes and so on) is valid, yet taken in isolation, it would prove partial. Thus, classification must be compound and games can be classified simultaneously according to:

- the platform they are played on: PC, Xbox, PlayStation, Wii, iPhone etc.

- the style of play they employ: single-player, multiplayer

- the position of the player in the game world: first person, third person, "god"

- the rules and goals of gameplay: racing game, action adventure, shooter etc.

- the representational aspects: science fiction, high fantasy, urban realism, apocalyptic vision etc.

All these possibilities for classification coexist in games and none are irrelevant, although the style of gameplay is most often of fundamental significance in genre categorization.

2.5 Why Study Computer Games as American Cultural Products?

Economically, games are one of the most rapidly expanding sectors of the cultural industries. Now just over thirty years old, video games have quickly become one of the most persistent, profitable, and influential forms of entertainment across the world. In 2001, computer and console game software and hardware exceeded $19 billion worldwide (IDSA, 2002). And it seems that because games have their cultural roots in the USA as I've demonstrated in the last chapter, video games are a traditional key part of the entertainment industry in the North American territory - and the United States in particular, which has become the broadcast center of all technological entertainment advancement and cyber-cultural icons alike.

The important role of videogames in the American culture and game industry is further demonstrated and supported by every form of American media made a ritual of covering new records in sales, users, marketing budgets etc. in the digital entertainment industry. CNN, ABC News, FOX News, The New York Times or websites such as Yahoo all have special sections dedicated the video games where they post news, previews, interviews or reviews on a daily

basis. It is also noteworthy that the biggest websites dedicated to video games are located in USA and their main target consists in the US gamers. We are talking about www.Gamespot.com and www.IGN.com, both headquartered in San Francisco, California. The most popular print magazines in the world are also from the USA, Game Informer and PC Gamer, and nobody else on the global scale can compete with these two when it comes to exclusive/breaking news materials. The figures below will help reach the conclusion that the USA is the number one market for the video games industry.

2.5.1 Sales & Genre Data

According to data compiled by the NPD Group, a global market research company, and released by the ESA in January 2009, computer and video game companies posted record sales in 2008. The industry sold 297.6 million units, leading to an astounding $11.7 billion in revenue. Of these sales:

- Game console software sales totaled $8.9 billion with 189.0 million units sold;

- Computer games sales were $701.4 million with 29.1 million units sold;

- There was a record $2.1 billion in portable software sales with 79.5 million units sold.

The most popular game genre was "Family Entertainment", which accounted for 19 percent of all games sold in 2008, up from 9.1 percent in 2006. In addition, of the games sold in 2008, 57 percent were rated "Everyone (E)" or "Everyone 10+ (E10+)." The NPD Group's data also indicates that only 16 percent of games sold were rated "Mature (M)."

2.5.2 Economic Data

Numbers also point to the fact that entertainment software is one of the fastest growing industries in the U.S. economy. It is creating jobs and producing revenue for very diverse economy sectors. In addition, the industry posted record sales in 2007 as video games continued to grow as an entertainment medium. To further understand the economic impact of video games I have used *"Video Games in the 21st Century: Economic Contributions of the U.S. Entertainment Software Industry"*, which is the first study that quantifies in detail the specific contributions of the U.S. entertainment software industry to the nation's economy. It was conducted by Economists

Incorporated and released by the ESA in November 2007. The study found that the video game industry:

- Encouraged growth: from 2003 to 2006, the entertainment software industry's annual growth rate exceeded 17 percent. Over the same period, the entire U.S. economy grew at a less than four percent rate.

- Has a positive impact on the GDP: in 2006, the entertainment software industry's value added to U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was $3.8 billion. The industry also makes a disproportionate contribution to the real growth of the nation as whole. For example, in 2005-06 the industry's contribution to real growth exceeded its share of GDP by more than four to one.

- Continually grows as a source of employment: for the four-year period 2002-06, direct employment for the industry grew at an annual rate of 4.4 percent. Currently, computer and video game companies directly and indirectly employ more than 80,000 people in 31 states. By 2009, it is projected that the industry will support over a quarter of a million American jobs. The average salary for direct employees is $92,300, resulting in total national compensation of $2.2 billion.

The report also shows that the entertainment software industry provides benefits to individual state economies. The top five states that have the highest concentration of video game jobs are California, Washington, Texas, New York and Massachusetts. Collectively, these areas directly employ 16,604 workers and post 70 percent of the industry's total indirect employment. California alone, as the largest employer of computer and video game personnel in the nation, accounts for approximately 40 percent of total industry employment nationwide. The California based game design companies provided over $1.8 million in direct and indirect compensation to Californians last year. California's computer and video game industry grew by 12.3 percent last year, nearly three times faster than the state's overall growth and added $1.7 billion to the state economy.

Other states are also rising in the video game industry: New Jersey witnessed a boom in industry growth in recent years as computer and video game companies have expanded beyond New York

City. Virginia's entertainment software industry, meanwhile, grew by 552 percent in 2006, with computer and video game companies adding $28.7 million to the Commonwealth's economy.

2.5.3 Game Player Data

The final set of figures that I would like to present points out that video games are no longer just a form of entertainment for children and young adults alone and that the old stereotypes of the "geek-gamer" no longer apply. The ESA's "*2009 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*" show that 68 percent of American households play computer and video games. The research also reveals other interesting demographic facts about today's gamers and the games they play, including:

- The average gamer is 35 years old and has been playing for 12 years.
- Forty percent of all players are women and women over 18 years of age are one of the industry's fastest growing demographics. Today, adult women represent a greater portion of the game-playing population (34 percent) than boys age 17 or younger (18 percent).
- Twenty-five percent of game players are over the age of 50, an increase from nine percent in 1999. This figure is sure to rise in coming years with nursing homes and senior centers across the nation now incorporating video games into their activities.
- Forty-two percent of homes in America have a video game console. One out of every four households owns a Sony Playstation (Sony Corporate Website, 2000). And even Even the newest gaming console, the Xbox 360, released by Microsoft in March, 2005, has sold 9.15 million units in the USA by January 2008.
- Fifty-seven percent of online game players are male and 43 percent are female. Thirty-seven percent of heads of households report they play games on wireless devices such as a cell phone or PDA, up from 20% in 2002.
- Ninety-two percent of the time parents are present at the time games are purchased or rented. Seventy-seven percent of parents believe that the parental controls available in all new video game consoles are useful. In addition, 63 percent of parents believe games are a positive part of their children's lives.

This certainly proves that the American market has a colossal buying power. Just to have an image of this huge economical engine, it should be reflected upon the debut of the Sony

PlayStation system in October 23, 2001, which managed to net well over $150 million in just twenty-four hours.

2.6 Video Games as Myth Reconstructions

To draw a line, it can be concluded that video games rightfully belong structurally and culturally to the modern American cultural space and society, which, getting back to the theory upon myth, is regarded by Campbell as lacking an effective mythology and ritual. He finds nothing that can compare with the powerful puberty rituals of primitive societies in the American modern lifestyle. He also claims that the exclusion of classical studies from the modern educational syllabus has led to a lack of awareness of the mythological foundations of Western society's heritage. This, combined with an increased materialism and emphasis on technology, has led the modern youth to becoming alienated from the main stream of society and inventing their own morality, initiations and gangs.

But if Eliade's theory is to be taken into account, modernity would not raise such big an alarm anymore, because all forms of mass media can be regarded as transformed, degraded forms of myth reconstruction. For example, this definition of the television, provided by Maltby and Craven (1995:22) demonstrates how the so-called "window of the world" can create realities, just as well as myths do: "(TV is a) Utopian version of the audience's own world: Utopian in the sense that it is a place of more energy and more abundance than the 'real' world, and also… that its issues, problems, and conflicts are clearer and more intense than those we experience in our day-to-day reality." We can already see the Sacred and the Profane both being encompassed into the fixed models of news with deep moral values and light sitcoms. Moreover, the partial familiarity of the TV turns it into an "axis mundi", a symbol of the family and its strength in modern American society.

As computers gradually began to merge with popular media culture, stressing accessibility, pleasure and familiarity, it also became clear that video games bear a similar cultural role. And, with this role, came their obvious identity as myth reconstructions. We could say that video games are one of the most powerful forms of myth reconstruction: advanced technologies such as graphical engines, quality voice acting and epic soundtracks, controller vibration and dense storylines build up a synesthesy of senses that the traditional man could only reach through trance or deep meditation. Moreover, as Buckingham stresses out (2006:40), "because games are

essentially fictional in nature, they are fundamentally set apart from ordinary life. As Salen and Zimmerman (2003) put it, the game takes place within a 'magic circle', a frame that marks it off from reality, both spatially (in that the game world is distinct from the real world) and temporally (in that play must begin and end)". Namely, video games by definition set themselves in what Eliade calls the "illo tempore", outside time and space, preparing to become, through their level of realism, the very reincarnations of myths. And, while the simple myth structure is still hidden under a wealth of narrative devices, games have the strongest impact on players because they employ the use of role-playing. When role-playing, the participant assumes the role of a fictional character. He is supposed to act based on the characterization, and the actions he does succeed or fail based on a formal system of rules and guidelines (the fixed forms of ideal models). Within the rules, players can improvise and their choices shape the direction and outcome of the game. The roles one is supposed to play are never ordinary ones. Most of the times the player substitutes the hero (see *Neverwinter Nights*, for example), the anti-hero (*Overlord*), or even a god (*Black & White*), who embarks on a mission of balancing (or unbalancing) the universe. While the "rite of passage" might seem trivialized through the use of technology, feelings are greatly expanded and the myth is always revived, and absorbed, although at an unconscious level.

