Heroism, Gaming, and the Rhetoric of Immortality

by

Jason Hawreliak

A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
Thesis requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2013

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines rhetorics of heroism and immortality as they are negotiated

through a variety of (new) media contexts. The dissertation demonstrates that media technologies

in general, and videogames in particular, serve an existential or "death denying" function, which

insulates individuals from the terror of mortality. The dissertation also discusses the hero as a

rhetorical trope, and suggests that its relationship with immortality makes it a particularly

powerful persuasive device. Chapter one provides a historical overview of the hero figure and its

relationship with immortality, particularly within the context of ancient Greece. Chapter two

examines the material means by which media technologies serve a death denying function, via

"symbolic immortality" (inscription), and the McLuhanian concept of extension. Chapter three

examines the prevalence of the hero and villain figures in propaganda, with particular attention

paid to the use of visual propaganda in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Chapter four

situates the videogame as an inherently heroic, death denying medium; videogames can extend

the player's sense of self, provide quantifiable victory criteria, and allow players to participate in

"heroic" events. Chapter five examines the soldier-as-hero motif as it appears in two popular

genres, the First Person Shooter, and Role-Playing Game. Particular attention is paid to the *Call

of Duty* series and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Chapter six outlines an "epistemological

exercise," which attempts to empirically test the claims made in the previous chapters via Terror

Management Theory, an experimental paradigm which examines the relationship between

mortality, self-esteem, and ideology. The conclusion discusses how videogames can contest

prevailing views of the heroic, and calls for a departure from contemporary game design

practices.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

For Crystal, my partner in crime and best friend. Your love and support have sustained me throughout. I am eternally grateful to have you by my side as we embark on this journey together.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Introduction: Heroism, Gaming, and the Rhetoric of Immortality

> What man really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction *with insignificance*. Man wants to know that his life has somehow counted, if not for himself, then at least in a larger scheme of things, that it has left a trace, a trace that has meaning.
>
> - Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil*

> Where, in the real world, is that gamer sense of being fully alive, focused, and engaged in every moment? Where is the gamer feeling of power, heroic purpose, and community? Where are the bursts of exhilarating and creative game accomplishment? Where is the heart-expanding thrill of success and team victory?… The real world just doesn't offer up as easily the carefully designed pleasures, the thrilling challenges, and the powerful social bonding afforded by virtual environments.
>
> - Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken*

In a deathbed interview conducted by the philosopher Sam Keen (1974/2005), Ernest Becker sums up the central thesis of his life's work: "[A]ll humanly caused evil is based on man's attempt to deny his creaturliness, to overcome his insignificance. All the bombs, all human edifices, are attempts to defy eternity by proclaiming that one is not a creature, that one is something special" (p. 220). According to Becker, human beings are deeply motivated by an urge to "deny" death and transcend mortality, either *literally* (through an afterlife) or *symbolically* (through a legacy). Like all organisms, human beings are biologically driven to seek out more life and survive for as long as possible. However, because we are also capable of abstract thinking and can anticipate future events, we also recognize that we are mortal beings who will eventually die. This tension between our evolutionary instinct to survive and our ability to foresee an inevitable end is a source of potentially crippling anxiety, and so, Becker suggests, we evolved a variety of coping mechanisms for dealing with this "existential terror."

For Becker, human beings cope with mortality primarily by denying our status as mere animals; instead, we often imbue the human with "extra-biological" and therefore more lasting attributes, such as an eternal soul. In order to demonstrate that we are more significant than "worms and food for worms" (Becker, 1973, p. 26), we engage in social practices which increase feelings of belonging and self worth; we try to stand out, and to convince ourselves and others that we are beings of cosmic significance. In short, we yearn to be heroes, those individuals honoured by their societies and celebrated through song, sculpture, and most recently, digital technologies (O'Gorman, 2010). One attains hero status by living up to, or excelling within, culturally defined standards of value, those characteristics most valued by a particular culture.

Becker calls these standards of value "cultural hero systems," since they provide the interpretive frameworks for defining the heroic. These hero systems manifest themselves in myriad ways, from the Homeric and chivalric ideals which emphasize military prowess and "honor," to contemporary conceptions of heroism, which might include material wealth, tech-savviness, or even philanthropy. In all cases, cultural hero systems provide us with "worldviews," which help us understand our environment, as well as our place within it. As animals acutely aware of our own finitude, we want to make a lasting mark of some sort, something which will survive our physiological deaths. Cultural hero systems provide the guidelines for doing just that. After all, in order to achieve "greatness," it is necessary to first outline the conditions for greatness in the first place. In making a mark, whether globally or locally, individuals are rewarded with a legacy, a name which outlasts our finite existence, and which can be propagated through available media forms. We can still read about the exploits of Alexander the Great, for instance, or view Admiral Horatio Nelson's likeness in Trafalgar Square. We remember the heroes, and in this remembrance they continue to live on.

The urge to prove oneself a hero is thus intimately tied to our basic organismic urge to extend life, and this makes the hero a powerful persuasive device: If individuals believe that acting or thinking in a particular way grants them hero status—and therefore immortality—then they will be strongly motivated to act or think according to that hero system. The hero can thus be seen as a benchmark, a heuristic for encapsulating everything that is admirable, right, and good. We see how heroes are revered, and we want to be like them. How we define the heroic therefore has profound implications. As I will demonstrate in this dissertation, conceptions of heroism are negotiated within the predominant communication media of the day. In ancient Greece, rhetorics of heroism appeared primarily in epic poetry and sculpture; in Elizabethan England they appeared in plays and treatises. Today, perhaps more than anywhere else, they appear in videogames.

As we shall see, through a variety of mutually reinforcing techniques, videogames are uniquely situated in their ability to construct, perpetuate, and contest rhetorics of heroism and immortality. As media they allow us to extend our sense of self and increase our potency (McLuhan, 1964). As games they provide an arena in which to quantifiably demonstrate excellence and stand out among others (Huizinga, 1955). And as a procedural, audiovisual medium, they provide us with the rules, sights and sounds (Bogost, 2007), of what it means to be a hero. Videogames put all of these component parts together, and are thus capable of constructing, perpetuating and contesting rhetorics of heroism. Through examining videogames and their component parts, the dissertation explores the rhetorical techniques by which heroism is defined, and how such definitions can tell us about the broader cultural contexts from which they emerge.

Furthermore, the dissertation looks at how rhetorics of heroism and immortality are

appropriated for persuasive purposes. For example, by invoking the fear of death and then also providing a remedy for death-fear, skilled rhetoricians and propagandists can construct powerfully persuasive arguments which tap into our deepest psychological needs.

The relationship between persuasion, heroism, and immortality is not a clean one, to be sure. Each society is comprised of several, semi-permeable hero systems, all desperately competing with one another for the status of unequivocal Truth. Indeed, this discursive battle to define the parameters of heroism is equally significant to, and a necessary pre-cursor for "actual" war. As media theorist Friedrich Kittler (1999) puts it, "True wars are not waged over people or fatherlands, but rather between various media, communications technologies, and data streams" (p. 30). This dissertation is ultimately concerned with understanding how media systems in general, and videogames in particular "fight" these discursive battles, and the consequences which result from them.

One of the problems with heroism is that inevitably, heroes require villains to vanquish. After all, one must *earn* symbolic immortality; it is not for everybody. Sometimes this dichotomy can be used for beneficial purposes. For example, setting up poverty and disease as "villains" has led to remarkable breakthroughs in improving the length and quality of life for millions of human beings.[1] However, all too often villains and "evil" take human form, and so exterminating them is not only permitted, but enthusiastically encouraged. For Becker, this urge to prove oneself by vanquishing an unworthy Other is responsible for a great deal of violence, as we will see throughout this dissertation. Thus, in addition to understanding how heroism is constructed, this project also examines the various mechanisms employed to define otherness and villainy. In better understanding how both heroism and villainy are constructed, it is hoped that we can then use these insights to address very real problems, such as inequality, intolerance,

---

[1] Even then, however, unintended harm can (and does) arise from the best intentioned pursuits.

and inter-group violence.

As a large portion of this dissertation is inspired by Becker, some caveats must be made. Becker's writing can be problematic, both in its style and substance. At times, he is unabashedly both anthropocentric and androcentric. Becker clearly views human beings as special among animals, and his examinations of hero systems tend to focus on typically "masculine" examples, such as war.[2] Furthermore, Becker can also lapse into what may be thought of as "thanatological reductivism," in that he places death at the center of all human action. As Robert Jay Lifton (1983) puts it, Becker's "death-centred view" (p. 30) simply replaces Freud's sex-centred view, thus "replacing a dogma of sex with a dogma of death" (fn, p. 52). Clearly, human behaviour cannot be adequately explained by any single factor. Nevertheless, even if mortality is not the *only* motivator, it certainly plays *some* part in our beliefs and actions, and thus warrants attention.

Furthermore, it may not be immediately clear why the writings of a relatively obscure cultural anthropologist are an appropriate jumping off point for a dissertation in English, Media Theory or Game Studies. Although Becker is a cultural anthropologist by trade, his ideas have wide-ranging implications, particularly for rhetoric. After all, rhetoric is ultimately concerned with motive, that is, why do people think and behave in the way that they do? Understanding what moves an audience has been a key component of rhetorical scholarship since at least Aristotle, and was perhaps most fully elucidated in the writings of Kenneth Burke.[3] If we can understand the ins and outs of motivation, then we can better understand persuasion. The advantage of Becker's approach is that it forces us to recognize that we are animals first and foremost, driven by deeply ingrained instincts, and this, in turn, allows us to recognize the role of biological forces in persuasion.

---

[2] Indeed, there is very little mention of women at all in Becker's writing, excepting references to paternal relations.
[3] Burke informs much of this project, both explicitly and implicitly. His attention to the "everydayness" of rhetoric and focus on motive make him ideal for a study on persuasion and media consumption.

Finally, it must be asked—why videogames? The dissertation ultimately focuses on videogames not only because they are becoming an increasingly ubiquitous medium, but because they are an inherently heroic medium. And since they are often viewed as "mere" games, this makes them excellent vehicles for the dissemination of ideology, for propaganda is most effective when it is not perceived as such (Ellul, 1973). Furthermore, because videogames are comprised of so many components, they can provide the means for constructing a multi-modal offensive which can convey the same message in a number of ways simultaneously. In Ellul's (1973) words, propaganda "must be total. The propagandist must utilize all the technical means at his disposal—the press, radio, TV, movies, posters, meetings, door-to-door canvassing…. Each usable medium has its own particular way of penetration." (p. 9). Each videogame is comprised of several components, and so can "penetrate" the user with particular conceptions of heroism in a number of ways simultaneously.

Ian Bogost (2006) describes these component parts as "discrete units," which do not exist in isolation, but rather, in a radically dynamic relationship with one another. It is important to recognize the distinctness of each unit, since in Bogost's words, "Each medium carries particular expressive potential" (p. 15), but it is also important to recognize that these units cannot help but interact with one another. To examine the interactions between discrete units, Bogost suggests a methodological approach he calls "unit operations," which "strive to articulate both the members of a particular situation *and* the specific functional relationship between them" (p. 14). In emphasizing the *relationship* between discrete units, further avenues of meaning are opened up to the critic. For instance, instead of asking, "what are the narratological themes in a game?" we might ask, "how do the narratological themes interact with gameplay mechanics?"

This dissertation largely examines how these inter-related units reinforce or "agree" with

one another, but they can just as easily conflict with one another, thereby creating a sort of modal "tension."[4] In both cases, Bogost suggests, this approach emphasizes (re)configurations, and therefore "meander[s], leaving [hermeneutic] opportunities open rather than closing them down" (p. 7). Bogost suggests that critics engage in what he calls "[*u*]*nit analysis…* the general practice of criticism through the discovery and exposition of unit operations at work in one or many source texts" (p. 15). In other words, a multi-tiered methodology is not only suitable for videogame criticism, but for any form of criticism.[5]

Thus, although this dissertation is ultimately concerned with heroism and immortality as they appear in videogames, it does not start with them. For both heroism and videogames have ancient roots which continue to inform them. Discourses linking heroism with immortality have a long history, dating back to at least the Assyrian "Epic of Gilgamesh" (c. 2,200 B.C.E.), and games predate that.[6] Since no medium is created in a vacuum, it is important to understand how videogame representations of heroism fit in with established conventions. Similarly, a unit analysis is also beneficial because it allows us to recognize that videogames are many things at once. They "remediate" (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) the representational techniques of other media, and so if we want to understand how heroism, immortality, and media consumption are brought together in the videogame, it is essential that we understand how each of these parts contributes.