CHAPTER THREE: THE MYTH OF ATLANTIS and THE META-GAME

3.1 Research Questions

Reviewing a wide array of acadmic literature both on the subject of myths and video games as culture has left me with a series of complex questions that, once answered, are meant to clarify the role of video game as myth reconstructions. The questions most suitable to the scope of this project are:

1. At what level of video games do myths manifest?

2. Are all games myth reconstructions?

3. Is there a fundamental myth that transcends all video games?

4. Do video games alter myth structures?

In other words, I will try filling the gaps that may have remained between games and myths and find additional validity to the conclusion of the last chapter.

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Data & Data Collection

My study is based mostly on qualitative methods. It will interpret a wide array of data collected mainly from two video games: *Bioshock* (2007) and *Braid* (2008). I have chosen these two titles because neither of them seems to have, at a first look, a deep link with mythology. *Bioshock* is a First Person Shooter, an action title by excellence that wouldn't usually put too much emphasis on elements other than virtual destruction. *Braid*, on the other hand, is a puzzle platformer, most closely related to the ancestrial "arcade action" genre and should have a very basic structure that does not leave space for deep mythical echoes.

At first, I will rely on the plot of the games to distinguish basic mythical occurrences, which I will compare with ancient mythical patterns that Frazer has identified and catalogued in his study, The Golden Bough. Then, I will analyze the representational level of the video game and beyond to identify other areas where myths manifest themselves during play. But my study isn't limited to the period of play. Based on comments collected from player communities and other sorts of

fan created content, I will try to underline how games stretch beyond the initial ludic moment, together with their mythical pattern. Probably the most difficult task will be to find a fundamental myth that transcends all video games, because this requires an act of generalization which cannot rely solely on the data collected from two video games. The same applies to answering whether all games are myth reconstructions. To reach a conclusion, I will have to rely both on my specific findings and academic literature.

3.2.2 Means of Analysis

In my analysis, I have ignored the technical aspects of games and also any elements of theory of game design, hardware, programming or the political economy of games, although I will touch upon some of these aspects in the last chapter of my work.

The first problem that arises when analysing video games is that game studies is a new field and inevitably most of those scholars involved are refugees from other disciplines. Theories drawn from narrative theory, film studies, social semiotic theory and sociology are also applicable when commenting video games. So, a new coherent set of critical tools has to be developed to enable the analysis of video game content. A first aspect I want to underline is what the study should be focusing on: the structure of game texts or the player? In choosing the former, I risk to underestimate the social and cultural specifics of the audience and the degree to which such factors might alter the perception upon video games. If I choose the latter and I ignore the particularities of the ludic discourse, I might misunderstand the game experience. As Buckingham admits, (2006:104) "the tension between textual analysis (humanities) and audience-based research (social sciences) is impossible to ignore in the context of computer games and gaming culture, precisely because the game text is playable: it is only realized through play, and play is lived, social and culturally situated experience." I can only reach the conclusion that video games should be treated wholistically: I have to analyze the game text, the player and their dynamic relationship.

I want to underline that to call a game "text" is not to deny that it involves play, mutability, chance, interactivity or change. A "text" is not something that does not have materiality in this context, and it is not limited to the things that are written down, it can incorporate many communicative modes: speech, song, sound, writing, visual design. What matters is that it is

recognizable and that it is replicable. So, for my purpose, the fact that video games are only fully realized when they are played does not exempt them from being text.

Also, when focusing on the player and his relationship with the game world, I will have to refer to the genre of the game (which I defined in chapter two), on gameplay, space and navigation, but also on the avatar. I found out that the analysis is easier if I split the game up according to the elements that Jarvinen (2003:103) defines as the types of rules specific to a game:

1. components: rules relating to the properties of objects within the game that define their number, status or value

2. procedures: these realte to the actions that players perform in order to play and advance towards their goal; procedures may have to be performed in a certain order, using certain components

3. Environments: the physical space of play, which may be less or more abstract. Environments typically contain objects or paths that constrain movement, and define the boundaries of the game world

4. Themes: the content of the game, for example puzzle solving or driving or fighting or escaping to safety. They may be more or less abstract, can enable players to use knowledge drawn from other areas of media or of real life (sport)

5. Interface: means to access the game

3.3 *Bioshock* – the Myth of Atlantis

Speaking in terms of genre, *Bioshock* is a First Person Shooter. In such a game, the avatar is provided by the game and is usually not seen, meaning that players are directly connected to his or her field of vision. The avatar is characterized by the game's back story and their physical capabilities are, to a large extent, predetermined. The hero or heroine might detour to rescue others, but by and large they tend to travel alone.

The avatar's path through the world is generally preset: a particular set of puzzles or obstacles need to be confronted or overcome, in a given order. Obstacles tend to have a single solution, there is little dialogue or on-screen texts, the menu options are quite straightforward and the

economies of the game relate to easily quantifiable properties such as the character's helath status or his amount of ammunition. Confrontations occur in real time, with success allowing onward progression and failure resulting in injury or death.

Aside from gradually acquiring bigger weapons, the avatar does not necessarily alter through the game – it is the player's strategic acquisition of skill that matters most. Also, the goal is usually clearly proposed and straight forward and there is an emphasis on spectacle, pace and accuracy.

But that does not mean that a shallow narrative structure lacks potential for mythical exploration. It is enough to start from the condition of the loneliness of the hero itself to be able to explore the wealth of mythical content. When playing the role of the stranger, the gamer discovers himself through exploring the Universe. In his search, the player actually recreates the world according to his own image, just as in the Vedic legend of Brima, the god created existence only when he realized he was alone and a stranger to himself. The only way he could explore his own nature was through exploring his creation.

The protagonist of *Bioshock* though is not aware of his uniqueness and his loneliness at the beginning, and only a traumatic experience can initiate the series of enlightenments. In this case, on his trip home, the plane crashes into the sea and the protagonist discovers a hidden underwater city, Rapture. Note the setting of the game: firstly, everything takes place in the water, which, according to Eliade (1963:42), has a deep religious valorization:

1) The waters existed before the Earth (see Genesis 1.2, "Darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters")

2) Through waters, the world becomes transparent, and can show the transcendent

Indeed, water symbolizes the universal sum of virtualities, the spring of origin, a reservoir of all possibilities of existence; it precedes every form and supports every creation. Eliade reminds that one of the paradigmatic images of creation is the island that suddenly manifests itself in the midst of the waves. On the other hand, immersion in water signifies regression to the preformal, reincorporation into the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence. "Emersion repeats the cosmogonic act of formal manifestation; immersion is equivalent to dissolution of forms" (Eliade, 1957:130). In other words, water underlines the tension between death and rebirth.

Contact with water always brings regeneration because dissolution is followed by a new birth and because immersion fertilizes and multiplies the potential of life. But the aquatic cosmology has its counterpart in the belief that mankind was born of the waters. So, water is not a final extinction but a temporary reincorporation into the indistinct, followed by a new creation, a new life, or a new man. Waters retain their function: they disintegrate, abolish form and wash away sins. They are both purifying and regenerating. Their desitiny is to precede creation and reabsorb it, since they are incapable of transcending their own mode of being, incapable of manifesting themselves in forms. Waters cannot pass the condition of virtual, of latency and germs.

At the same time, Rapture is presented as in the middle, as the best and central point of humanity. Once again, Eliade reminds that only the true world is always in the middle, at the Center, for "it is here that there is a break in plane and hence communication among the three cosmic zones" (Eliade, 1957:42). The player soon understands that the water has lost its purifying characteristic in the case of the beautiful steampunk city, because it is half dead, as expecting something. Also, it is inhabited with monsters, which once again remind of the myths of creation. The marine creature is a symbol of the amorphous and the virtual, of everything that hasn't yet acquired form. For example, in the Babylonian legends, Marduk, by slaying the monster Tiamat, had created the world. And the players too must plunge into the tainted waters to recreate the world.

Rapture literally becomes the image of the Forbidden City, the image of the Lost City of Atlantis, one that Plato describes in his two dialogues, the *Timaeus* and the *Critias* (see Annex I). The writer underlines that the city has been cursed by the Gods to be forever sunken because people, blinded by prosperity, have forgotten the sacred laws. Their foolish deeds and their evil coalition have brought their destruction. Rapture, on the other hand, did never see the light of the watery surface. It was built from the beginning as defiance to the laws of the external world, as his creator, Andrew Ryan, admits in one of the monologues across the game: "I chose Rapture, a city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, where the great would not be constrained by the small". Through this rejection of the laws of order, Rapture will be exposed to decay, and Ryan will often be accused of the corruption that literally reaches a physical state. Because, as in any myth, "the king or priest is often thought to be endowed with supernatural powers or to be an incarnation of a deity, and consistently with this belief the course of nature is supposed to be more or less under his control, and he is held

responsible for bad weather, failure of the crops, and similar calamities. His person is considered, if we may express it so, as the dynamical centre of the universe, from which lines of force radiate to all quarters of the heaven; He is the point of support on which hangs the balance of the world, and the slightest irregularity on his part may overthrow the delicate equipoise." (Frazer, 1922: chapter XVII, The Burden of Royalty) This is where the anonymous player emerges as a hero, brought by fate, not by accident into this mad world. He is there to kill the ill man-god: "the man-god must be killed as soon as he shows symptoms that his powers are beginning to fail, and his soul must be transferred to a vigorous successor before it has been seriously impaired by the threatened decay." (Frazer, 1922: chapter XXIV, The Killing of the Divine King). The new king will bring equilibrium to the tainted world and would reinstate order.

The descent of the hero into the darkness of the ocean is also a symbol of initiation, which acts as "a threefold revelation – of death, the sacred and sexuality" (Eliade, 1957:188). Death is present in Rapture at every step. Take the wrong corner and you might end up shredded by the splicers, the disfigured and mutated citizens of this virtual world. Sometimes, corpses decorate the environment like fashion dolls, betraying not only a troubling and violent pulse of the city, but also the twisted artistical taste of some of its inhabitants. Sexuality here is also linked to death, as most of your enemies are disgustingly naked. A different kind of sexuality can be seen in the relationship between the Big Daddies and the Little Sisters (see Annex I). These sisters are the corrupted children of the city, who can extract the vital essence of all dead creatures throughout Rapture (something the game calls "Adam", a very valuable substance everyone wants to get their hands on). The Big Daddies are their protectors, huge mechanized people that have been engineered to die if they are split from a Sister for too long. They attract the little harvesters using pheromones and cannot talk, expressing themselves only through the chilling sound of a raging bull. There is a small trace of pedophilia into their relationship, which further demonstrates the anomalous connection between death, sexuality and the grotesque in this game. The Sacred, too, is revealed through the very same little girls. The hero has the ability to purify them and through them, to save the future of the dying underwater city. The Little Sisters are pure because they are the victims of a condition they haven't consciously assumed. For them, the anonymous hero is a Messiah that will open the Gates to Heaven. At the same time, the hero can choose to sacrifice them and further lower the city into Hell.

This brings us to another aspect of the game. *Bioshock* does not stop here, and alters the simple mythic structure by mirroring it and creating a triangle of antagonisms. In the end, the initial stranger and hero can be nothing but a tool of destruction, a dirty trick in a battle between two gods. Andrew Ryan shares the city with Frank Fontaine, a corrupted businessman, the one that has been threatening the fragile system of the underwater city from the beginning. In an ultimate plan that spans over decades, Fontaine had created the character of the player as a biological weapon, a flesh and blood automaton that responds to the key phrase "would you kindly". Because two sacred gods cannot directly confront each other, as such a deed would threaten the very existence of the Universe, Fontaine sent his creation away from the underwater world, while also making sure he will return one day, to shatter the other God: "I remember when I and the Kraut put you on that sub. You were no more than two. You were my ace in the hole. But you were also the closest thing I've ever had to a son. That's why this hurts, kid. Life isn't strictly business." It is important to note that Andrew Ryan is aware of the evil scheme plotted against him, and yet, he does nothing. His death will appear as self-sacrifice of the God, for the equilibrium of his created universe. Even the feelings Ryan has towards the player range between disappointment in the sometimes automatic nature of creation and deep consideration: "You think you have memories. A farm. A family. An airplane. A crash. And then this place. Was there really a family? Did that airplane crash, or, was it hijacked? Forced down, forced down by something less than a man, something bred to sleepwalk through life unless activated by a simple phrase, spoken by their kindly master."

The lack of equilibrium of the world is not brought by the tainted dreams of one human-god anymore, but by the refusal of the two gods to complement each other. Destruction refuses to oppose Creation, as if Yin would refuse to form a whole with Yang. Ryan understands Fontaine's refusal to be his counter-part, he understand his lust of power, and, at the same time, sees the victory that his own sacrifice would bring: "What is the difference between a man and a parasite? A man builds. A parasite asks 'Where is my share?' A man creates. A parasite says, 'What will the neighbors think?' A man invents. A parasite says, 'Watch out, or you might tread on the toes of God...' ".

As you can see, the player is drawn into a whirlwind of ideas, into a multitude of potential myths which he has to sort out and live individually. If we were to talk into Eliade's terms again, the

player is not living the Eternal Return (reminder: "the detachment from profane time and the magical re-entering into the Great Time, the sacred time"), but rather a series of juxtaposed Eternal Returns, a whole sacred life in a second.

But how exactly does the player react to this labyrinth of symbols and mythical structures? In order to answer this question, I analyzed some active discussion threads which I found on The Escapist Forums. They are moderated by a user named Maet and the reason for which I chose this content and not other threads is because the feedback is much more complex and directly correlated. Below are some of the key comments that Maet made, which I will detail upon:

> (1) " I wrote this because I feel the need to outline how important the Vita Chamber is to the story of BioShock, even if all you see it as is an artificial 'make game easy' machine. This review is essentially ONE MASSIVE SPOILER written for the people who have experienced BioShock in mind. You have been warned. Most critics tend to automatically dismiss the use of Vita Chambers as a petty attempt at scaling down the BioShock's difficulty to a friendlier level. Granted if you just take the Vita Chambers at face value and never really ask yourself why they're there or what the whole point of them plot-wise is, then that's exactly what it levels out to. Fact is, BioShock is deliberately crafted from the ground up, which means that virtually every element of the game, pertaining to both aesthetic and UI design, has a reason. Vita Chambers are no exception."

> (2) "ADAM, ADAM, ADAM... It's bathtub gin, times the atom bomb, times Eve with the serpent."

> (3) "Given the above paragraphs, you should be able to see my frustration with ADAM: it's just too damn mysterious. The characters talk about ADAM a whole hell of a lot, but when you trim the fat, not much is really said about it. As far as the player is concerned, ADAM can be traded for plasmids. If anyone asks, ADAM is retrieved from sea slugs operating symbiotically in the tummies of little girls, end of story (in BioShock 1, at least). But there is hope for this thread as Tenenbaum does query in a diary recovered in Point Prometheus that she herself doesn't understand why only little girls can generate ADAM. Perhaps one day the player will sympathize with her woes too."

> (4) "Just keep in mind that whether or not Ryan lives is a coin toss and a likely direction for BioShock 2: Sea of Dreams."

User Maet on The Escapist Forum

In the first comment, the user underlines his intention of clarifying the role of Vita-Chambers in the *Bioshock* game. Note that Maet actually tries to point out that what the others believe to be simple gameplay devices (Vita-Chambers are the spots where, if you die, you will be respawned) he sees Vita-Chambers as important to the game lore. In other words, he is aware that not only pure narrative elements participate in the construction of the game mythology, but also elements belonging to the field of gameplay mechanics: "Vita Chambers are an important part of the game design, but also of the story: you're able to use them, therefore you share Ryan's genetic frequency, therefore you must be related to Andrew Ryan! (cue dramatic sound byte). This is

where things get interesting. Vita Chambers are tuned to a specific genetic frequency, and since the player shares that frequency, this explains why the player is able to use them. But what about the rest of Rapture? What good is a widely commercial product available for only a handful of citizens, if anyone outside Ryan's immediate genetic structure at all?" Maet is already thinking in mythical patterns, identifying the image of Ryan with the image of God the Creator, that is in one way or another the father of all creation (here, the parent of all Rapture citizens).

The first finding here is that sensitivity to mythical structures varies from player to player: while there is a number of people who tend to see the mythical narrative simply as a backdrop for the actual play, at the opposite pole, players claim that every game element is crucial to its mythical coherence. What is important here is the fact that the first category of people do not disagree with the theory of the second category, rather, they just admit that they do not have the patience to consciously aknowedge the existence of mythical patterns. For example, elricik notes that: "Wow you really put a lot of thought into this. I didn't even realize all of these things until you pointed it out." And his opinion is shared by a lot of the other users on the forum. So, this does not mean that the myth is not used or filtered by the more unaware players, but they do it unconsciously, passively deepening themselves in the mythical pattern as they play the game.

Maet's second comment is actually an in-game quote, which tries to explain the nature of Adam. In it, this substance that all of Rapture's economy is based on is actually compared to a tainted version of the godly ambrosia (a "bath tub gin" that carries the originary sin). As can be seen, users are free to replicate the discourse of myths and, most importantly, they are free to give it a new, unique interpretation. This is a key fact that leads to the flexibility of mythical structures. Myths survive because they are adaptable and can morph to correspond to the human needs. They are so open to interpretation that they can freely provide the means for elaboration and even for the creation of new mythologies.

In fact, even if mythical structures sometimes prove too basic in video games, it is this quality of theirs to be adaptable that determines them to inherently gain complexity in the mind of the player. If the third comment is to be analyzed, Maet complains about the „mystery" around Adam and how the substance functions. He would like the game world to give more details about its origins and its role in the game universe, yet this does not stop him from making his own

speculations and inventing his own plausible mini-mythology. The same tendency can be seen in the fourth quote, where the user imagines a storyline for the Bioshock sequel, The Sea of Dreams. His ideas have little to do with the internal coherence of the game world, especially in the absence of proper facts. But it is probably this lack of information that enables him to fabulate in the first place. While the other users tended to react quite approvingly to Maet's first comment, when it comes to inventing a new mythology people get more reluctant. Krait Razer, for instance says that: "Bioshock is a game that fascinated me the first time I played it as well as seeing hidden plot lines the second time through. Looking forward to more of your good work as no matter how many times I played through it this had never come to mind as a solution. I'm sitting here wondering if, when looked at in depth, it is possible to come up with more conclusions and ideas than was intended by the original developers."