In summary, if the need to feel heroic does indeed stem from a deep seated, existential anxiety, then providing "doses" of heroism on-demand make videogames a potentially powerful medium for conveying ideological "messages." Associating feelings of death anxiety and death

---

[4] This tension is typified by Clint Hocking's (2007) concept of "ludo-narrative dissonance," which refers to the tension between game mechanics and narrative. For example, a game's narrative may represent the protagonist as an inherently peaceful person, but the gameplay will require her to kill thousands of virtual people.
[5] The concept of a multi-tiered methodology forms the basis of what is now called "Platform Studies."
[6] As I discuss in chapter four, play is not only pre-cultural, but pre-human.

transcendence with a particular conception of the heroic may increase its rhetorical efficacy. Thus, by better understanding the powerful rhetorical effects of death denial and heroism, we can better understand how particular rhetorics of immortality and heroism are used for persuasive purposes, and perhaps more importantly, how we can use these same techniques to counter them.

Chapter Summaries

1. Heroism and the Rhetoric of Immortality

This chapter begins with a historical overview of the hero as conceived by Homer, Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece. It includes an extended analysis of the Iliadic characters Achilles and Hector, whose actions and motives epitomize Hellenic heroism. It also draws heavily on the work of Hellenic scholar Gregory Nagy (1999), whose seminal text, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*, examines the cultural and psychological functions of the Hellenic hero tradition. Particular attention is paid to his examination of the terms *kleos aphthiton* and *aristeia*, which can be loosely translated as "un-wilting renown" and "moment of triumph" (i.e. in combat) respectively. The chapter then outlines the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of the hero, which in many ways broaden the criteria for heroism. No longer concerned with military prowess alone, both Plato and Aristotle emphasize a form of "intellectual heroism," best typified by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues.

The chapter then examines the hero as a Jungian archetype, as outlined in Joseph Campbell's (1968), *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Campbell's text illustrates the panhuman nature of the heroic motif, or "monomyth," which can be found in almost all cultures, regardless of geographic or temporal divides. Campbell's insights are significant for this project because they a) indicate that heroism is a panhuman constant; b) link heroism with immortality and

rebirth; and c) form the basis of many contemporary videogames, especially within the fantasy genres. The final section of the chapter examines conceptions of the contemporary hero, as formulated by Ernest Becker. This section begins with an overview of Becker's intellectual progenitor, Otto Rank, an early post-Freudian psychoanalyst. Rank ultimately rejects Freud's motivational hierarchy, and replaces sex with death anxiety as humanity's prime mover. Becker's work allows us to better understand how heroism and "death denial" work together, and subsequently, why rhetorics of heroism and immortality are so prevalent and so persuasive. More than simply playing on fear, the promise of "indefinite duration," even if only "symbolically," can be incredibly enticing at a very fundamental level.

Chapter 2. "The Death Denying Function of (New) Media"

Chapter two examines the first "level" on which rhetorics of heroism and immortality are ultimately conveyed. This chapter is not so much concerned with "content" as it is with "form." Whereas chapter one shows that individuals can secure a "symbolic immortality" by engaging in heroic practices (content), chapter two looks at the mechanics of symbolic immortality, the material means by which death transcendence is attained (form). If a would-be hero hopes to have his or her name remembered throughout the ages, then there must first be a system in place for recording and transmitting that name.

Drawing on the works of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Friedrich Kittler, the chapter begins by discussing media as prosthetic devices, capable of extending both individual and collective identity beyond the temporal and spatial limitations of embodiment. As recording devices, media serve a mnemonic function, storing individual and cultural memories for future transmission. Media allow us to leave behind a "trace" after we are gone, a way to signify that we were here and that we mattered. In Kittler's (1999) words, "what remains of people is what

media can store and communicate" (pp. xl-xli). What media record, store, and transmit are not just individual identities, but entire meaning systems, whole cultures upon which individual immortality depends.

The chapter then combines Becker's assertion that human beings attempt to extend their agency as a means for denying materiality, with Marshall McLuhan's concept of extension. In McLuhan's (1964) terms, electronic media have "extended our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned" (p. 3). For McLuhan, electronic media essentially abolish any concept of the "local," and therefore allow us to exert our influence in the world with increasing ease. Media, therefore, ultimately act as means for empowerment, for conquering the limitations imposed on us by nature. And as Becker (1975) suggests, "All power is in essence power to deny mortality…. Power means power to increase oneself, to change one's natural situation from one of smallness, helplessness, finitude, to one of bigness, control, durability, importance" (p. 81). In this view, media use is one of several means by which we increase our potency. In establishing that media in general serve a death denying function, this chapter demonstrates that videogames will always already be a death denying medium, simply by virtue of *being* a medium.

Chapter 3: Heroism and Villainy in Propaganda

The third chapter examines the rhetorical power of media to elevate and degrade particular belief systems. Drawing on the works of Jacques Ellul, Kenneth Burke, and Paul Virilio, this chapter examines the role of the hero and villain figures as rhetorical devices in various forms of propaganda. Ultimately, propaganda is essentially an exercise in valorizing one's own ideals while demonizing others. Much like Becker's hero systems, propaganda provides individuals "with a complete system for explaining the world, and provides immediate

incentives to action" (Ellul, 1973, p. 11). Propaganda provides an interpretive framework through which to view the world, and uses the hero and villain figures to quickly encapsulate often complex messages. What propaganda propagates, I argue, are hero systems; from a Beckerian perspective, propaganda is the attempt to promote one's own hero system, while at the same time denigrating other hero systems and their adherents.

I draw on "real world" representations of the hero and villain figures as they manifest themselves in propaganda, especially within Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, as well as visual propaganda from the two World Wars and the War on Terror. Particular attention is paid to the scapegoat figure, which can be seen as an antithesis to,[7] and pre-requisite for, the hero. As Burke (1989) explains, this evil figure in need of expulsion is the scapegoat, "the 'representative' or 'vessel' of certain unwanted evils, the sacrificial animal upon whose back the burden of these evils is ritualistically loaded" (p. 294). The scapegoat allows individuals to identify, confront, and conquer evil. In identifying a scapegoat, individuals are granted a common Other to unite against, thus forming a sense of community and belonging. In conquering evil, the individual demonstrates both individual self-worth, as well as the inherent validity of the belief system he or she represents.

The final section of this chapter examines propaganda in the post-war period, with particular attention paid to NATO manuals on "Psychological Operations" (PSYOPS). PSYOPS essentially combine the fields of Social Psychology, Neurobiology and Rhetoric to influence foreign governments and populations. The chapter also looks at Paul Virilio's (1998) concept of "pure war," the dissolution of the wartime/peacetime dichotomy, and the means by which "civilian" life has been appropriated by the military for both economic and ideological purposes.

---

[7] Strictly speaking, the antithesis of the hero is perhaps not the villain, who is also *significant*. Rather, the antithesis of the hero would be the mundane individual who never makes a mark and is forgotten by posterity.

The concept of pure war is used in subsequent chapters to frame discussions of the warrior-hero in military-themed videogames.

Chapter 4: Heroic Gaming and the Rhetoric of Immortality

Now that we have established that heroism is inextricably linked with immortality (chapter one), that media in general serve a death denying function (chapter two), and that representations of heroes and villains are often utilized for persuasive purposes (chapter three), chapter four focuses on videogames explicitly. It examines four permeable, dynamic techniques by which videogames propagate rhetorics of both heroism and immortality: Play, Immersion, Procedurality, and Narrative.[8] It includes an overview of the predominant theoretical approaches within Game Studies, with particular emphasis on *play*, a difficult concept to articulate.

The chapter begins with a discussion of Johan Huizinga's (1955) conception of play, which asserts that play precedes culture, and that all cultural forms are essentially ludic in nature. By linking human beings' innate desire to stand out with the measuring stick provided by games, Huizinga's text provides a bridge between some of the existential concepts hitherto discussed and contemporary Game Studies. The chapter then gives an overview of Roger Caillois' (1961) four rubrics of play (competition, chance, simulation and vertigo), each of which offers its own death-denying techniques. The chapter also covers the (controversial) concept *immersion*, which roughly describes the phenomenological sense of "being in" a game. I show that virtual worlds serve a death denying function because they allow us to extend our selves, to become *immersed* and exert influence in a world supplementary to, and less confined than, the physical world.

The chapter then turns to Ian Bogost's (2007) concept of "procedural rhetoric," which

---

[8] This is a slight variation on Janet Murray's (1997) four part framework: 1) Procedurality; 2) Participation; 3) Spatiality; and 4) Encyclopedic Scope. My particular approach favours certain terms over others. I prefer "Play" over "Participation," for example, because it highlights the videogame's ancient, pre-human origins.

informs much of my methodology. Procedural rhetoric, therefore, is "a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created" (p. 3). A videogame's procedures can be thought of as representations of processes, rule-based systems or parameters. One such process, death, will be given particular attention, since videogames have always employed thanatological metaphors to represent success and failure. I also appropriate Bogost's concept to discuss what I call the "procedural rhetoric of heroism," the means by which a game's procedures guide heroic action. With very few exceptions, games are almost always about epic quests, powerful characters, victory, and becoming something bigger than oneself (McGonigal, 2011).

This chapter concludes with a look at the application of Campbell's "hero's journey" to videogame design and narrative. Narrative has been a controversial subject in Game Studies, and so I briefly cover the "narratology/ludology" debate that occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Drawing on the works of several videogame designers (e.g. Troy Dunniway, 2000), I demonstrate that Campbell's monomythic structure works especially well for videogame narratives because like videogames, a quest is in many ways the middle ground between story and action. Like quests, videogames are largely concerned with demonstrating skill for rewards, and a game's narrative can provide a culturally prescribed heroic context for acting out this structure. Of course, the hero always survives the quest, even when everyone else does not. Since videogames are able to convey rhetorics of heroism and immortality through so many mutually reinforcing techniques, I argue that they are in many ways an inherently heroic medium.

Chapter 5: "A Saviour Through Blood:" The Rhetoric of War Heroism

Chapter five consists of a series of "close readings" examining the rhetoric of war heroism as it appears in two popular genres, the First Person Shooter (FPS) and Action Role-

Playing Game (ARPG). It applies the concepts and methodologies outlined in the previous chapters, focusing on the components of play, immersion, procedurality, and narrative. In both genres, I argue that the warrior is depicted as a heroic figure, combat is depicted as the ultimate heroic pursuit, and success and failure are framed in thanatological terms. From a Beckerian perspective, these games allow players to become death-defying heroes who must often "save the world," even if only virtually and temporarily. The chapter begins by providing an overview of the relationship between the military and gaming, drawing on J.C. Herz's (1997) concept of the "military-entertainment complex."

The chapter then turns its attention to the techniques by which the FPS valorizes the warrior in general, and the American soldier in particular. Although a brief history of the genre is provided, the majority of the analysis centers around the popular *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Activision) series, in which the player participates in a virtual War on Terror. In this series, the enemies are depicted as Islamic and Eastern European terrorists who hope to destroy the West, and it is up to the player to save the world. In this way, the *Modern Warfare* series closely resembles and reinforces rhetorics surrounding the "real" War on Terror, which emphasizes the "Americans good/Terrorists bad" dichotomy.

Although the military-entertainment complex is typically discussed alongside the FPS and other military-themed games, I argue that the ARPG also propagates a rhetoric of war heroism, even if this rhetoric is not tied to any particular military foce. A similarly themed analysis is also conducted on the ARPG genre, which often relies on the high fantasy tropes of Tolkein. Particular attention is paid to the *Elder Scrolls* series, and the fifth instalment, *Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) especially. Typically, the goal in these games is to increase one's power by levelling up, and in doing so, become a character of significance in the game-world. Like the

FPS, the player succeeds largely by defeating, or "killing" others, and gains points for doing so; however, instead of guns and explosives, the combat generally revolves around swords and magic. Ultimately, both genres convey rhetorics of heroism and immortality, albeit in different ways, and such rhetorics can (and are) utilized for rhetorical purposes. Although there are many types of videogame heroes, these games reaffirm the ancient conception of the warrior as someone to be honoured and memorialized.

Chapter 6: Terror Management Theory in Technoculture and Gaming

The final chapter describes a collaborative, "epistemological exercise" that attempts to empirically verify some of the claims made in the previous chapters. It outlines a series of experiments which examine the role of death anxiety in technology use, conducted in collaboration with Dr. Marcel O'Gorman, Dr. Mark Zanna, and Steven Shepherd. To conduct our studies, we utilized an experimental paradigm known as Terror Management Theory (TMT), which tests Becker's ideas empirically. TMT was developed in the 1980s by Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski, and Jeff Greenberg. Following Becker, TMT posits that the organismic need for survival coupled with the knowledge we will inevitably die is a source of potentially crippling anxiety (e.g. Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S., 1997).

The chapter beings with an overview of TMT, and its usefulness for this particular project. TMT examines the role of worldviews in mitigating death anxiety, and is centered around two fundamental hypotheses: 1) The *mortality salience hypothesis*: The idea that cultural worldviews buffer one's anxiety from the inevitability of death, and that reminders of death provoke individuals to assert cultural worldviews; and 2) The *anxiety buffer hypothesis*: The idea that self-esteem serves as a buffer against death anxiety. If people cling to value systems as a means for mitigating death anxiety, then reminding them of death should increase their need to

assert the validity of their value system.