In other words, Razer expresses his worry that personal discourses might go beyond the mythical discourse of the text. This user thus underlines one of the oldest conflicts that was discovered regarding myths: if myths are sacred texts that onthologically found the world, how far is the sacred man/ the believer allowed to go in interpreting, playing them out and reinterpreting them? Wouldn't overinterpretation be the signal of the degradation of myth in modern cultures? Would the same apply to underinterpretation? I think the truth lies somewhere in between. The very signal of degradation is the fact that people actually worry about such things. If we were to talk in Eliade's terms, sacred man's rite of worshipping is absolute. He is simply happy, by repeating godly gestures in his own way, to be contemporary with the Sacred and creation. Relativity of space and time is a modern construct and so are the doubts that accompany it.

However, it is true that players can fall into the trap of mistaking some functional elements belonging to the field of play as having mythical functions. While a mythical function can exist, it is often minimized in the case of enemy design (for physical memory usage reduction purposes, for example), yet Maet goes on talking about a possible deep link between duplication and the game history, as if he's referring to a sort of conspiration theory and not a game anymore: "Do you ever find yourself underwhelmed by the small variety of character models and voices in game? You kill one batch of splicers, only to encounter what could very well be the exact same splicers ten in game minutes later! But wait a tick, what if those splicers *are exactly the same splicers*? What if they can use Vita Chambers and bathyspheres too? Wouldn't that both explain

why you see the exact same enemies everywhere and lend credibility to this rather preposterous genetic device?" Here, an exacerbation of the mythical discourse occurs and the sense deviates so much from the original meaning that it risks to lose its regulatory function. It's almost as if the discourse becomes gratuitous and commercial, no longer being able to encompass the absolute meaning of the game text.

Above I have seen some of the most common reactions players tend to have when confronted with a coherent mythical substructure. As can be seen, video games bring a sort of relief to the player, which he fully acknowledges. But it is debatable whether mythical structures are at work here or the very nature of play is the one that allows the pleasurable escape from reality. I think both factors account for the enjoyment of video games. And in order to prove that mythical structures also play an important part, I will continue my analysis with *Braid*, a simple video game that challenges the player's logic to the extent of making him desire to generate new meanings for the game. Bear in mind the fact that this tendency of expanding the game world to the outer reality is most likely encouraged by myth and less by play.

3.4 Braid – the Self-conscious Video Game

Unlike *Bioshock*, *Braid* belongs to the genre of 2D puzzle platformers. This means that the gameplay mechanics are even simpler, the player moving from left to right in the game universe, while also being able to use a jump mechanism to reach the different platforms that give the genre its name. Platformers come in two varieties: fixed and side-scrolling. In the first case, the setting of each level is fixed and quite limited. *Braid* belongs to the second category, where the universe of each level is slightly bigger and can be progressively discovered by going to the edge of the screen. Moreover, *Braid* is set apart from other types of platformers through its puzzles. Players are not meant here to only avoid or destroy the creatures of the universe, but actually have to understand the rules and mechanics of each world to progress forward. In fact, the death mechanic has been eliminated here in favor of the actual possibility of getting stuck in a level, which is worse than death. For instance, players can use a time reverse "spell" to undo an otherwise imminent fall into the void, but the same time reverse ability could prove useless or even ruining when used into a puzzle.

Braid is also seen as an art game, or what I like to call a meta-game (a game that constructs a discourse based on its own devices), because it has been developed by a small independent studio (you could actually call it the "baby" of one single person, the developer Jonathan Blow) with the precise aim of criticizing the current trends in game development. Juul compares Blow's creation, a challenge for the narrow mind, with the defiant trends of rock: "It's kind of like punk rock" (Warren, online). "They were a reaction to big progressive rock bands like Pink Floyd who had these elaborate tours." *Braid* is by no means a game for the light-minded, the final goal being to understand the game itself and to reach an open perspective upon the challenges of video games in general. So, *Braid* has a deconstructive role. It shatters predetermined rules and proof to that is the title's feeble narrative structure, which is over 90% concentrated in the epilogue of the game.

At a first look, the game takes the structure of a sad love story - the player controls Tim in his search of the Princess, who has run away and is forever to be found in another castle. But this is just one surface plot and theme that blends into the nonlinear pulse of the game. Looked at in detail, the storyline has no coherent chronology. Instead, each plot element helps in the development of Tim's character and contributes to the overall message of the game. Tim travels through four worlds, which are constructed and given meaning through four key elements:

       1) Different time gameplay mechanics - each world introduces a unique concept upon time.

       2) The artistical direction of the game – the music and different paint touches are used to set the mood of each world and to hint towards its theme. As the player progresses, the overall tone will get a bit darker.

       3) The explanatory books found throughout the universe – at some point in the game, Tim will reach the clouds, where he can read enlightening books. Of course, these tomes have little to do with the main plot of the game, but they serve as a metaphor for the gameplay of their respective world. The themes they convey are to be looked at as pieces in a scrapbook which, juxtaposed, can paint a whole picture.

       4) The puzzle images at the end of each world – these help in regarding the theme of the world from a different angle. They all depict male figures which, contrary to popular belief, are not Tim. In fact, they should not be taken literally, they are independent entities and do not correspond to the events detailed in the books either.

If the elements of the game are so disparate, how is it possible for them to form a cohesive image when joined? The answer lies in their deep symbolical qualities. In order to illustrate their huge potential, I will analyze World 2, for example. This is actually the first playable world in the game, for a reason apparently unknown at first. It is named "Time and Forgiveness" and the player soon understands that this first universe gives him the chance to learn from his mistakes. Observe how all the elements merge in their symbolical value to point towards the same meaning. The time mechanic introduced in this world is Rewind, the ability to undo a mistake and try again without penalty. Also, in this optimistic start of the game the colors are vivid and the music is pleasant. According to the graphical artist behind *Braid*, Hellman (2008:online), this starting universe "is a very forgiving world. The art had to add to that sense of forgiveness and positivity." (see Annex II) The same sense of relaxation and lack of consequences to your action is conveyed by the finished puzzle-painting of World 2, which shows a black-haired man drinking white wine with a woman in a garden. He reaches for his glass, but accidentally tips over the bottle of wine. The painting is basically a snapshot of a mistake in progress.

The same thing cannot be admitted in the case of World 5, which is the peak in this prorgression from carelessness to full impact upon the universe. This world is named Time and Decision and it functions based on the mechanic and motif of the Doppelganger. Here, Tim is able to create a shadow of himself to pursue and carry out a different fate. In this sequence, Hellman (2008:online) admitted that he had to underline the theme of "parallel realities" somehow: "I represented the theme by combining luxurious domestic objects (nice furniture and fabrics) with rugged outdoor objects (swampy water, rotting piers and nautical rope).   The resuilt is incongruous, but intentionally so! Hopefully players will have two simultaneous reactions – 'what a nice ottoman' and 'what a yucky swamp' – again reiterating the theme of 'splitting', or 'staying or going'." (see Annex II) Also, this world's painting depicts two versions of the man at an airport. One is sitting down, looking depressed while waiting for his flight. The other is in good spirits, happily walking towards his next destination. A woman walking in front of the happier clone unites the two scenes by putting her hand on a seat near the sad person.

This splitting of the world in two is the first sign of a disruption in the harmony between reality and illusion in the game universe. A disruption which will transform World 6 into a paralysis of the internal coherence of the universe meant to give it the time to recapture and reintegrate its

sense. This sixth world, named Hesitance, uses the metaphor of the wedding ring to convey this internal crisis. The ring is both a sign of devotion but also a huge form of commitment that slows people's decisions down to the point of paralysis. This world's time mechanic functions in exactly the same way. The closer to Tim's ring an object is, the slower it moves. It's clear that the ring is a burden that Tim can use to achieve goals he might not otherwise be able to, but that's all. It's exhausting to use and only works to a limited degree.

As you may have observed, I have made no comments yet upon the books in the clouds. This is because the tomes offer a totally different key to the text of the game. They contain three parallel stories, told using the voice of three key figures: a disappointed lover, a cryptic mother and the personified atomic bomb, the metaphor of destruction. Apparently, they have nothing in common. But if they are examined beyond the surface of their short stories, they represent the sacrifices that have to be made for creation. Here is a passage that is self-explanatory:

> "He worked his ruler and his compass. He inferred. He deduced. He scrutinized the fall of an apple, the twisting of metal orbs hanging from a thread. He was searching for the Princess, and he would not stop until he found her, for he was hungry.
>
> Ghostly, she stood in front of him and looked into his eyes. 'I am here', she said. 'I am here. I want to touch you'. She pleaded: Look at me! But he would not see her; he only knew how to look at the outside of things."

(*Braid*)

Two things stand out in the fragment: firstly, the character's search, compared to the scrutinizing thoughts of scientists, is quite limited because it only looks upon the surface of things ("he only knew how to look at the outside of things"). Secondly, now we know why the Princess is forever in another castle. This is because it should no longer be taken literally, but as a metaphor of the bomb, a being of immense destruction, who does not want to be brought in this world. It is trying to evade its creation, because her creator cannot grasp the full meaning of her existence and cannot control the devastatory outcome of the genesis. There is additional clue that points to this idea. In the end of the game, when the player reaches the final castle, he gets a slightly different line from its inhabitants: "It took you so long to get here! But at long last, I can tell you that the Princess must be in another castle. I've never met her... Are you sure she exists?" The Princess is no longer in another castle, but "must" be out there somewhere, on the imaginary plane of ideas.

Another element that is supposed to get you thinking is where the World 1 that the game insists so much on skipping at the beginning has been all along. Once you reach the end world, you will figure out the fact that this is actually the first one. This is a hint that you are playing the game in reverse. The final level is actually the first door of that world, not the last. The game tries to show you the future in the attempt to stop you from pursuing your goal of creation, which will bring the destruction of the universe. In the real world, there is no such thing as a "rewind" ability. Moreover, man tries to shake off his imperfection by reaching a godly status through creation. But he only manages to defy the divine entities and he will always be punished by the inner balance of the universe. At least this is what the game suggests.

So far, I have been analyzing the structure of the game, both at the ludic and representational level but I haven't touched on the mythical perspective. So where are myths hidden in this video game? If we remember Eliade's theory, symbols form a coherent, logical system that reveals meanings simultaneously and that expresses the "subconscious and transconscious activity of man." In other words, symbols are the indicator of myths: where there are symbols, there are links to the mythical layer of the human being. And *Braid* has loads of them. But we do run into a problem when we try to identifiy the specific myth we are talking about. It could be the myth of creation, intertwined with the myth of the place of man in the real world. But at the same time, we could be talking about the myth of the eternal cyclic time (let us not forget that we are playing the game in rewind and seem to be always stuck in an eternal repetition of the act of creation; also, note that the hero's name, Tim, is actually a play of words derived from the word "time"). The myth of destruction is also a plausible one that can be seen as part of this particular title. Or, at the same time, *Braid* could be a collection of myths, a myth of the whole, of the internal coherence of the universe, of a deep link between all aspects of existence.

This myth can be identified if we try analyzing the title of the game. According to Wikipedia, a "braid is a complex structure or pattern formed by intertwining three or more strands of flexible material such as textile fibres, wire, or human hair. Compared to the process of weaving a wide sheet of cloth, a braid is usually long and narrow, with each component strand functionally equivalent in zigzagging forward through the overlapping mass of the others." Blow, the developer of the game, has made it clear in several interviews that the story isn't entirely about the atomic bomb and that the allusions to the bomb and the trinity test may just be part of a

deeper meaning attached to the game. So, *Braid* may be a game that tries to define the universe and the human condition in the universal context, while also criticising the repetitivity of creation (and of design practices in video games). It tries to swallow the real world as a whole, with all its intricate links that are never random. While player feedback is less prominent here (most players do not perceive beyond the puzzle platformer aspect of the game) than in the case of *BioShock*, the specialized media which had to analyize the game in depth and is closer to the sensitivity of the academical study, seems to agree:

> Braid doesn't have a story, at least not in the traditional linear narrative sense, but there's a lead character, Tim, and his mission is to find a princess. She's not a literal princess though, but a metaphor – the romantic cliché of that perfect soul mate as filtered through popular videogame motifs. The classic Mario line "our princess is in another castle", knowingly reused here, is more than just an ironic wink to gaming history. In the context of Braid's melancholy mood, it becomes a bona fide commentary on the human condition. Our princess is *always* in another castle.

Whitehead - *Braid* Review on Eurogamer.net

This leads to the conclusion that the level of mythical complexity in a video game is not directly proportional with the complexity of its narrative structure. *Braid* seems less elaborate that *Bioshock*, both in terms of play, universe and its 2D representation. But at the mythical level it is probably ten times as deep, raising a lot of questions and bending the mind of the aware player. Of course, the game is less easy to decipher, but the effort is well worth it. So, the mythical weight of a video game does not rely necessarily on its functional structures, but on its symbols, which can be found at any level of the experience, be it the user interface, the narrative or the actual gameplay mechanics.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Research Conclusions

Now that I have finished my analysis of the two games, it is time to put my findings together and partially answer the questions that I formulated at the beginning of the third chapter. For a full response, I will also combine my findings with the conclusions of other academic studies.

The first question I wanted to answer concerned the different levels of video games at which myths manifest. As I analyzed the two games above, I have discovered that myths are most transparent at the textual level of the video games, as the narrative structures behind games closely mirror those of other more traditional forms of media (books or movies). *Bioshock*, for example, chose to tackle with the idea of the hero destined to save a condemned world. Most modern complex games, be they FPS like the analyzed game, action-adventures or RPGs usually have the player control a model heroic figure. Sometimes, he is simply a solider in an impossible war (*Battlefield*, *Medal of Honor*), at others he is an icon with super-powers (*Crysis*, *Prototype*, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*) or an able commander (*Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age: Origins*). There are also those situations in which the gamer controls an anti-hero (the vampire in *Legacy of Kain* or the outlaw in *Grand Theft Auto*) but the game makes sure to build a deep emphatic link between player and avatar as the story unfolds. Raziel, the main character in *Legacy of Kain* is betrayed by his brethren at the beginning of the game because he is envied for his wings while Niko Bellic, on whom *Grand Theft Auto IV* focuses, is the perfect victim of the American Dream. *Braid* on the other hand shows an apparently normal protagonist which suddenly finds himself in an uncommon situation - the Orphic search for love, which later proves to be the metaphor of scientific labor.

But games do not simply limit themselves to the textual level when developing mythical patterns. For some games which are more reduced in narrative setting, symbols are just as important in rounding up the representational. In *Braid*, whose plot is concentrated in a few books, Tim, the protagonist, discovers in the sky, the Princess is a symbol for the atomic bomb, which in turn is a symbol for the fragile balance between creation and destruction. Most independent titles like to play with meanings and the mythical power of symbols to compensate for the rudimentary plot: *The Misadventrues of P.B. Winterbottom* uses the motif of the doppleganger to suggest the

illusory nature of reality, while *World of Goo* breathes life into objects to underline the artificiality of the human world. These same symbols are also used to refine the meanings in more narratively elaborate games. Just because *Bioshock* features a more robust plot this does not mean it cannot benefit from the additional connotations of symbols. The elaborate art deco style is here a symbol for the stylish decadence that surrounds the underwater city, while Big Daddies and the Lilttle Sisters themselves are the living victimis of man defying the universal creation.

It can be thus concluded that myths can be identified to a certain degree at any level of the videogame, according to how deep the analyst chooses to delve into details. To a certain extent, even the level design and the overall design of a video game can reflect myths. Both *Bioshock* and *Braid* include initiatory patterns that are significant for the avatar as well as for the player himself and all the game elements are organized around this initiatory skeleton. According to Krzywinska (2008:128), the epic hero quest originates "within early civilizations—Greek, Teutonic, Babylonian, Hebraic, Hindu, Egyptian—in stories and poetry aimed to glorify their princes and warriors, each filtered through the terms of their own cosmological traditions (Rank, Raglan, and Dundes, 1990)". The author adds that the hero quest format has also been integrated into popular culture, in part through the widespread influence of Campbell's "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" (1969) on Hollywood scriptwriters. Thus, it can be concluded that due to its ancient roots and popular expressions, the hero quest figure has imposed itself in the collective consciousness. As well as enriching the text, setting expectations and encouraging identification, playing a hero "affords a vicarious yet pleasurable sense of agency, the sphere of which is extended and exploited by many games" (Krzywinska, 2008:128).

This initial conclusion also helped me answer another one of my questions. I believe there is a fundamental myth that transcends all video games and that is the myth of creation. Each videogame is, in fact, another way to represent the already created reality or, in some way, to recreate it. Of course, the freshly shaped reality is filtered through the experience of the new creator(s) and cannot encompass all the dimensions of the divine world. The player himself recreates the game universe by interpreting it through their own vision. And although this vision is not perfect, it is nonetheless close to the ritual and sacred return to illo tempore that Eliade discovered in the primitive religious man.