The chapter then outlines the methods and results of two TMT studies conducted under the supervision of Dr. Marcel O'Gorman. In the first study, we used TMT as a tool for identifying what O'Gorman (2010) calls *technoculture*, "a distinct heroic action system in which technological production is viewed as an end in itself, and individual recognition and death-denial are hypermediated by technologies that permit us to feel that we transcend time and space with increasing ease" (para. 4). The second study examined if exposure to representations of death in videogames would induce death-awareness (hypothesis one), and if such reminders might increase worldview defence (hypothesis two). We had participants play one of two games, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Activision, 2009), an FPS in which images of death are ubiquitous, and *Paintball 2* (Majesco, 2010), also an FPS but without any death imagery.

Since this dissertation is ultimately concerned with videogames, the second experiment receives the most attention. Moreover, the results we gained from the second study are perhaps more promising than the results gained from the first. We ultimately did not confirm our hypotheses for Study One, but found at least partial confirmations for Study Two. We found that in-game exposure to death did make participants more likely to think of their own death, but only if they were not familiar with videogames in general. We also observed differences in worldview defence, but not in the way we expected. All in all, the results were not as cut-and-dry as we would have liked, but they certainly show promise for future iterations of the study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of TMT's potential application to videogame criticism and design. More specifically, how do videogames treat the concept of "death," and how might we use that information to better understand videogame design and consumption?

Conclusion: Towards an unconventional heroism

The conclusion looks at how videogames can ultimately be used to interrogate, critique, and combat conventional rhetorics of heroism and immortality, especially as they pertain to war and killing. It draws on Yager's 2012 game *Spec Ops: The Line*, a third person shooter which utilizes narrative to upend traditional representations of heroism and villainy. It also looks to the death mechanic known as "permanent death" or "permadeath" (Bartle, 2004), in which the player's character only gets one life. Both *The Line* and permadeath complicate the standard rhetorics of heroism and immortality found in most videogames. *The Line* ultimately conveys the Beckerian message that the urge to do "good" and to be heroic can often bring about unintended but disastrous consequences, and the permadeath mechanic may be a way for games to explore death and dying in a more nuanced, complex way.

If violence and dying are shown to have significant effects, even ludically, then perhaps we can use videogames to counter conventional videogame rhetorics, which depict warfare as fun, and killing as inconsequential. Furthermore, perhaps we can use videogames to promote pro-social conceptions of heroism, which are empathetic, compassionate, and inclusive. More broadly, complicating the often simplistic rhetorics of heroism and immortality demonstrates that videogames are capable of more than mere caricature, and can indeed be used to explore some of the most complex and profound issues we face.

Chapter 1: Heroism and the Rhetoric of Immortality

> The love of fame and the desire to win a glory that shall never die have the strongest effects upon people. For this even more than for their children they are ready to run risks, spend their substance, endure every kind of hardships and even sacrifice their lives…. [I]t is desire for immortal renown and a glorious reputation… that is the incentive of all actions, and the better the man is, the stronger the incentive; he is in love with immortality.
>
> - Plato, *The Symposium*

Immortality and heroism have a long and complex relationship. Beginning with the Assyrian and Hellenic cultures, and ending in the contemporary era, this chapter will provide an overview of some of the major points of intersection between immortality and heroism, though it is by no means exhaustive. Moreover, it will examine the rhetorical and psychological functions of heroic discourses which appear, it would seem, in all cultures and all epochs. Indeed, the idea that immortality can be attained via heroism is found in some of our earliest cultural forms. In the Assyrian "Epic of Gilgamesh" (c. 2,200 BCE), the Sumerian King, Gilgamesh, is warned against facing the forest guardian, Humbaba for fear of death. However, Gilgamesh replies:

> Where is the man who can clamber to heaven? Only the gods live for ever with glorious Shamash, but as for us men, our days are numbered, our occupations are a breath of wind. How is this, already you are afraid! I will go first although I am your lord, and you may safely call out, "Forward, there is nothing to fear!" Then if I fall I leave behind me a name that endures; men will say of me, "Gilgamesh has fallen in fight with ferocious Humbaba." (1972, p. 71)

Through heroic action, Gilgamesh the man dies, but Gilgamesh the enduring hero is (re)born. A millennium later, Homer's *Iliad* is likewise filled with characters acutely aware of their material finitude. As Glaucus tells Tydeus during an encounter on the battlefield,

> like the race of leaves
> The race of man is...
> The wind in autumn strows
> The earth with old leaves, then the spring the woods with new endows,

> And so death scatters men on earth, so life puts out again
> Man's heavy issue. (VI, 141–146)

The speeches of Gilgamesh and Glaucus demonstrate that even the noblest, strongest, and most revered individuals must succumb to decay, just like everything and everyone else. Like all organisms, their life spans, *bios*, will eventually fade, as material existence dooms them to finitude. Mortality becomes a crushing, undeniable inevitability, and for an animal hardwired to survive via evolution, this foresight can be a terrible curse (Becker, 1973). There is a way out, however. Symbol systems, transmutable in character, provide individuals with an avenue for overcoming the finitude of the *bios*. With their ability to overcome temporal and geographical restrictions, symbol systems become our only salvation, and provide us with what Robert Jay Lifton (1983) calls *symbolic immortality*,[1] a specific form of knowledge which represents

> the capacity of the symbolizing imagination to explore the idea of death and relate it to a principal of life-continuity—that is, the capacity for culture…. [It is] an *exchange of literal for symbolic immortality*. It suggests an ideal of a mortal being who need not remain numbed toward (ignorant of) the fact of death, who can know death and yet transcend it. (p. 7)

Symbolic immortality is the perpetuation of the self through symbolic means; it is an "imagined (symbolized) perpetuation of elements of the self through connection with larger forms of human culture" (p. 8). If we can imagine the self outside of its material existence, then we can "open our imaginations to a post-death (postself) future—and at the same time to the idea of the termination and disintegration of the self, of the individual mind and body" (p. 8).

The concept of immortality, symbolic or literal, is a great comfort, since it offers the prospect of existence outside of material embodiment. In Lifton's (1983) words, in order to cope with the inevitability of physical extinction,

---

[1] Lifton is by no means the first to discuss this concept, but he is generally credited with coining this specific term. Becker (1971) for instance, speaks of "immortality symbols," and Homeric *kleos* likewise addresses similar themes.

> We require a psychological language—our own system of professional symbolization—to express a sense of endless biohistorical continuity. Death does indeed bring about biological and psychic annihilation. But life includes symbolic perceptions of connections that precede and outlast that annihilation. (p. 18)

For to us, it appears as if the symbol systems into which we are born are always already there, and likewise, always will be. Thus, symbolic immortality provides a sense of permanence and continuity mere biology cannot, and so it is our only recourse against the finality of death. With all our supposed progress we remain *bios* first and foremost, and this can be deeply troubling.

To cope with the anxiety which arises from the awareness of an inevitable and impending doom, we convince ourselves through cultural systems that we are beings of cosmic significance, more permanent than our materiality would indicate. In Ernest Becker's (1975) words, "man erects cultural symbols which do not age or decay to quiet his fear of his ultimate end—and… to provide the promise of indefinite duration" (p. 3). However, symbolic immortality is conditional; one must demonstrate a certain "worthiness" by living up to a certain set of standards. Not everyone gets a statue. It is culture which grants us access to the symbols and conditions of immortality; in Becker's words, "what people want in any epoch is a way of transcending their physical fate, they want to guarantee some kind of indefinite duration, and culture provides them with the necessary immortality symbols or ideologies; societies can be seen as structures of immortality power" (p. 63). In other words, culture provides us with access to symbolic immortality, but only if we are willing (or able) to follow the rules.

1. *Kleos* and the *Iliad*'s Heroic Code

Perhaps the clearest example of an earned symbolic immortality can be found in the Hellenic tradition. In spite of the inevitability of "natural" death, the Hellenic code of heroism, epitomized by the *Iliad*, provides a means for transcending death and ensuring perpetuity. If one

is willing to act in a "heroic" fashion, namely, by risking one's life and demonstrating martial prowess, then one potentially gains honour, (*time*), and renown, (*kleos*); one's deeds and (more importantly) one's *name*, become the subject matter of conversation and song. Thus, the hero's name is granted a certain perpetuity beyond his or her actual death; the name, or symbolic self, is carried across space and time through cultural artefacts, such as song, sculpture, or homily, and so attains *symbolic* immortality, a pseudo-existence comprised of symbols, and carried along symbolic systems. As Georgia E. Brown (2004) observes, the Hellenic conceptions of heroism, the "heroic code," provide a means for transcending death via symbol systems:

> The heroic code sets up a mutually supportive relationship between success, glory, and song. Death in battle is transformed into a way of making mortality palatable. If it is a heroic death, it avoids the disfigurements of aging and, at the moment the hero loses everything, he gains immortality, perpetual youth, [and] honor… (p. 49)

This second order, symbolic form of immortality is a poor consolation prize, to be sure; but as Becker (1975) so succinctly puts it, "in matters of eternity you take what you can get" (p. 86).

Faced with the inevitable prospect of death, the individual must thus settle for the perpetuation of the idealized self, divorced from the spatial and temporal confines of physiological being. Where biology decays and fails, symbol systems persist; where death ends one form of existence, song breeds another. The Hellenic scholar, Gregory Nagy (e.g. 1999), examines this "supportive" relationship at length, particularly through his examination of the term *kleos* in the works of Homer. *Kleos*, according to Nagy, initially meant simply "to hear," but eventually evolved to signify the eternal renown, or glory afforded through song:

> Etymologically, *kleos* should have meant simply "that which is heard" (from *kluô* 'hear')…. [*K*]*leos*, comes to mean "glory" because it is the poet himself who uses the word to designate what he hears from the Muses and what he tells the audience…. The conceit of Homeric poetry is that even a Trojan warrior will fight and die in pursuit of [Achaean] *kleos*.... If you perform heroic deeds, you have a

> chance of getting into Achaean epic. The Achaean singer of tales is in control of the glory that may be yours. (ch. 1, para. 2)

By performing heroic deeds, the Homeric warrior-hero attains *kleos* (glory), thereby entering the seemingly eternal realm of song. As long as the hero's name and deeds are continually heard and retold, a certain aspect of the hero can be said to live forever in praise and glory.

It is important to note that "*kleos*" refers both to the glory attained through heroic action, but also the *vehicle* of that glory, or the cultural artefact itself. Thus, not only does Achilles attain *kleos* for his heroic deeds, but the *Iliad* itself can be seen as an iteration of *kleos*. According to Nagy (1999), the term *kleos* is often accompanied by the epithet "*aphthiton*," which can be translated as "un-fading" or "un-wilting." Thus, the construct, *kleos aphthiton*, refers to "un-wilting fame" or "immortal renown," and it is found throughout both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Since all things which are biological eventually wilt, the epithet *aphthito-* implies that biology can be transcended via culture. In Nagy's words, *aphthito-* ultimately "conveys the cultural negation of a natural process, the growing and the wilting of plants, and also, by extension, the life and the death of mortals" (ch. 10, para. 13).

Since we cannot possibly defeat death through biological means alone, we attempt to change the rules, or insist on playing a different game altogether. We invent words with imaginative, magical properties without direct referents in the physical world, words so powerful they negate nature itself. The cultural construction *aphthiton*, then, grants the much sought after property of immortality, a property mere biology cannot hope to deliver. It is no wonder both Trojan and Achaean soldiers were willing to risk literal death for symbolic transcendence, when, from a purely temporal perspective, symbol systems are superior. Indeed, the very possibility of

securing a *kleos* which is *aphthiton* pits culture against nature, with heroism as the catalyst for this binary.[2]

Furthermore, the notion that this glory "may [too] be yours" is of the utmost importance, and reveals a secondary, though related, function of *kleos*: Not only does it immortalize the hero, it also provides a benchmark, a model for citizens to follow. And the reward for reaching this benchmark is nothing less than eternal life. It is clear, then, why the image of the hero carries such powerful rhetorical and psychological force, and why the Homeric hero is, above all, motivated by death. More accurately, he is motivated by an obsessive urge to transcend death, to continue his existence beyond corporeal finitude. In the *Iliad*, heroes on both sides of the conflict are acutely aware of their own mortality, and thus constantly fret over how posterity will remember them. This looking forward to a looking-back yet to come motivates the Iliadic hero above all else.

Achilles, for example, explicitly acknowledges that he must choose between a long life of comfort and obscurity at home, or return to the Trojan battlefield where he will die young but obtain his *kleos aphthiton*:

> [I]f I here remain t'assist our victory,
> My safe return [*nostos*] shall never live, my fame [*kleos*] shall never die:
> If my return obtain success, much of my fame decays,
> But death shall linger his approach, and I live many days. (IX, 398 – 401)

In this translation, Chapman (1616) retains the sense of *aphthito-* by employing the biological metaphors, "die" and "decay" to describe fame. Here fame and renown are set up as antitheses to material decay. As evidenced in Glaucus' remark that "death scatters men on earth" like leaves (VI, 145), comparing human existence to that of vegetation is a common trope in Hellenic poetry. As Nagy (1999) puts it,

---

[2] The nature/culture binary of course is not so clear cut, but for Homer's heroes, it certainly appears to be.

> The latent vegetal imagery in this theme—that the life of man "wilts" like a plant—brings us now to yet another important contrast in the poetic representations of immortality and death. Traditional Hellenic poetry makes the opposition immortality/death not only remote/immediate but also artificial/natural. To put it another way: death and immortality are presented in terms of nature and culture respectively. (ch. 10, para. 5)

The function of *kleos* (and perhaps all culture) is to negate the "vegetal" aspects of material existence. Everything which is natural decays; therefore, it behoves us as organisms to construct alternate means toward perpetuity, i.e. in the form of cultural systems.

Like all Homeric heroes, Achilles attains *kleos* by excelling in the virtues valued by his culture; in the case of Hellenic poetry, this usually takes the form of military prowess, demonstrated by performing an *aristeia*. The term *aristeia*, derived from the Greek word for "best," *aristos* (Nagy, 1999) can best be characterized as an opportunity for glory; it is a heroic action in which an individual demonstrates valour, or excellence. It is most clearly illustrated by the public duel, wherein two relatively equal opponents attempt to "best" one another in front of an audience (Huizinga, 1955). The presence of an audience is absolutely essential, since the *aristeia*'s function is to inscribe the combatants' names and deeds upon the audience, who will then retell and therefore immortalize the victor. As Stephen A. White (1992) remarks,

> If secured by eulogies and memorials, deeds can win a sort of immortality that outlasts the hero's death. It was not enough simply to be better; the hero also had to be recognized as better, and that required actually doing better…. The rewards of honor, in short, were reserved for competitive excellence, and in keeping with epic ideals, it was thought that honourable men must excel in contests with others. This public dimension gives honor a moral basis, for respect is won only by doing something that others admire. (p. 247)

In Book VII of *The Iliad*, Hector, the Trojan hero, stands in front of the entire Achaean army and challenges any willing Greek combatant to face him in an *aristeia*. Hector acknowledges that any Greek foolish enough to accept will probably die, but in a truly epic example of the warrior-boast, offers the would-be combatant an ironic consolation:

> [W]hen our beings on the earth shall hide their period,
> Survivors sailing the black sea may thus [your] name renew:
> "This is his monument, whose blood long since did fates imbrue,
> Whom passing far in fortitude, illustrious Hector slew."
> This shall posterity report, and my fame shall never die. (VII, 72-76)

In other words, Hector is offering the "opportunity" to become a part of his *kleos*. Hector's challenge is thus doubly imposing: Not only will his opponent physically die, but his death will only serve to bolster Hector's fame; the Greek combatant will simply become one name among the many vanquished by Hector, and thereby forfeit his own *kleos*. It is an intimidating rhetorical technique to be sure. When no Greek soldier accepts Hector's challenge, the Spartan king Menelaus chastises his "Grossly inglorious" (85) forces, reminding them that "conquest's garlands hang aloft amongst th' immortal gods" (87). As Nagy (1999) notes, the "Achaeans had better behave as heroes, for Epos is keeping them under observation" (ch. 2, para. 4). Menelaus offers to fight Hector himself, but eventually Ajax can no longer bear the shame and takes Menelaus' place. The two combatants then fight to what essentially amounts to a draw, earning a mediocre *kleos* for both.

Hector's bold challenge indicates his devotion to the heroic code, and the primacy both he and all would-be heroes place on the (symbolic) immortality conferred through "posterity." Returning to the text of Hector's challenge, we again see "fame" set up antithetically to mortality: Hector's "fame shall never die" (76); posterity will report his victory, and so his name will continue to exist long after he and his opponent have physically expired. One cannot help but feel a certain degree of sympathy for Hector; it is he who desires the *kleos* of the *Iliad* most of all, though it will be reserved for another. Indeed, after his initial irritation with Paris for starting the war, Hector comes to embody the relentless pursuit of glory more than any other character in the poem.

Even Achilles, the true hero of the poem (Nagy, 1999), questions the merit of *kleos* at times. When Odysseus and Ajax attempt to lure Achilles back to the battlefield by casting doubt on his legacy, Achilles responds by telling them it would be "foolish pride t'abridge my life for praise" (IX, 402).[3] Throughout the *Iliad*, however, Hector never wavers in his devotion to *kleos*; indeed, all his actions can be viewed as an attempt to attain his *kleos aphthiton*. And he at least partially succeeds. He certainly makes a name for himself in the war, slaying innumerable Greek warriors, particularly in Books XV and XVI, and the unwillingness of any Achaean warrior to accept his challenge speaks to his renown as a warrior. Furthermore, Hector is described as "far best of Troy in arms" (XVI, 767), and while Achilles sits out, he is the best warrior in the field.

But there is perhaps no clearer example of the importance Hector places on *kleos* than the "domestic" scene of Book VI. As Hector prepares to return to the battle, and almost certainly to face his death, his wife, Andromache, pleads with him to stay home with her and their son, Astyanax. Hector assures Andromache that he hears her pleas and feels terrible,

> But what a shame and fear it is, to think how Troy would scorn…
> That I should fly cowardly off! The spirit I first did breathe
> Did never teach me that; much less, since the contempt of death
> Was settled in me, and my mind knew what a worthy was;
> Whose office is to lead in fight, and give no danger pass
> Without improvement. In this fire must Hector's trial shine;
> Here must his country, father, friends, be in him made divine. (VI, 478-485)

Motivated by the heroic code of honour, shame, and duty, Hector refuses Andromache's plea and leaves for the battlefield. Much like Achilles, Hector must make a choice between a *nostos* and a *kleos*; the two are mutually exclusive and so he cannot have both (Nagy, 1999).

But the loss of renown is unbearable for Hector. If he flees the battle, "Troy would scorn… / That [he] should fly cowardly off!" (478-480); that is to say, he will no longer be held

---

[3] Indeed, Achilles has a rather ambivalent relationship with his *kleos*. It is not until Patroclus is killed that Achilles returns to the battle and earns his *kleos* by slaughtering the Trojans in a grief-driven rage.

in high regard by his own people, or the Achaean forces for that matter. If remembered at all, he will be remembered as a coward, the epithet reserved for those despicable individuals who fail to honour the tenets of the heroic code. In other words, Hector is worried about his reputation, the worthiness of his name, his legacy; he is afraid what others will think of him. Given that his entire being appears devoted to securing un-wilting, glorious renown, which is nothing more than the propagation of one's reputation, this is not surprising. After all, Hector is under a tremendous amount of pressure. His performance in this war, his "trial," has the potential to immortalize not only himself, but his "country, father," and "friends" (485). Troy's very existence depends on Hector's ability to overcome seemingly impossible odds, and he knows it. Thus, instead of opting for a longer biological life, Hector chooses the immortality conferred by the heroic code, and in demonstrating his "contempt of death" (481), Hector transcends it.

Hector's professed "contempt of death" is immediately followed by a related assertion, i.e., the coordinate clause, "and my mind knew what a worthy was" (482). The contempt of death is grammatically linked with the concept of "a worthy," which is used as a noun here. A "worthy" can mean either a "distinguished or eminent person; a famous or renowned man or woman; esp. a man of courage or noble character" (*OED* C.1.a) or "a hero of antiquity" (C.1.b). In other words, Hector is saying that although his "spirit" is fearless to begin with, his contempt of death "was settled in [him]" (482) once he understood the concept of "a worthy." Like *kleos*, the concept of "a worthy" is inextricably linked with the concepts of *distinction*, *renown*, *fame*, *courage* and *nobility*; in short, with the symbolic perpetuity one attains by demonstrating the "higher" virtues. Hector's "worthy" revelation thus settles his contempt of death because it offers a way out, a solution to the most basic problem faced by mere mortals. It is no wonder Hector

chooses *kleos* over *nostos*, especially considering he must confront the immediate danger posed

by the besieging Achaean forces.

This passage also indicates the pedagogical nature of the heroic code; even for the

naturally heroic Hector, the heroic code is something which is *learned*, something one becomes

aware of. In hearing the stories of heroes past, the citizen learns a system of action and reward:[4]

Acquit yourself in a heroic fashion, and eternal renown is yours. Recalling Nagy (1999), it is

crucial to remember that the epic represents "a glory that may [too] be yours" (ch. 1, para. 2).

These are not just entertaining stories; the epic serves a deeply pedagogical function, and the

ideals presented in poems like the *Iliad* provide benchmarks for citizens to follow. As White

(1992) observes in his analysis of Aristotelian virtue, the "epics, after all, were central to

education. Used to instil virtue as well as to teach letters, they continued to inspire admiration

and even emulation" (p. 248).

It is not surprising, then, that Hector should hope his progeny learns the heroic code,

since any glory attained by Hector's son contributes to Hector's own glory. Shortly before

Hector leaves for the battlefield, he says a prayer while holding his son, Astyanax:

> Let his renown be clear as mine, equal his strength in war;
> And make his reign so strong in Troy, that years to come may yield
> His facts this fame, when rich in spoils, he leaves the conquer'd field
> Sown with his slaughters: these high deeds exceed his father's worth… (VI, 515-
> 518)

Hector does not pray for his son's happiness, or for a peaceful world in which his son will not

have to experience the horrors of war. On the contrary, Hector prays for his son's participation in

a future, bloody war, a war in which Astyanax will leave the "conquer'd field / Sown with his

slaughters" (517-518). In other words, Hector prays for his son's *kleos* above all else, a *kleos*

---

[4] As I discuss in a later chapter, this system of action (or task) and reward is closely linked to the realm of the
contest, or *agon*.

won through war and conquest. Hector's prayer illustrates the primacy of both military prowess and symbolic immortality in Hellenic culture generally.

For Hector, Astyanax represents the magnification of his own symbolic immortality, in both the genealogical and heroic senses of the term. As Hector's offspring, Astyanax represents the continuity of Hector's bloodline, the perpetuation of his genes. Begetting children is one way to transcend death, the "natural" or evolutionary form of death denial. And this is common to all life on earth, everything that is *bios*; thus, we might call this symbolic immortality in the genealogical sense.[5] As Diotima tells Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*,

> All men, Socrates, have a procreative impulse, both spiritual and physical and when they come to maturity they feel a natural desire to beget children... There is something divine about the whole matter; in procreation and bringing to birth the mortal creature is endowed with a touch of immortality. (207b)

The "immortality" which results from procreation of course is only symbolic in nature; Diotima is speaking metaphorically here, as the father does not literally live in the son or daughter. Offspring only offer "a touch of immortality;" true immortality is reserved for the gods alone. Much like *kleos*, procreation does not grant literal immortality, but it "is the nearest thing to perpetuity and immortality that a mortal being can attain" (207b).

Thus, Astyanax's mere existence provides Hector with "a touch of immortality," but beyond this, Astyanax can also add to Hector's symbolic immortality (*kleos*) if he meets or exceeds his father's accomplishments. With every conquest and every victory, Astyanax magnifies and perpetuates the myth of himself, to be sure, but in so doing he also magnifies the *kleos* of Hector, who is ultimately responsible for his progeny's existence. Hector's prayer therefore speaks to his own desire for immortality above anything else. Unfortunately for Hector

---

[5] Lifton (1983) lists "biological" as one of the five modes of symbolic immortality.

and Astyanax, in most versions of the story Astyanax is thrown over the Trojan walls by the

raiding Achaean forces and killed.

In "The Fall of Troy," for example, Quintus (4th century C.E.) describes the scene thusly:

> Yea, also did those Danaan car-lords hurl
> From a high tower the babe Astyanax,
> Dashing him out of life. They tore the child
> Out of his mother's arms, in wrathful hate
> Of Hector, who in life had dealt to them
> Such havoc; therefore hated they his seed,
> And down from that high rampart flung his child –
> A wordless babe that knew nothing of war! (XIII)

Astyanax's fate is therefore the direct antithesis to the fate Hector had envisioned in his prayer:

Hector not only hoped his son would "know" war, but that he would become an expert in it. In

killing the infant Astyanax, the Achaeans not only pre-emptively deny him his own *kleos*, they

also prevent Hector's fame from becoming even greater than it already is. In short, it is an

attempt to stem the flow of glory emanating out of Hector's name.

The existential character of the heroic code makes it incredibly appealing; it deals in

matters of life and death, and so taps into deeply rooted psychological drives. And as Astyanax's

murder demonstrates, the pursuit of glory can often (and perhaps necessarily) lead to heinous

acts. As Becker (1975) puts it, the greatest source of "evil comes from man's urge to heroic

victory over evil" (p. 136). But we need not look to the extreme example of Astyanax to observe

this; the very nature of warfare itself speaks to it. "Military prowess" is simply a euphemistic

way of saying "good at killing people." Let us look at an example of Hector's *kleos* in the *Iliad*.