If this hypothesis of the universal myth of creation in video games is to be accepted, then all video games can be regarded as bearing mythical value through refounding the world. However, the academic literature sees some video games as having social significance over mythical charge. The sacred, balancing value of these video games fades in comparison to their social role of bringing people together. Massive multiplayer online games and sport games are seen as falling into this category. With sport games it is fairly simple to clarify and establish their mythical roots and value, as sports originate in the Olympic Games whose "origins were attributed to the gods, and competing legends persisted as to who actually was responsible for the Games' genesis" (Kyle, 2007:101). The players were the direct representatives of the Gods, in whose names they won their olive wreaths. In one way or another, today's sport video games and cyber-confrontations are still the clash between different fundamental concepts. With massively multiplayer role-playing online games such as World of Warcraft, Guild Wars, Warhammer Online or Lord of the Rings Online, myth is harder to be discovered under what Kaveney called the "thick text" of the video game, abundantly populated with references. But Krzywinska argues that once the myth has helped with the genesis of the fantasy game world it cannot simply withdraw from creation. Myth continuously stimulates an intertextual interplay which "offers players the opportunity to inhabit such worlds wherein they play and interact with others in the guise of heroic adventurers" (Krzywinska, 2008:123) and helps in the generation of meaning and in the recognition of popular cultural artifacts. "As such, any fantasy-based game draws on a range of preexisting sources relevant to the invocation of the fantastic to lend breadth and depth to a gameworld and to make use of players' knowledge". (Krzywinska, 2008:124) That is why myths can be seen not only simply as part of the narrative (the dimension in which we have already agreed myth is most visible) but furthermore as having a structural function (for example, the mythological narrative envelope of the quest or game objectives helps to disguise the game's technologically based mechanics), as shaping the experience of the game world, its temporal condition and also the game resonance, style registers and rhetoric. It is true that players might interact with different types of mythos, ranging from classical myth to myth filtered through the 'fantasy' register or even myth as derived form other forms of popular and game cultures. It also seems that at times more quotidian aspects dominate the player's experience or that even the game can be played without the real interest of the player to accumulate the ingame lore: "mythos is likely to slide into the background when a player is engaged in concentrated localized tasks or

when indulging in certain chat room-style social activities" (Krzywinska, 2008:130). But in the end, the myth is a fundamental unifying feature of the design of the MMO as it provides an archetype that is core to the pleasure of playing any game.

The last question I wanted to find an answer to is whether video games alter the structure of the myths they are based on. In order to elaborate a response, one should reflect more on the nature of classical myths, whose imaginary worlds constitute a blueprint for the derivation and creation of others. The modern game fantasy worlds, universes or multiverses "use structures and forms derived from preexisting mythological cosmologies and follows in the world-creating footsteps forged in myth systems such as the Celtic, Greek, Native North American, and Nordic". (Krzywinska, 2008:130) Myth, being the story of a cosmogony, needs to adapt itself to explain the creation of all the particular virtual worldviews, so mythical adjustment is unoavoidable. But there are also positive aspects that come with the process of myth alteration. Most classical mythological worlds, although they employ the use of symbols to extend beyond the surface narrative meaning, are linear in nature.

By contrast, the development of computing technologies that enable the construction of three-dimensional digital space within which a player character can move around and choose to do different activities shifts the video game mythical experience to the domain of the nonlinear. Unlike or other media, video games, and especially massive multiplayer online games such as World of Warcraft offer a persistent world in temporal terms that exists whether or not an individual player is playing. As such, the gameworld has a material presence beyond the sphere of the player that resembles in some respects the way that a primitive mythologically based worldview functioned.

The fact that a player is an active choice-making entity within the gameworld adds a lot to the process of mythical alteration. As a living part of an apparently coherent world, the gamer finds himself entitled in continually recreating his universe in order to justify it. The cyber self-obsession is so prevalent that it extends outside of the scope of the play moment itself. This is the only way in which the fan dialogue, concept art, efforts to give additional coherence to the game world and even speculations upon the future of a video game series can be explained.

But what is the downside of this process of mythical alteration? The difference between the video game universe and a mythologically based one is that in a digital world, we choose as consumers to inhabit it and we understand that this is a fantasy world designed for our entertainment rather than a reality. Games, more than ever, have constituted themselves as brands. From 1996 to 2006 computer and video game sales in the United States grew from $2.6 billion to $7.4 billion (Entertainment Software Association, 2007). Due to the growth of the industry, video games now seem to be a major competitor for traditional forms of entertainment, discretionary income, and consumer leisure time. In fact, 2004 sales of video game items surpassed movie theater box office receipts in the US market (e-Strategic Research, 2005). Moreover, a comprehensive study has revealed the potential of sport video games to act as "an innovative tool to reach existing sport consumers, attract new customers, and access younger market segments by incorporating brands into interactive games" (Newman, 2008). It seems that about 700 million dollars in advertising revenue is generated via in-game ads in the US, according to The Yankee Group (2010).

So, when playing video games, the sacred "reality" of the myth no longer applies to our frame of knowledge and the process of mythical purification through ritual is highly unconscious and might even not take place. As Krzywinska admits, "although it is still the case that many game worlds make use of mythic structures, the guiding framework, the mode of delivery, and therefore the nature of our engagement are altered"(2008:63). But where are video games really heading to?

4.2 Reconstructions or Deconstructions?

When trying to predict the future trajectory of videogames, the academic literature likes to make estimations which imply that alternative modes of video game evolution exclude eachother. Authors formulate all their questions based on binary oppositions, such as: is the future of gaming to be found online, or in next-generation mobile devices? With the appearance of MMOs, does single-player have any chance in still attracting gamers? The latest years have seen the emerging of DLCs (Downloadable Content) and episodes. If we take this tendency into account, will video games continue to be distributed as stand-alone entities, or rather as sequential titles, developed in response to player feedback? Which will prevail: 100-hours plus games such as

Dragon Age: Origins or short indie titles? And last but not least, which will continue to prevail, gameplay or graphics?

I personally prefer the opinion of Newman, who believes that "there is no reason why videogaming cannot develop in all of these areas simultaneously" (Newman, 2004:170). For example, at the time of this study, retrogaming sits confortably alongside Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. In fact, companies such as Good Old Games (www.gog.com) have already started re-commercializing games from the '80 and '90 and developing DOS-games support for the current operating systems. Microsoft itself wants to take advantage of the arcade melancholy by opening the Game Room section on Xbox and Windows LIVE: "Relive the glory days of the classic arcade: Game Room replicates the old-school look, sound, and feel of a retro video game arcade. At launch, Game Room brings you a library of 30 original arcade and console classics from Activision, Atari, Intellivision, Konami, Taito, and others, including *Centipede,Asteroids Deluxe*, and *Super Cobra*, shown in their original cabinets. With weekly new title releases, your arcade will be retro-fitted to perfection!" (official website).

Newman believes that each potential future offers a trend of development that complements the others. And that it is foolish and naive to think that videogaming can exist in only one form. For instance, single-player and multiplayer games have co-existed alongside mobile and home console systems for many years. In this way, we could reach the conclusion that video games do not constitute a medium, but what Kay defines as a 'metamedium', a medium able to simulate the properties and characteristics of any other, whether real or imaginary. As video games can be delivered through a large plethora of media, it is natural for the future of video gaming to be accurately described through diversity, not uniformity.

Numbers point to the same fact: the latest annual study - Global entertainment and media outlook: 2009–2013 - published by PricewaterhouseCoopers (or PwC), one of the world's largest professional services firms and the largest of the Big Four auditing firms, is pointing towards the same diversification:

   - The console video game market in North America is being driven by the newest generation of platforms. Console/handheld games will continue to dominate the market, increasing at a compound annual rate of 5.5 percent to $15.5 billion in 2013 from $11.9 billion in 2008.

- Consumer spending on games will expand at a 5.4 percent compound annual rate to $20.1 billion from $15.5 billion in 2008, while advertising will rise from $765 million in 2008 to $1.4 billion, a 13 percent increase compounded annually.

- The online game market will benefit from new business models, the increased use of the newest consoles that enhance online activity, and rising penetration of broadband homes. Online games are expected to increase from $2.0 billion in 2008 to $2.7 billion in 2013, growing by 6.4 percent on a compound annual basis.

- The deployment of game-friendly mobile phone handsets will expand the market for wireless games, which will be the fastest-growing end-user segment, increasing by 8.0 percent on a compound annual basis from $858 million in 2008 to $1.3 billion in 2013.

- The market for PC games will continue to stagnate as interest shifts to other forms of games. The PC game market will decrease to $697 million in 2013 from $789 million in 2008, a 2.4 percent compound annual decline.

But the diversity which characterizes the future of videogames still does not make the development trajectory clear. This is mostly due to the speed of technological and the unpredictability of game design trends. While playing *Pong* in the livingroom 30 years ago it would have surely been impossible to predict the photo-realistic 3D environments experienced on today's modern PCs, for example. Also, consumer resistance has a lot to say when it comes to adopting video games as cultural practices. Technology alone is not sufficient to impress gamers: virtual reality is a fine example for that. While the headset-based coin-operated games of the mid-1990s enjoyed some limited success with their novelty, virtual reality has made no impact on the home market. Nintendo's public Virtual Boy console was released to considerable consumer apathy and there are now almost no references to it on the company's official website. The technologies of VR have simply not impacted upon computer entertainment in the way that specialists predicted.

Online gaming too has raised mixed feeling between gamers at the beginning and while it was popular among some PC users, attempts to bring similar connectivity to the mass-market via video game consoles such as Sega's Dreamcast have been largely unsuccessful in the past. Were

it not to the invention of persistent worlds, video game players might still ignore the wonders of Internet today. As Newman explains, "where most videogames cease upon turning off the console and their gameworlds can be considered to be constituted only while the player chooses to engage with them, persistent universes exist in perpetuity. As such, their simulations continue to operate whether or not a player is engaged with them"(2004:175). These persistent universes are based on the online medium and allow many players to simultaneously experience them. One such game in particular, the *World of Warcraft* MMO, was the first to attract over 11 million players in its coherent realms, but it must be said that the phenomenon has been rather isolated. While developers have discovered the business potential of MMOs through *World of Warcraft*'s huge success, other MMOs remain simple sattelites around this massive giant, luring away subscribers which are simply tired of the high-fantasy context. Antoher problem with MMOs and persistent worlds in general is that, although having not even reached maturity as a genre, they already have the tendency to turn into something else. Paul Barnett, the head of the Electronic Arts Mythic video game studio, in an interview with Eurogamer.net on the future tendencies of MMOs admitted that "MMO, as a phrase, is something that is becoming irrelevant. It's like 'dialling' a telephone number. You do not actually dial numbers much now. And MMOs, the games that are massive and multiplayer and online, aren't really MMOs any more". (online) What he means is that the term MMO now encompasses such a large area as to be unrecognisable. In the past, a MMO was defined by a server to which many people could connect. Now, the MMO tag can be attached to a vast array of possible experiences, from the enormous complexities of the subscription-funded epics of *World Of Warcraft* and *EVE Online*, through a host of online experiments, down to the asynchronous, essentially non-multiplayer casual games such as *FarmVille*. Specialists do not even recognise the existence of sports MMOs, not because they had not heard of the games, but perhaps because these games do not fit the template of what people there thought MMOs should be. MMO developers are genuinely worried about the succes of quasi-MMOs such as FarmVille because they cannot explain this shift away from subscription-based complex games towards simple games where the business model is based on micro-transactions: giving things away for free and then trying to persuade the player to give away as little money as possible.

Juul has found the roots of this exodus from complex games in the emergence of what he calls "The Casual Revolution", a cultural reinvention of what a video game can be and a reimagining

of who can become a video game player. Players no longer "fit any stereotype of the adolescent male video game player"(2009:1). They have discovered the casual game, which is simple, sometimes musical or can played using plastic guitars and other gadgets but which, most importantly "does not ask players to readjust their busy schedules"(Juul, 2009:2). Video games have slowly stopped belonging to a social elite, they are losing their so called "coolness" and they are becoming normal. This means they have started to fit the social contexts in which people are already spending their time. It could also be said that games are getting back to their roots, they are reconnecting with the audience they had in the arcade era, with those people they have alienated when maturing as a medium and when developing a large set of conventions: to play video games has become the norm, to not play video games has become the exception.

But what is casual? According to Juul, "the concepts of casual players and casual games became popular around the year 2000 as contrasts to more traditional video games, now called hardcore games, and the hardcore players who play them" (2009:15). As I've underlined in the second chapter, there is a culturally identifiable stereotype of a hardcore player who "has a preference for science fiction, zombies, and fantasy fictions, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games" (2009:16). The casual player is the exact opposite of what I described above: he has a preference for positive fictions, hasn't played a lot of video games, will not commit a lot of resources towards playing and does not have the patience to play difficult games. What Juul chooses to underline is that casual players rarely have casual gameplay experiences. Most of the time, they play just as much as hardcore gamers do. Then, the difference between the two stereotypes is simply that casual gamers tend to play games that provide a meaningful play experience in a shorter time frame.

Bearing in mind the definitions above, casual games are simplicity rediscovered, games that are easy to learn to play, which scale well to a large number of players and can be played in many situations. Juul (2009:15) identifies two trends which define this casual revolution:

1) Games with mimetic interfaces: the physical activity of the player mimics the game activity on the screen. Nintendo Wii games fall into this category, because the player can, for example, play tennis by literally swinging his arm using the Wii remote (Wiimote) which comes with the device. Music games such as *Guitar Her*o or *Rock Band* also fall into this category.

2) Downloadable casual games: these games are purchased online and can be played in short sessions. They also do not require any video game knowledge in order to be played. Games such as *Zuma*, *Diner Dash* or any hidden-object titles.

I would also add a third element to his list, the one I have discovered above while talking about MMOs and namely:

3) Browser based games: these are asynchronous games which do not require a lot of time spent in them; they usually function on the principle of accumulating rewards and communicating with other players to reach your goals. Such examples would be all Facebook games (which, it should be noted, are already integrated into a social network) and *Travian*, *Heroes of Might and Magic Online* etc.

These games are played on computers, consoles and cellphones (including the widely popular iPhone). They reach players through a wide array of distribution channels and have more exposure than hardcore games, which are usually limited to a single traditional platform. Because of this, the rise of casual games has also changed the conditions for creating games targeted at non-casual players. As Juul explains, "it is harder and harder to find people willing to fund games that only go after that narrow hardcore audience." In other words, the rise of casual games has an impact upon the whole industry and forces developers to make games for a broader audience.

Moreover, because they reconnect to the arcade audience, these casual games develop a taste for retrogaming and emulation. According to Newman (2004:180), "Retrogaming describes the growing interest in 'vintage' or 'classic' videogaming hardware and software. The fascination with 1970s', 1980s' and, even, early 1990s' 'vintage' videogaming is often expressed in terms of its 'purity'. Here, 'classic' refers not only to the age of the systems and software, but to their status and, particularly, to their perceived emphasis on gameplay over the trappings of presentation and (re)packaging." But retrogaming does not necessarily require retro systems. Emulation software has emerged to mimic the technical functionalities and capabilities of the old platforms. Thus, by utilizing such applications, PC users may enjoy virtual implementations of gaming platforms such as the Atari VCS, Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and Sega MegaDrive. It is highly possible that these kinds of 'vintage' games may form the initial portfolio for the 'next generatino' 3G mobile devices. We've already seen olf LucasArts point&click titles being

implemented on the iPhone (for example, *The Curse of Monkey Island*). And console manufacturers themselves have already seen the benefits of casual gaming.

After concentrating so much on change, it is worth asking ourselves what has remained the same so far. The most immediately obvious element that has remained largely unaltered is the videogame controller. While contemporary videogames may seem unrecognizably more sophisticated aesthetically and may offer more complex and varied gameplay, the player, in the home at least, has at their disposal what is essentially the same input device as was attached to consoles more than 20 years old: the thumb pad controller and also the much more complex keyboard and mouse combination. In this field, perhaps the most important 'revolution' of recent years was the inclusion of 'analogue' controls (in fact, still digital but mimicking analogue properties) offering proportional rather than momentary control. Thus, moving the analogue stick a little makes the character walk, while pushing it further makes him break out into a jog while pushing it further still sees him run. However, manufacturers are slowly moving away from controllers. Project Natal, recently renamed to Kinect, which will be launched this Christmas will eliminate the need of a controller altogether, because it uses a camera which records the player's moves and tries to mimic them inside the game environment.

But will this shift towards the casual deepen the mythical structure of video games? Or will it make it shallower? In my opinion, immediate games which have an immediate experience cannot develop an intricate mythical maze. Because they are not as demanding as hardcore games, the player will no longer suffer the deep withdrawal from reality that true challenges bring about. At the same time though, casual games have rediscovered in casual players means of interaction which closer resemble the mythical interactions of ancient communities. Casual games are more easily shared than their hardcore counterparts. And, as the analysis of *Braid* has demonstrated, casual games and indie titles can concentrate a lot of mythical symbols if they are carefully developed.

4.3 Limitations of the Study

This impossibility to foresee the future of video games as myth reconstructions is also due to the fact that many researchers have criticized Eliade's work, on which I too have based my suppositions, as having no empirical support. My analysis of the mythical structure of

videogames can thus be based on the dangerous hipothesis of an Eliade that "failed to provide an adequate methodology for myths or the history of religions and to establish this discipline as an empirical science" (Ricketts, 1978:400). Still, we must note that "the history of religions should not aim at being an empirical science anyway" (Ricketts, 1978:401). Specifically, it is hard to prove both that the Sacred is a structure of human consciousness or that it isn't. In my study, I had the tendency to identify the Sacred with a certain part of the human unconscious, as rarely do gamers realize the deep mythical implications games have. Nevertheless, as long as the literature itself had not drawn any conclusion on the subject, one can still choose to observe this mythical function of games, in order to illustrate faces of digital entertainment different from the debates on violence and education.