In Book VIII, the Trojan forces are in danger of being overrun, but thanks in part to some

divine intervention, Hector turns the tides of the battle, and

> brought terror with his strength and ever fought before.
> As when some highly stomach'd hound, that hunts a sylvan boar
> Or kingly lion, loves the haunch, and pincheth oft behind,

> Bold of his feet, and still observes the game to turn inclin'd,
> Not utterly dissolv'd in flight: so Hector did pursue,
> And whosoever was the last he ever did subdue. (VIII, 292-297)

Hector is running down Greek soldiers and slaughtering them as they flee; he is described as a predator taking down "kingly" prey. This particular *aristeia* "made it" into the *Iliad* because it is remarkable; only great heroes such as Hector possess the ability to alter the course of battle, to instil such fear of death that even Achaean warriors will flee in his wake.

This is a fairly disturbing scene, but Hector's slaughter again speaks to the forcefulness of the heroic code, a code which has the power to absolve and even justify the murder of infants, let alone opposing combatants. And as a powerful motivator, it is often exploited for rhetorical purposes. Hector (like all Generals) uses the heroic code as a persuasive device, a means for ensuring his soldiers stand their ground and fight. Immediately before engaging the Achaean forces, and immediately after Jove intervenes on the Trojans' behalf, Hector provides the following words of encouragement to his men:

> If any bravely buy
> His fame or fate with wounds or death, in Jove's name let him die.
> Who for his country suffers death sustains no shameful thing:
> His wife in honour shall survive, his progeny shall spring
> In endless summers, and their roofs with patrimony swell. (XV, 450-454)

Hector's speech not only functions as a "pep talk" designed to encourage his troops, it also reminds them of the heroic code they purport to follow, the code of sacrifice and reward, death and glory. In this way, it serves a rhetorical function: It is an attempt to ensure his soldiers acquit themselves in a fearless, honourable manner. By exploiting the individual soldier's need for recognition and perpetuity, Hector employs a powerful persuasive device, a device which taps into the organismic desire for perpetuity. The heroic code Hector invokes requires the individual soldier to risk his life, but simultaneously offers an escape from inescapable finitude:

Sacrifice your life for King and Country, and you and your kin will be honoured eternally. This is the ideal of "*dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori*" celebrated by Horace and later obliterated by Wilfred Owen.[6]

Homer appears to occupy the middle ground here, for although there is no question that martial prowess is valorized, Homer does not omit the horrifying, tragic aspects of war. As Brown (2004) observes,

> While the poem does celebrate heroism and has ensured the charismatic appeal of Achilles, Hector, and all the other exceptional individuals, it also acknowledges the terrors of fighting and the grim specifics of death…. In a poem that undoubtedly extols martial virtue, there is also repeated revelation of the cost of war.... (p. 45)

Achilles' grief over the death of Patroclus, the in-fighting over war "spoils" such as Briseis, and the graphic depictions of painful death all point to a decidedly un-glorious side of warfare. Homer is sure to inform his audience that the *kleos* of one warrior can only ever come at the expense of another; where there are winners there must also be losers.

This brings us to a fundamental point: There are degrees, or gradients of *kleos*, and indeed, of Homeric, symbolic immortality generally; all (symbolic) immortality is not created equal. In defeating Hector, Achilles secures a *kleos* which is everlasting, but Hector's death also secures him a form of immortality in the form of *akhos* or *penthos* ("grief"). As Nagy (1999) notes, whether the *kleos* of a particular individual brings grief or glory depends on the audience, since "the *kleos* heard by its audiences may be *akhos/penthos* for those involved in the actions that it describes" (ch. 6, para. 10). For example, Hector's death brings grief to the Trojans, but glory to Achilles and the Achaeans, who celebrate the death of a terrifying opponent. In both cases, the heroes have acquired a form of symbolic immortality, since their names and deeds

---

[6] Owen, W. "Dulce et Decorum Est." (1917).

continue to be heard, stored, and retold via symbol systems. However, one is clearly superior to the other; the praise Achilles earns is preferable to the grief Hector evokes.

Hector's *kleos*, while great, pales in comparison to Achilles'; for all his bravado and demonstrated valour, when it comes time to face "the best of the Achaeans" (the title of Nagy's book), Hector fails as a hero. Nearing the end of the *Iliad*, as the rest of the Trojans flee inside Ilion's walls (to escape Achilles' wrath), Hector bravely holds his ground. While he waits for Achilles to approach, we get an intriguing insight into the hero's thought process as he awaits certain death. Hector is essentially giving himself a motivational speech, not unlike the one he gave his men in Book VI. He weighs his options through internal discourse: He can forfeit to Achilles, "and retire with this man's life, or die / Here for our city with renown, since all else fled but I" (XXII, 99-100). Just before Achilles gets into striking distance, Hector appears to conclude that he might as well fight and die heroically, since "I'll not sue, nor would he [Achilles] grant, but I / (Mine arms cast off) should be assur'd a woman's death to die" (109-110). In other words, he will not ask for mercy because Achilles will probably not grant it anyway, and if he fights he can at least avoid a "woman's death."

However, when Achilles finally gets close, Hector loses his nerve and flees in terror; the heroic code's greatest proponent fails to live up to its standards precisely when it matters most:

> ...and now Achilles comes, now near
> His Mars-like presence terribly came brandishing his spear.
> His right arm shook it, his bright arms, like day, came glittering in
> Like fire-light, or the light of heav'n shot from the rising sun.
> This sight outwrought discourse, cold fear shook Hector from his stand. (115-119)

In the battle between the heroic code (culture) and existential terror (nature), the latter wins the day in this scene; the terrifying sight of Achilles obliterates the discursive power of the heroic code. The ensuing scene would not be out of place in a slapstick comedy routine, as Achilles

33

proceeds to chase Hector around Troy three times. However, given Homer's description of Achilles, it is perhaps no surprise. The above image of Achilles represents the Homeric hero in all his glory, the ultimate manifestation of *kratos* (power), and manly virtue; Achilles is the penultimate embodiment of the sort of man who earns a *kleos* which is *aphthiton*. The adjectives used to describe Achilles' appearance are truly cosmic in nature; invoking the power of the *cosmos* and the divine. He is "Mars-like," his armour and weapons shine like "the light of heav'n shot from the rising sun." It is a truly terrifying image indeed.

As Nagy (1999) alludes to throughout his text, although all figures named in the *Iliad* attain a certain degree of *kleos* (since we continue to read about them), ultimately the *Iliad* signals Achilles' *kleos* above all others; he is the true hero of the epic, as both the plot and war revolve around Achilles' (in)action. The "runner" up, so to speak, is Hector, who certainly makes a name for himself as "far best of Troy in arms" (XVI, 767). However, as Nagy (1999) notes, in dying by Achilles' hand Hector simply becomes "part of an epic story glorifying the deeds of Achilles…. The *Iliad* belongs to Achilles. It is to Achilles that the Iliadic tradition assigns the *kleos* that will never perish" (ch. 2, para. 3). Moreover, in killing the greatest warrior Troy has to offer, Achilles magnifies his renown to an even greater degree. Hector is the most accomplished (and famous) warrior in the Trojan army, and so in defeating him, Achilles earns his place as the centerpiece of the *Iliad*.

Achilles is an unparalleled warrior, "half deified" (XXI, 291). Given his quasi-divine birth, Achilles is clearly favoured by (some of) the gods from the outset; however, it is his military prowess which makes him truly exceptional. Indeed, the entire Grecian campaign seems to hinge on his personal involvement (or lack thereof). While Achilles sits out in protest of Agamemnon's insult, Hector wreaks havoc on the Greek forces. As the situation becomes

desperate, Odysseus pleads with Achilles to return: "Troy and her consorts, / Bold of thy want, have pitched their tents close to our fleets and forts," threatening to force "their violent way / Ev'n to our ships" (IX 228-232). However, still smarting from Agamemnon's insult, Achilles turns them down; after all, why would he fight for his king, when "With equal honor cowards die, and men most valiant, / The much performer, and the man that can of nothing vaunt[?]" (308-309). The Grecian cause looks grim, and unfortunately for the Greek forces, Achilles seems as obstinate as ever to rejoin the battle.

Achilles' beloved friend, Patroclus, however, cannot bear to watch his countrymen slaughtered, and so enters the battle disguised in Achilles' armour, hoping this will rally the Greek forces and strike terror into the Trojans. And for an instant, this works. However, Patroclus is no match for Hector, and when the two meet in the field, Hector kills Patroclus with relative ease. While this is a terrible loss for Achilles, Patroclus' death signifies the beginning of the end for Troy. Upon hearing the grim news, Achilles returns to the battle, and in a truly epic display of grief driven rage avenges Patroclus' death by decimating the Trojan army: "ill affairs took up his furious brain / For Troy's engagements: every way he doubled slain on slain" (XXI, 19-20). Achilles is quite literally wading through the corpses of his "victories," and he is only getting started.

Recognizing Achilles' superiority, many Trojan soldiers simply run from him in terror, fleeing to (and drowning in) the Scamander river. The courageous few who stay to fight are quickly dispatched, often in gory detail, their lifeless bodies likewise ending up in the Scamander. Eventually, the river becomes clogged with Achilles' victims, prompting a rebuke from the river god, Xanthus: "In the field, let thy field acts run high, / Not in my waters. My sweet streams choke with Mortality / Of men slain by thee" (XXI, 203-205). This is a truly

gruesome scene, and, illustrating Achilles' power, is followed by a battle between Xanthus and a defiant Achilles. Not even the gods themselves can stop Achilles at this point. Achilles' "kill count" from this particular *aristeia* rivals that of any war movie or videogame. As Adam Roberts (2003) remarks in his introduction to Chapman's translation, Achilles' "sustained killing spree" following Patroclus' death "is amongst the most violent in literature" (p. xi).

Although the poet describes Achilles' actions as "horrid deeds" (XIX, 407), it is undeniable that his military prowess is celebrated in and by the *Iliad*. Yet, as remarked earlier, Achilles is ambivalent in his relationship with *kleos*: as he tells Ajax and Odysseus, it would be "foolish pride t'abridge my life for praise" (IX, 402). He ultimately returns to the battlefield due to the "crying blood for vengeance of my friend, / Mangled by Hector" (XVIII, 83-84), not personal glory. His *kleos* is merely a secondary consideration: He will avenge Patroclus, and "Meantime, I wish a good renown" (114). He knows his "death's hour then nigh" (85), but his thirst for vengeance consumes him, and so he will kill all Trojans who stand in his way, earning his *kleos* in the process. Achilles' great *aristeia* may not have been fuelled by a desire for *kleos*, but in the end *kleos* is precisely what he gains. His grief-driven slaughter, culminating in the humiliation of Hector, ensures, in Nagy's (1999) words, that "he will be the central figure of an epic tradition that will never die out. And the key to the *kleos* of Achilles' epic is the *akhos/penthos* [grief] over Patroklos" (ch. 6, para. 11).

Thus, we have an interesting dichotomy at play in the depictions of Hector and Achilles: Hector reveres *kleos* above all else, but is denied the *kleos* of the *Iliad* by one for whom *kleos* is only secondary, i.e. Achilles. Such apparent "contradictions" might signal the text's critical nature, for, as Brown (2004) observes, "The *Iliad* is as interested in the limitations of the heroic code as it is in celebrating its potential" (p. 48). Hector is fighting for his personal glory; Achilles

is fighting to avenge a dear friend. Which is more honourable? Perhaps the poem suggests that neither is ideal, that the warrior-hero system is fundamentally flawed. In any case, it is clear that both Hector and Achilles recognize that their perpetuity depends on cultural artefacts—like the *Iliad*—which can be transmitted over space and, more importantly, time. The terms *kleos* and *aristeia* thus denote the means by which Hellenic individuals transcend death. They provide the means for assuring the symbolic self (or name) will be extended eternally, or become un-wilting. The very fact that we still discuss the *Iliad*, that we continue to retell its subject matter with every new communicative mode is testament to the propagating potential of cultural artefacts.

It is entirely possible that many young people first met Achilles as Brad Pitt in the 2004 film *Troy*. The truly heroic find a way to persist, it would seem. As Nagy (1999) articulates the point, for heroes, "the key to immortality is the permanence of the cultural institutions into which they are incorporated" (ch. 10, para. 13). This permanence is not to be mistaken with immutability, however; on the contrary, it is a cultural institution's ability to adapt, to assimilate new communicative modes and technologies which determines its permanence. The ideals embodied in the *Iliad* serve a psychological, death denying function, but they also serve an ideological function as well: For powerful men seeking greater power, willing combatants are required, combatants who will literally risk everything as long as one is willing to pat them on the back and call them *hero*.

2. Platonic and Aristotelian Conceptions of the Heroic

In 4th Century (BCE) Greece, several centuries after Homer's own death, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* continued to occupy a prominent position in Greek culture. They continued to serve a pedagogical function, and to provide heroic benchmarks—Hector and Achilles were still regarded as admirable characters—but they also provided material (i.e. examples) to be

critiqued, and applied for pragmatic purposes (e.g. a philosophical debate). Socrates, Plato and

Aristotle all draw on Homer's works, using them as both a reference point as well as an appeal to

authority. For example, in the *Phaedo* Socrates relies on Homer's authority when discussing the

nature of the soul with Simmian and Cebes, stating, "it will never do for us to say that the soul is

a harmony; for we should… neither agree with Homer, the divine poet, nor with ourselves"

(94e-95a).