ANNEX I
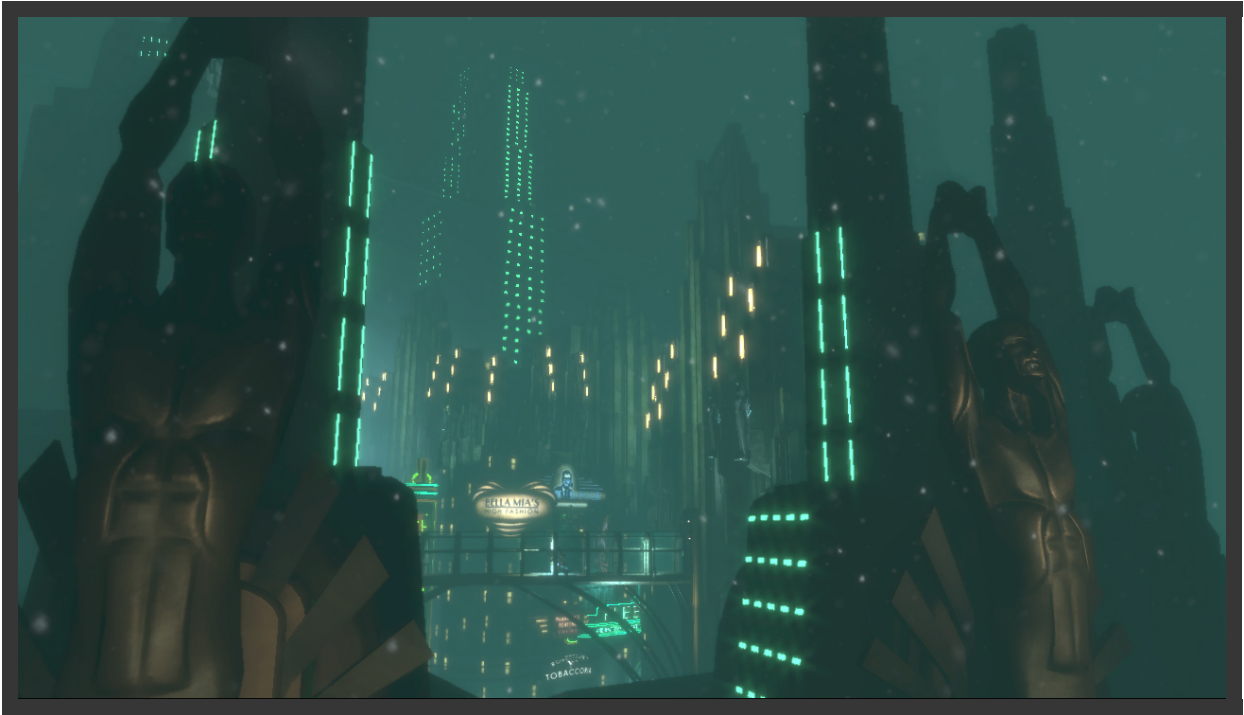
Rapture – an underwater city which reminds of Atlantis
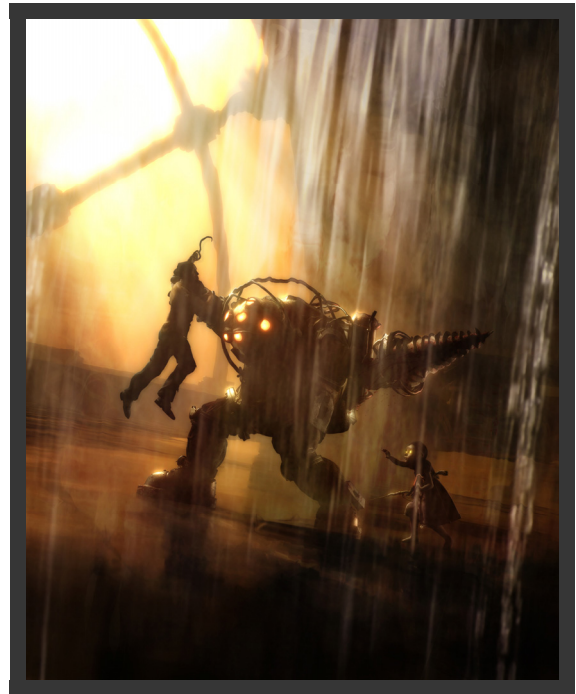
The Big Daddies and the Little Sisters – a symbol of Rapture's degradation

The art direction of the first levels of Braid suggests forgiveness

In Time and Decision, the theme of parallel realities is explored: luxurious domestic objects are combined with rugged outdoor objects

REFERENCES:

Aarseth, E. (2001) *Computer Game Studies, Year One.*
http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html

Aarseth, E. (1998) *Allegories of Space: the Question of Spatiality in Computer Games* available at http://www.hf.uib.no/hi/espen/papers/space/

Aristotle (1961) *Poetics.* Transl. S. H. Butcher, New York: Hill and Wang

Ashcraft, B. (2009) *The Millionth Word In The English Language Could Be....* Online at
http://kotaku.com/5248752/the-millionth-word-in-the-english-language-could-be

Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* Austin: University of Texas Press

Bierlein, J. F. (1994) *Parallel Myths*. New York: Ballantine Books

Bierhorst, J. (1985) *The Mythology of North America.* New York: William Morrow

Campbell, J. (1988) *The Power of Myth,* New York: Betty Sue Flowers

Campbell, J. (1990) *Transformations of Myth through Time.* New York: Harper & Row

Carr, D., Buckignham, D., Burn, A. & Scott, G. (2006). *Computer Games. Text, Narrative & Play.* Malden, MA, USA: Polity Press

Crawford, C. (1984) *The Art of Computer Game Design*. Berkeley, CA: Osborne/McGrawHill.

Dovey, J. (2006) *Games Cultures : Computer Games As New Media.* Berkshire, GBR: McGraw-Hill Education.

Eliade, M. (1959) *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New York: Harper Torchbooks

Eliade, M. (1963) *Myth and Reality.* Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper & Row

Eliade, M. *(1957) The Sacred & The Profane*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt

Feinstein, K. (1999) Interviewed in 'Towards a Definition of Videogames'. *Electronic Convservancy.* Online at www.videotopia.com/errata1.htm

Fine, G. (1983) *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press

Frazer, J. G. (1922) *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gaston, *World of Warcraft Economy in trouble!,* online at http://www.notaddicted.com/forums/showthread.php?t=430

Green, B. (1998) 'Teching the Nintendo generation? Children, computer culture and popular technologies' in Howard, S. (ed.) *Wired-Up: Young People and the Electronic Media* London: UCL Press

Hellman, D. (2008) *Braid.* Online at: http://www.davidhellman.net/braid.htm

Jarvinen, A. (2003) *Making and Breaking Games: A Typology of Rules.* Paper presented at the Level Up Digital Games Research Conference, Utrecht

Jung, C. (1963) *Memories, Dreams, Reflections.* trans. Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Pantheon Books

Jenkins, H. (1992) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Cultures* London: Routledge

Jessen, C. (1995) *Children's Computer Culture* available at http://www.hum.sdu.dk/center/kultur/buE/articles.html

Juul, J. (2001) "Game telling stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives", *Game Studies, 1,* online at www.gamestudies.org

Juul, J. (2001) *A Clash between Game and Narrative.* Online at:

http://www.jesperjuul.net/thesis/2-historyofthecomputergame.html

Juul, J. (2009) *A Casual Revolution.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press

Kaveney, R. (2005) *From Alien to The Matrix: Reading Science Fiction Film*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Kent, Steven (2001) "And Then There Was Pong". *Ultimate History of Video Games*. New York: Threee Rivers Press

Klein, M.H. (1984) "The bite of Pac-Man" *The Journal of Psychohistory* 11: 395-401

Kluckhohn, C. (1942) *Myths and Rituals: A General Theory* Harvard Theological Review

Kress, G. (1999) *English at the crossroads: Rethinking curricula of communication in the context of the turn to the visual.* In Gail E. Hawisher, & Cynthia L. Selfe (Eds.), Passions, pedagogies and 21st century technologies. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Krzywinska, T. (2008) 'World Creation and Lore: World of Warcraft as Rich Text' in Corneliussen, G.H., Rettberg J.W., *Digital Culture, Play and Identity – a World of Warcraft reader*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press

Kyle, Donald G. (2007) *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World.* Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing.

Laurel, B. K. (1991) *Computers as Theatre*. MA: Addison-Wesley

Leeming, D. A. (1990) *The World of Myth*. New York: Oxford University Press

Maltby, R. and Craven, I. (1995) *Holywood Cinema*, Oxford: Blackwell

May, R.(1991) *The Cry of Myth.* New York: W. W. Norton

McAllister, Ken S. (2005) *Game Work : Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture.*

Tuscaloosa, AL, USA: University of Alabama Press.

McLuhan, M. (1965) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*

McWhertor, M.(2008) *Who's Winning The Console War In The US?*. Online on Kotaku:

http://kotaku.com/346301/whos-winning-the-console-war-in-the-us. Retrieved on 2008-01-19.

Newman, J. (2004). *Videogames.* London: Routledge

Pearce, C. (2002) 'Story as Play Space: Narrative in Games' in L. King (ed.), *Game on: The History and Culture of Video Games*, London: Lawrence King

Rilstone, A. (1994) *Role-Playing Games: An Overview*, Inter*Action #1.

Ricketts, M. L. (1978) "Review of *Religion on Trial: Mircea Eliade and His Critics* by Guilford Dudley III", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 46, No. 3

Rochelle, W. G.(2001) *The Rethoric of Myth in the Fiction of Ursula K. le Guin.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Saxe, J. (1994) 'Violence in videogames: what are the pleasures?' paper presented at the International Conference on Violence in the Media

Sherry, J. (2001) *'Video game uses and gratifications as predictors of use and game preference'* paper presented at the ICA convention Video Game Research Agenda Theme Session Panel, 26 May 2001. Available at:

 http://www.icdweb.cc.purdue.edu/~sherry/videogames/VGUG.pdf

Sowa, C.A. (1973) *Ancient Myths in Modern Movies.* Online at:

http://www.minervaclassics.com/movimyth.htm

Turkle, S. (1984) *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit.* New York: Simon & Schuster

Yates, S.J. & Littleton, K. (1999) *Understanding Computer Game Cultures: A Situated Approach.* Information, Communication & Society.

Walsh, P., Kim, Y., Ross, S.D. (2008) *Brand Recall and Recognition: a Comparison of Television and Sport Video Games as Presentation Modes.* Sport Marketing Quarterly. Volume: 17. Issue: 4