Much like Homer, both Plato and Aristotle concern themselves with the problem of

mortality. In the *Phaedo*, Cebes, one of Socrates' last visitors, describes this fundamental fear:

> [I]n regard to the soul men are very prone to disbelief. They fear that when the
> soul leaves the body it no longer exists anywhere, and that on the day when the
> man dies it is destroyed and perishes, and when it leaves the body and departs
> from it, straightway it flies away and is no longer anywhere, scattering like a
> breath or smoke. (70a)

This fear of what Otto Rank (2011) calls "final destruction" (p. 203) is a key component of

human existence; though we are rarely conscious of it, death anxiety is a driving force in human

motivation. There is no way of knowing whether or not the "soul" exists after death, and this

causes great fear. However, there is more certainty in the perpetuation of the self through symbol

systems, and the way to get into symbol systems is through heroic action. As Plato and Aristotle

reveal, however, what is deemed ideal and heroic is not static, but always changing. By their

time the warrior hero is still revered, but the artist (Homer), philosopher (Socrates), and ethical

politician are also highly valued;[7] this may suggest a shift away from the Homeric hero system,

in which warriors clearly rule the day.

As Glaucon asserts in the *Republic*, "the task of our guardians is the greatest of all"

(374d). As a nation with expansionary aims, and perpetually under threat of attack, Greece

---

[7] Of course, Plato sees imitation as a fundamental evil. Yet, he still appeals to Homer at times, so it seems that either
Plato is ambivalent in his judgement of the artist, or that Homer is an exceptional case.

required armies of would-be heroes, ready to kill and die for the pragmatic (e.g. defence, resource acquisition) and symbolic (prestige, glory, renown) needs of a nation. And so the warrior hero continued to hold a place of honour in Greek society, and continued to be the recipient, and subject matter of *kleos*. Indeed, during a discussion regarding the soldier's function in a state, Socrates asserts that we must honour "the valiant among our youth. For Homer says that Ajax, who had distinguished himself in the war, was honored with the long chine," and furthermore, "at sacrifices and other like occasions, [we] will reward the good… with hymns and the other privileges of which we have just spoken" (468d). These hymns and "other privileges," e.g. spoils of war, serve to glorify the hero and add to his *kleos*.

Socrates explicitly links heroism with immortality, or to be more accurate, the immortality conferred through the "*dulce et decorum est*" ideal, asking, "of those who die on campaign, if anyone's death has been especially glorious, shall we not, to begin with, affirm that he belongs to the golden race?" (468e). As Nagy (1999) suggests, the "golden race" refers to

> the First Generation of Mankind, whose very essence is gold…. The immortality of the Golden Age is specifically correlated with the *suspension of a vegetal cycle*: in the Golden Age… as on the Isles of the Blessed…the earth bears crops *without interruption*…. In these images, we see gold as a general symbol for the artificial continuum of immortality, in opposition to the natural cycle of life and death as symbolized by the flourishing and wilting of leaves on trees. (ch. 10, paras. 7-8)

Unlike the ages of Achilles or Socrates, the Golden Age is un-wilting, without decay. The clear implication is typically Platonic: In sacrificing one's life in war (by dying "gloriously"), one transcends the world of organismic existence, death and decay, and "reverts" to a state of purity and immutability. The prospect of immortality is thus held up as an incentive for heroic action, i.e. killing and risking one's life, which in turn assures the perpetuation of the group.

Each of the Platonic dialogues concerns itself with immortality in one form or another, and to varying degrees. Progeny and *kleos*, the immortality conferred through fame and song, are most prominently discussed in the *Symposium*. After a lengthy discussion on love and the corresponding desire to beget children, Diotima and Socrates come to "the inevitable conclusion that love is love of immortality as well as of the good" (207b). However, "the mortal thing partakes of immortality, both in its body, and in all other respects" (208b), and one of these "other respects" is *kleos*. According to Diotima, *kleos*, the transcendence of mortality via heroic action, is the primary driving force of human action:

> [T]he love of fame and the desire to win a glory that shall never die have the strongest effects upon people. For this even more than for their children they are ready to run risks, spend their substance, endure every kind of hardships and even sacrifice their lives. Do you suppose that Alcestis would have died to save Admetus, or Achilles to avenge Patroclus… if they had not believed that their courage would live for ever in men's memory, as it does in ours? On the contrary; it is desire for immortal renown and a glorious reputation such as theirs that is the incentive of all actions, and the better the man is, the stronger the incentive; he is in love with immortality. (208c-208e)

Like Homer, Plato is describing fame and glory as antitheses to death, decay, and the material.

The concept of *kleos* implies a distinction between nature and culture, wherein the latter provides the means for transcending the former. Although the material is mortal, renown is not, and so the concept of *kleos aphthiton* provides a powerful incentive for heroic action. Put another way, in order to survive in "men's memory," the would-be hero must stand out and contribute to the well being of his or her group; in this we again see the pragmatic function of *kleos*, which gives young men and women the incentive for defending the group or nation. It is a cosmic *quid pro quo* of the highest order, dealing in nothing less than existence itself.

However, although the immortality conferred through *kleos*, as discussed in the *Symposium*, is typically (though not exclusively) reserved for warriors like Achilles, there are in

fact several forms of immortality in Hellenic culture. In their introduction to Project Gutenberg's

Phaedo, Sue Asscher and David Widger (2008) comment on the theme of immortality in Plato:

> The *Symposium* may be observed to resemble as well as to differ from the
> *Phaedo*. While the first notion of immortality is only in the way of natural
> procreation or of posthumous fame and glory, the higher revelation of beauty, like
> the good in the *Republic*, is the vision of the eternal idea. So deeply rooted in
> Plato's mind is the belief in immortality; so various are the forms of expression
> which he employs. (para. 21)

The higher order immortality conferred through an immutable, pure *soul*, is the *Phaedo*'s

primary subject matter. The *Phaedo* is Plato's most explicit and focused treatment of death and

immortality, and this is no surprise given it is a retelling of Socrates' final hours. The *Phaedo*

signals a new hero system, namely, the hero as philosopher. Just as the Homeric hero gains *kleos*

by demonstrating courage in the face of death, so too does the philosopher. Whereas the *Iliad*

constitutes the *kleos* of Achilles and all he embodies, the *Phaedo* constitutes the *kleos* of Socrates

and all he embodies.

When Socrates' final visitors greet him, Phaedrus describes Socrates' disposition:

> [H]is mien and his language were so noble and fearless in the hour of death that to
> me he appeared blessed. I thought that in going to the other world he could not be
> without a divine call, and that he would be happy, if any man ever was, when he
> arrived there, and therefore I did not pity him as might seem natural at such a
> time. (58e-59a)

There is something supernatural about Socrates here; he is noble, fearless, appears blessed and

destined for a happy afterlife. Just as Achilles faces his death unflinchingly, so too does Socrates.

While most flee from death, the hero stares it in the face, and in doing so, transcends it. And as

Becker (1973) remarks in *The Denial of Death*, this is perhaps the most admirable human trait:

> We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and
> most constant adoration; it moves us deeply in our hearts because we have doubts
> about how brave we ourselves would be. When we see a man bravely facing his
> own extinction we rehearse the greatest victory we can imagine…. And so the

hero has been the center of human honor and acclaim since probably the beginning of specifically human evolution. (pp. 11-12)

Socrates' unflinching approach to his death is truly admirable. Socrates' depiction in the *Phaedo* represents the image of the hero as philosopher, discussing philosophy and pursuing wisdom until the moment of death. Socrates is heroic, but his death transcendence comes not from military prowess, but through the pursuit of knowledge, or living the philosopher's life.

Socrates' courage comes from his belief in the eternality of the soul, not the immortality conferred through *kleos*. Indeed, much of the *Phaedrus* consists of Socrates trying to persuade Cebes and Simmian that he is not fearful of death, and that no true philosopher should be. In fact, Socrates takes this one step further by arguing death is something all philosophers crave, since

> when we are dead we are likely to possess the wisdom which we desire and claim to be enamored of, but not while we live. For, if pure knowledge is impossible while the body is with us, one of two thing must follow, either it cannot be acquired at all or only when we are dead; for then the soul will be by itself apart from the body, but not before…. And in this way, freeing ourselves from the foolishness of the body and being pure, we shall, I think, be with the pure and shall know of ourselves all that is pure. (66e-67a)

The image of the body as an obfuscator to Truth is prominent in Hellenic poetry and philosophy, and indeed continues to persist.

For Socrates, only the eternal soul is capable of comprehending universal Truths; the body is a hindrance to the true philosopher, who loves wisdom above all else. And so death, which in this case is defined as the separation of the pure soul from the "foolishness of the body" becomes the only way to truly know anything. This separation, however, is not horizontal. While "the soul is most like the divine and immortal and intellectual and uniform and indissoluble and ever unchanging… the body, on the contrary, [is] most like the human and mortal and multiform and unintellectual and dissoluble and ever changing" (80b). Socrates has thus reconfigured death into something positive, liberating, and ultimately desirable.

In this way, Platonic philosophy can be viewed as the ultimate death-denying system; it divides the world into two parts, one material, finite, illusory, and one immaterial, infinite, and True. What is key is that Truth can only be found in the immaterial world of forms, the "real" world from which ours derives. It is comforting to think that finitude is merely an illusion, that our "real," spiritual selves will exist for eternity. Plato's dichotomous version of reality offers a supernatural supplement to the finitude of the material world, and while it may not be explicitly "religious," we clearly see the eternal soul in religions both preceding and following Plato.

Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, was much more concerned with the material, the bodily, the here and now. As Tad Brennan (2002) observes, Aristotle

> did not take up the Platonic project of proving the soul's immortality or of providing eternal rewards for virtuous conduct. Indeed, by defining the soul as the 'first actuality of an organic living body'… he seems to have precluded the possibility that any soul can survive the dissolution of the body whose actuality it is. (para. 1)

Aristotle does not insist on the soul/body dichotomy in the same manner as Plato. However, although Aristotle shies away from the immortality conferred through an immutable soul, his writing still shows the influence of Homeric conceptions of the heroic and *kleos*. I do not suggest that Aristotle makes an explicit connection between fame/honour and immortality in the same way as Homer, and (at times) Plato; as Grace Jantzen (2004) remarks, there "is no sense in which Aristotle uses the fact of death, let alone any prospect of immortality, as a fulcrum from which to judge human ethics or happiness. The idea of post-mortem rewards or punishments is completely alien to his thinking" (p. 237). Aristotle, it would seem, has neither the time nor patience to spend on fanciful speculation; unlike Plato, he is concerned with life, not death.

Yet, his treatment of war, courage, and the social benefits which derive from heroic action, all closely resemble the Homeric ideals embodied by Achilles and Hector. In the *Rhetoric*, for instance, Aristotle defines the nature and function of fame:

> Fame means being respected by everybody, or having some quality that is desired by all men, or by most, or by the good, or by the wise. Honour [*timé*] is the token of a man's being famous for doing good. It is chiefly and most properly paid to those who have already done good; but also to the man who can do good in future. Doing good refers either to the *preservation of life and the means of life*, or to wealth, or to some other of the good things which it is hard to get either always or at that particular place or time. (2.5, italics mine)

This concept of good as "the preservation of life" is of the utmost importance, as it is the crux of all heroic action; as such, I will return to it throughout this dissertation.

For now, however, if we follow Aristotle's reasoning, fame is ultimately linked with the preservation of life, since fame brings honour to those who do good, and doing good is defined as contributing to the preservation of life. This relationship holds true in several respects. First, the drive for immortality at the heart of Homeric *kleos* signals one relationship between fame and the preservation of life; in this case, it is the heroic actor's symbolic self which is "preserved" through cultural institutions. Secondly, although fame is often reserved for singular acts of heroism (notwithstanding unit citations, for example), it is not a solitary entity; on the contrary, it depends upon the group, since fame really means "known by others." This is key because the group outlives the individuals within it; it is made up of mortals yet it is immortal. From an evolutionary perspective, it is perfectly sensible that we would grant the "token of honour," to those of the group who aid in its perpetuation. Again , it is a trade-off, an existential *quid pro quo*: The group tells its heroes, "You keep us alive (literally and temporarily), and we'll keep you alive (symbolically and perpetually)." It is not clear who comes out on top in this deal, but it is a bargain almost all societies make, and upon which all societies depend.

Indeed, it is important to recognize that fame and honour are conferred upon those who distinguish themselves, who attain something which is "hard to get." Like Homer, Aristotle views the warrior among the most praiseworthy. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes honour as one of the key motivators for the "brave man." The brave man best embodies the virtue of *courage*, which is the halfway point between cowardice and recklessness. The brave man does not shy from danger, but neither is he reckless with his life; he is aware that his actions may cause his death, but confronts the "awe-inspiring" prospect of death openly:

> [N]o one is more likely than he to stand his ground against what is awe-inspiring. Now death is the most terrible of all things; for it is the end, and nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead. But the brave man would not seem to be concerned even with death in all circumstances…. In what circumstances, then? Surely in the noblest. Now such deaths are those in battle; for these take place in the greatest and noblest danger. And these are correspondingly honoured in city-states and at the courts of monarchs. Properly, then, he will be called brave who is fearless in face of a noble death, and of all emergencies that involve death; and the emergencies of war are in the highest degree of this kind. (3.6)

The brave man sees death coming but nevertheless stands his ground; in the face of mortal terror, the brave man demonstrates the "higher" virtue of courage. When we say "higher," what we really mean is *extra-bodily*; high virtue, "our better nature," etc., is to be contrasted with "base instincts," the purely physiological, or animalistic. Demonstrating higher virtues, therefore, can be viewed as a means for demonstrating one's supernatural essence, noble and transcendent.

With Aristotle's conception of the "noblest death," i.e. death in battle, "we are back with the *Iliad*. The glorious death in battle, celebrated in 'city states and at the courts of monarchs'" (Jantzen, 2004, p. 238). The individual who dies a noble death gains honour, *timé*, and glory, *kleos*. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle lists the honours conferred upon the brave man, in death and life: they include "sacrifices; commemoration, in verse or prose; privileges; grants of land; front seats at civic celebrations; state burial; statues; [and] public maintenance" (2.3). These are all markers

of renown, and function to *magnify* the individual in the public sphere, to broadcast the individual and his or her deeds into the *zeitgeist*. Whether or not Aristotle is making an explicit connection between heroic action, honour, and immortality, like Homer he propagates the idea that heroic action can lead to long-lasting praise through cultural artefacts and institutions. And as we saw through Nagy's analysis of *kleos aphthiton*, the cultural sphere functions to preserve the name of individuals who embody its virtues, and in doing so preserve itself. The brave man's actions bring abstract terms such as *virtue, courage,* and *valour* into existence, and in doing so the brave man becomes a hero, a transcendent figure to be revered and emulated.

Aristotle's brave man is not identical to the Homeric hero, but they certainly overlap. In both cases, honour is granted for bravely facing one's own death. In both cases, the battlefield presents the ideal setting for attaining the designations "brave" and "heroic." In both cases bravery and heroism are a function of mortality; that is, they both demonstrate a willingness to face death for "honourable" causes.[8] The brave man is honoured because he unflinchingly confronts death, which "is the most terrible of all things; for it is the end, and nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead" (*NE,* 3.6). Once dead, the deceased cannot change their situation; they have no influence, no agency. Qualitative concepts such as "good" and "bad" necessarily imply the possibility of movement, a mobility stamped out by death absolutely and irrevocably. This is what we fear most, and so in facing this end courageously, the man acting bravely becomes the "brave man," the hero of courage.[9]

Aristotle defines fear as "a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future" (*Rhetoric,* 2.5). In defining fear, which is concerned with

---

[8] The term "honourable" is culturally defined, and so what is deemed "honourable" differs across cultures. However, as a panhuman phenomenon, honour is almost always bestowed upon those who risk their lives for the benefit of others.

[9] It may be that each of Aristotle's virtues has its own particular hero figure.

the future, Aristotle associates evil with pain and *destruction*, which in its purest form is death. On the other hand, we saw earlier that "good is the preservation of life;" (*NE,* 2.5) the antithesis to destruction. Therefore, we come to the (widely held) conclusion that life is good, and death is evil. As Becker (1975) notes, "man has come, universally, to identify disease and death as the two principal evils of the human organismic condition. Disease defeats the joys of prosperity while one is alive, and death cuts prosperity off coldly" (pp. 2-3). Serial killers are evil because they take life; more to the point, because they take "innocent" life. Genocide is the most extreme instance of evil, since it not only involves the death of particular individuals, but the death of an entire people.

At first glance, there appears to be a contradiction here. Aristotle associates the good— the preservation of life—with bravery, but bravery achieves its highest iteration through warfare, which is comprised of killing and dying. The brave man is someone to be emulated, but he best demonstrates his courage in the mortally dangerous conditions of the battlefield. As evidenced in the story of Troy, the honour and renown acquired through warfare often comes at a terrible cost. However, in spite of all its blood and destruction, the Trojan War of the *Iliad* is in fact primarily centered around the preservation of life, both literally and figuratively. Literally speaking, the Trojans must fight to prevent the Achaeans from conquering and killing them; it is clear that the Greek forces are ruthless in victory, perhaps best evidenced in the murder of the infant Astyanax. Yet, even the murder of Astyanax can be understood as a function of "the good" since from the Achaean perspective, killing Astyanax means preventing a future war, since Astyanax will inevitably attempt to avenge his father once he grows up. It is a grotesque but pragmatic solution.

Figuratively speaking, the Trojans fight for the survival of their culture, the ability to propagate its values and people through genetic (offspring) and symbolic (cultural) vehicles. The

Greeks too fight for the same thing: By gaining size and material wealth through victories, the

Greeks fight for the perpetuation of their cultural identity, upon which individual immortality

depends. The greatness of Greek culture can only come at the expense of the Trojans and other

smaller nations, and both Greeks and Trojans understand the consequences of a Greek victory:

The end of Troy as a distinct, sovereign kingdom. For the Trojan women, an Achaean victory

means (at best) their enslavement, either as labourers or concubines; like property and treasure,

women constitute one of the spoils of war. For the Trojan men, they will almost certainly be

killed or enslaved; a select few may be allowed to assimilate into the Achaean forces, but for the

most part the Trojan men can expect brutal, ruthless treatment. Thus, the entire conflict is a

perfect illustration of the evil which stems from death denial, as we will see below with Becker.

In their pursuit of symbolic immortality and the magical properties of *kleos aphthiton*, the

would-be heroes of the Trojan war commit countless atrocities and kill countless human beings.

Nevertheless, Homer's heroes continue to signify an aspiration; they embody values

which are to be emulated. In his discussion of virtues and vices in the *Nichomachean Ethics*,

Aristotle draws on the example of Hector to describe the highest virtue:

> Let us now make a fresh beginning and point out that of moral states to be
> avoided there are three kinds—vice, incontinence, brutishness. The contraries of
> two of these are evident,—one we call virtue, the other continence; to brutishness
> it would be most fitting to oppose superhuman virtue, a heroic and divine kind of
> virtue, as Homer has represented Priam saying of Hector that he was very good.
> (7.1)

To be a brute is to lack refinement, to be base, beastly, animalistic. Brutishness is the antithesis

to the heroic because the former embodies absolute embodiment, while the latter embodies the

transcendence of the animalistic or material. The opposite of brutishness is "superhuman virtue,"

the transcendence of the material and animalistic embodied in the brute. To demonstrably

possess virtue, then, can be viewed as a means for denying one's creatureliness, as Becker would

say. Virtue is clearly transcendent; in its highest form, it is divine. To act out a vice is to fall, to "lower" oneself from an originary nobility.

Aristotle's conception of vice and virtue contains many of the elements in *kleos aphthiton*: By acting in a virtuous, noble, godlike manner, the individual distances himself from the material and the finite, thereby transcending biological matter. To fall into self-indulgent hedonism on the other hand, is to succumb to one's "baser instincts," the very antithesis of the heroic and transcendent. As such, when heroes are presented to us, they appear to be extraordinary; they are not subject to the same physical limitations as us mere mortals. Yet, in spite of the persistence of the warrior as transcendent hero motif, Aristotle, like Plato, appears to argue for a different form of heroism, a thinking, diplomatic and selfless heroism which puts the public good ahead of personal honour.

For Aristotle, it is the politician, not the warrior, who can exert influence on the grandest scale, and so politics becomes the new hero system. *Politics*, for example, opens thusly:

> Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good. (1.1)

Politics is the highest calling because it can achieve the greatest good, influencing the greatest number of people. To succeed in war is admirable because it protects the group; to prevent war altogether through diplomacy achieves the same end without the physical violence. Even in victory, a warring nation often loses vast swaths of its male population to death or injury.

The politician is suitable as a heroic figure because the political exists in the realm of *agon*, competition: Like the warrior, the politician is engaged in a contest, a battle of the minds, so to speak. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle clearly values the ability to engage in verbal as well as

physical contests, remarking that "it is absurd to hold that a man ought to be ashamed of being unable to defend himself with his limbs, but not of being unable to defend himself with speech and reason, when the use of rational speech is more distinctive of a human being than the use of his limbs (1.1). Again, we see the human/brute dichotomy at play here; although brutes can engage in warfare (though of a less noble sort), it is the mastery of rhetoric and by extension, politics, which characterizes the human. Thus, the glory afforded through winning contests is no longer reserved for the warrior or athlete alone.

White (1992) summarizes the move away from the warrior hero system:

> [In] Aristotle's day... [c]ompetition simply took on new forms. Victorious athletes basked in the reflected grandeur of epinician odes peopled with heroes of myth; while military exploits still won renown, generals were joined by politicians in the hunt for prestige; civic service ranging from liturgies to public office afforded new avenues to glory. Indeed, the principal source of honor, it seems, was now the political arena; the very word could refer to public office as well as respect. (p. 248)

Thus, like Plato, Aristotle does not completely do away with the warrior-hero concept; rather, he simply argues for the valorization of other individuals and other paths. This brings us to a crucial point. Achilles and Hector are fictional characters in a fictional tale; what the *Iliad*, or any other cultural artefact passes on is not merely an individual's name, but the cultural values embodied by the individual's deeds (his character). Examining a culture's heroes therefore provide us with insights into that culture's most sacredly held values at any given time.

In Hellenic poetry, we recognize the cultural importance of military prowess; the heroes are those who excel in combat. This is predictable, given the expansionary ambitions of ancient Greece and its neighbours: Individuals who excel in killing are valuable assets for a civilization continually at war. Achilles' deeds at Troy signal the apotheosis of the still persistent warrior-hero myth; these are actions which deserve the highest praise, which warrant the immortality

afforded through song. In Plato's day, the warrior is of course still necessary, but the complexity

of the Athenian political scene creates a new class of hero who must, above all, engage the world

in a critical, analytical manner. Through reason, the philosopher can ascertain essential Truths

and insights; the philosopher can bring light to darkness, so to speak. This is why it is the

philosopher who is best suited for governance, as illustrated by Plato's famous "Philosopher

Kings" from the *Republic* (e.g. 473c-473d). The philosopher knows best, and so should be the

one making the important decisions.

The philosopher is the hero because knowledge is now the path to the immortal; through

philosophy, the true, eternal nature of the universe, and more importantly, the *soul*, is revealed.[10]

In the figure of Socrates, the ideal philosopher, we see death denying benefits accrued through a

life of philosophy; Socrates is unafraid because he knows through reason that a) his soul is

immortal; b) he has led a good, contemplative life and so a happy afterlife awaits him; and c) that

death will bring what he always wanted most: the revelation of pure knowledge. As such, death

is no longer feared, but welcomed; as described in the *Phaedo*, death signals a release from "the

foolishness of the body" (67a) which does little else but obfuscate the truth.

In this sense, Plato's version of immortality is superior to Homeric *kleos*, since *kleos* is

simply a second rate, symbolic placeholder for the literal, revelatory immortality of the *Phaedo*.

As Achilles tells Odysseus in the *Odyssey*,

> I rather wish to live in earth a swain,
> Or serve a swain for hire, that scarce can gain
> Bread to sustain him, than, that life once gone,
> Of all the dead sway the imperial throne. (XI 642-646)

In other words, Achilles would rather serve a mere commoner alive on earth than rule the dead in

Hades. Plato's conception of an immortal soul therefore offers death transcendence on a higher

---

[10] Of course, Plato is not entirely disinterested; he is after all merely valorizing his own adopted hero system.

order than Homeric *kleos*, and the superior benefits afforded by Plato's hero system can be seen as a device used in the construction of a persuasive hero argument; in exchange for following the philosopher's path, Plato offers the ultimate prize for an animal who wishes itself immortal.

Yet, as desirable as Plato's immortal soul may be, it is entirely speculative, and deals primarily in the abstract and the invisible. Aristotle appears to have little patience for such flights of fancy; he is very much a philosopher of *this* world. In his valorization of the ethical politician, Aristotle retains elements of the warrior and thinker hero systems: The politician is skilled in contest, but as a thinking man, his prowess is demonstrated through persuasive argumentation, not killing. The politician is a thinking man, but he is also a man of action; he effects change and his influence is far reaching. Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not resort to promises of abstract immortality in valorizing the ethical politician, but emphasizes the pragmatic, earthly benefits of public service. However, many of the benefits of selfless public service are Homeric in nature. Aside from happiness, the hero politician is also rewarded with respect, praise, honour, and so on, all of which lead to recognition and therefore the symbolic immortality of *kleos*.

The warrior, philosopher, and politician, all exist within the realm of *agon*, though their tools differ. The warrior competes against others and against death; if he stands his ground he is brave; if he succeeds, excelling all others, he is a hero; if he is a hero he is granted immortality through cultural institutions, the *kleos* afforded through song, sculpture, and so on. The philosopher competes with others through dialectic and rhetoric, as evidenced in the Platonic dialogues; like the war hero, the philosopher is unflinching in facing death, but unlike the war hero, the philosopher hero, typified by Socrates, earns his or her[11] renown through discovering and revealing essential Truths; reason and wisdom supplant valour and prowess as the paths to

---

[11] Although philosophy was principally the realm of men in ancient Greece, the presence of Diotima as Socrates' mentor (e.g. in the *Symposum*) indicates they may have played a prominent role.

kleos. Like the philosopher, the public servant competes with others in the form of discourse, debate, and (ethical) political manoeuvring. If the politician "wins" these various conflicts, he is honoured, celebrations are held in his name, he is deemed wise, benevolent, just, valiant, and so on. As we shall see in the following section, the agonistic principal underlies virtually all manifestations of heroism.

3. Joseph Campbell and the Hero's Psychological Function

The Homeric, Platonic, and Aristotelian conceptions of the hero differ, but only superficially so: At their cores, each hero must overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges and in doing so, benefit his or her community. And although their techniques differ, they are all particular instances of *agon*. In his landmark survey of world mythology, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (originally published in 1949), Joseph Campbell examines the mythological hero in all its forms, across temporal and geographic divides; in almost all cases, the agonistic formula provides the underlying structure for specific hero myths, from the Babylonians onward. For Campbell, the persistence of this structure, what he calls the "monomyth" (discussed below) speaks to the fundamental character of the unconscious: Myths are external manifestations of the irreconcilable forces at play within the psyche. In Campbell's (1968) words, "the symbols of mythology are not manufactured; they cannot be ordered, invented, or permanently suppressed. They are spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it… the germ power of its source" (p. 4). Thus, through the examination of myth—its structures, forms and figures—we in fact examine the workings and processes of the subconscious.

As this passage indicates, Campbell is, at heart, a Jungian mythologist, and like Jung, sees both myth and dream as similar in form and function. Campbell (2002) draws an uneven analogy between the two, viewing them both as processes of meaning making:

> Like dreams, myths are products of the human imagination. Their images, consequently—though derived from the material world and its supposed history—are, like dreams, revelations of the deepest hopes, desires and fears, potentialities and conflicts, of the human will—which in turn is moved by the energies of the organs of the body operating variously against each other and in concert. Every myth… whether or not by intention, is psychologically symbolic. Its narrative and images are to be read, therefore, not literally, but as metaphors. (p. 28)

As we make our way through the material world, we try to make sense of it; we try to find patterns, assign categories, understand causal processes. Thus, the significance of the physiological element Campbell introduces here cannot be overstated; myths provide a sorely needed hermeneutic framework for the physical world, a world in which things are constantly changing, coming into and out of being.

Indeed, we exist in a world of suspicious origins. As Campbell's work shows, throughout recorded history all human beings have gazed at the world with a sense of awe and wonderment; we inevitably ask ourselves: How did *I* get here? How did *we* get here? Where did *this* come from? Why does the world behave in *this* way and not another? Each culture and epoch has its own way of expressing these fundamental uncertainties, but as Campbell's work, among others, demonstrates, the structures, forms, and figures employed in the service of answering them are strikingly similar. In one form or another, virtually all myths include the hero, the hero's task, the villain, the villain's aide, a helper figure, an object of desire, etc., and these all correspond to the people we encounter (e.g. parental figures) and events we experience.

As such, the myth is a means for both expressing and attempting to answer these fundamental questions. In Campbell's (2002) words,

> Mythologies are addressed… to questions of the origins, both of the natural world and of the arts, laws, and customs of a local people, *physical* things being understood in this view as *meta*physically grounded in a dreamlike mythological realm beyond space and time, which, since it is physically invisible, can be known only to the mind. (p. 28)

We see Campbell's (i.e. Jung's) Platonist leanings here, as this passage is reminiscent of Socrates' assertion that we can see the invisible truth through reason in the *Phaedo*. But what is clear is that the moment we assign meaning to a thing we transform it into something else entirely, adding magical properties to it. Everyday actions like hunting or eating and drinking become ritualized, and in performing rituals, it is hoped, we curry the favour of whichever gods the rituals honour. This meaning-adding activity of the human animal helps us understand our existence in an uncertain, ever changing world; and because we all ask the same questions, and face similar circumstances, it is perhaps no surprise that the answers are all so similar.

For example, according to Campbell, virtually all creation stories—including the Big Bang Theory—begin with some sort of absence, a void outside of time, from which life is created either spontaneously or through divine will. In the Judeo-Christian story, God creates heaven and the earth, "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (*Genesis* 1:2). The void is outside of time and so is eternal; it is not subject to the same laws and processes as the material, finite realm. In Campbell's (1968) words, "in the imagery of myth, the universe is precipitated out of, and reposes upon, a timelessness back into which it again dissolves" (p. 241).

Once God brings light and form to the earth, he fills it with life, culminating in the creation of Adam and Eve, who are directed to "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (*Genesis* 1:28). Out of the void comes not only material substance, but *meaning*. Here the meaning of life is to propagate it by subduing everything else in the world, and, in this case, to obey and praise God. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve are deceived by the serpent, and their infinite utopia is replaced with an existence of

hardship and finitude. The story of Adam and Eve represents one version of the creation myth, but as Campbell (1968) observes, it is simply

> The Biblical version of a myth known to many lands. It represents one of the basic ways of symbolizing the mystery of creation: the devolvement of eternity into time, the breaking of the one into the two and then the many, as well as the generation of new life through the reconjunction of the two. This image stands at the beginning of the cosmogonic cycle, and with equal propriety at the conclusion of the hero-task, at the moment when the wall of Paradise is dissolved, the divine form found and recollected, and wisdom regained. (pp. 141-142)

In the Christian tradition, the devolution from eternity to finitude is redeemed by faith in Christ; the Christian need only believe in Christ as God and "the wall of paradise is dissolved."

Campbell (2002) asserts that this other worldly realm, whether Paradise or the void, corresponds to the unconscious, and like dreams, myth is merely the expression of the subconscious, a way to bring visibility to the hitherto invisible:

> [A]s the insubstantial shapes of dream arise out of the formative ground of the individual will, so do all the passing shapes of the physical world arise… from a universal, morphogenetic ground that is made known to the mind through the figurations of myth. These mythic figurations are the 'ancestral forms,' the insubstantial archetypes, of all that is beheld by the eye as physically substantial, material things being understood as ephemeral concretions out of the energies of these noumena. Traditional forms of tools, dwelling and weapons have their justification in such everlasting models. Rituals are direct expositions of their life-sustaining patterns. (p. 28)

Thus, there is a continuous feedback loop between the substantive, visible world, and the invisible, ephemeral world of the subconscious. The physical world presents a wide array of problems for us—we must find food and shelter to survive, comingle with other human beings, and face an impending doom. And so to give sense and permanence to this insensible and fleeting world, we construct mythical worlds where meaning is clear and death can be transcended. In Campbell's (1968) words, "It is obvious that the infantile fantasies which we all

cherish still in the unconscious play continually into myth, fairy tale, and the teachings of the church, as symbols of indestructible being" (p. 164).

The myth, whether secular or religious, serves a psychological function by helping us "work through" the anxieties and uncertainties inherent in lived existence. Primary among these anxieties, of course, is death. Myth thus serves a death denying function by reifying the spiritual realm, and therefore offers transcendence from the material, visible, and finite. Jung (1963) summarizes the death denying function of myth as follows:

> [D]eath is an important interest, especially to an aging person. A categorical question is being put to him, and he is under obligation to answer it. To this end he ought to have a myth about death, for reason shows him nothing but the dark pit into which he is descending. Myth, however, can conjure up other images for him, helpful and enriching pictures of life in the land of the dead…. [W]hile the man who despairs marches toward nothingness, the one who has placed his faith in the archetype follows the tracks of life and lives right into his death. (qtd. in Lifton, 1983, p. 15)

In the mythical realm, chaos and death are conquerable; the "dark pit" is illuminated, so to speak.

Although reason may show us a meaningless, inescapably short existence, myth offers precisely the opposite, meaning and perpetuity. Through myth we are given purpose—"replenish the earth and subdue it" (*Genesis* 1:28)—and if we are true to our purpose, we are granted eternal life—"whosoever believeth in [Christ] should not perish but have eternal life" (*John* 3:15). Moreover, in providing understanding, the myth ultimately provides *control*; if we can understand the causal processes which surround us, then perhaps we can influence them. Perhaps in sacrificing a goat we will be rewarded with a plentiful crop in autumn. Perhaps in talking aloud to an invisible being, we can cure illness and stave off death. In any case, the structures and figures of myth provide a way to supplement the material, finite realm with one to work through and conquer (fear of) death.

In mythic figuration, the conqueror of death, of course, is the hero, the one who brings

life. In the Christian tradition, the devolution from eternity to finitude is redeemed by Christ,

who, in physically dying and resurrecting, symbolizes the life redeeming force of Christianity:

The Christian need only (truly) believe in Christ as God and blissful eternity is secured. This

redeeming figure, through whom eternity is (re)attained appears in the myths of virtually every

society. Otto Rank (1959), whom Campbell addresses periodically, outlines the "standard saga"

of the myths surrounding heroic birth:

> The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His
> origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or
> secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. During
> or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or oracle,
> cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his
> representative). As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then
> saved by animals, or by lowly people… and is suckled by a female animal or by
> an humble woman. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in a
> highly versatile fashion. He takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and
> is acknowledged, on the other. Finally he achieves rank and honors. (p. 65)

We see this formula most clearly articulated in the tales of Oedipus and Moses, but as we see

throughout the works of Rank, Campbell and Vladamir Propp, there are countless others.

Once born, the hero's life often follows the structure of Campbell's (1968) famous

"monomyth," which is essentially a panhuman, structural constant of the hero's journey. It

appears in virtually all cultures, across geographical and temporal divides, and although there are

countless local variations, the structure generally remains the same:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural
> wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the
> hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons
> on his fellow man. (p. 28)

The hero is inevitably faced with some exigency (often an existential threat) which only he or she can solve; through heroic action, the threat is vanquished, harmony is restored, and the hero is celebrated.

In *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, Propp (1968) gives us a similar account of this basic mythic structure, though Propp's focus is primarily on the local, Russian folkloric tradition:

> The hero of a fairy tale is that character who either directly suffers from the action of the villain in the complication (the one who senses some kind of lack), or who agrees to liquidate the misfortune or lack of another person. In the course of the action the hero is the person who is supplied with a magical agent (a magical helper), and who makes use of it or is served by it…. Generally the object of search is located in "another" or "different" kingdom. This kingdom may lie far away horizontally, or else very high up or deep down vertically. (p. 50)

In the *Iliad*, the entire conflict stems from a kidnapping, a "lack" which in reality is nothing more than an insult to Menelaus' (and therefore the Greeks') honour. It is up to Achilles and company to regain this lost honour—i.e. rectify the lack—by travelling to the Ilion battlefield, a place where gods and mortals exist together; and in doing so, the glory of the Greek nation is solidified, and therefore the immortality of its inhabitants.

Or, as the Christian story demonstrates, the hero's journey to, and return from, the uncommon realm or different kingdom (e.g. Jesus' death, the harrowing of hell, ascension to heaven and return) is often signalled by a shift, or change (in this case a new path to God). "For the mythological hero," Campbell (1968) suggests, "is the champion not of things become but of things becoming; the dragon to be slain by him is precisely the monster of the status quo: Holdfast, the keeper of the past" (p. 311). Since we belong to this world, the world of flux and finitude, immortality can be attained through cyclical processes alone, i.e. birth, death, and rebirth. In short, since we know we will inevitably die, the best we can hope for is a rebirth after death, a resurrection of some sort. But dying is almost invariably inescapable; it is always part of

the deal. In Nagy's (1999) words, "The fact of death, even for the hero, is painfully real and preoccupying…. Not even heroes, then, have a *bios* 'lifespan' that is *aphthitos* 'unfailing'; they too have to die before the immortality that is promised… comes true" (ch. 10, para. 1).

Indeed, physical death is often a prerequisite for the hero. Achilles has to die (young) in order to attain his *kleos aphthiton*; the glorification of Socrates in the *Phaedo* is predicated on his courageous confrontation with mortality; Christ must die so he can be resurrected as saviour. The theme of rebirth is, according to Campbell (1968), the meta-theme of myth, for

> Only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be—if we are able to experience long survival—a continuous 'recurrence of birth' (*palingenesia)* to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death. (p. 16)

Myth is the expression of our attempt to find (or make) meaning in the physical world, a world where everything we encounter comes from, and eventually returns to, non-existence. Thus, the hero is the one who ensures the cycle continues, that *palingenesia* remains the order of the day. To use a mechanical metaphor, the hero removes the wrench from the cogs of life, which must perpetually remain in motion. In Campbell's words, "The hero-deed is a continuous shattering of the crystallizations of the moment. The cycle rolls: mythology focuses on the growing-point" (pp. 311-312).

But, keeping with our mechanical metaphor, if the hero is the one who removes the wrench, who put it there to begin with? Why must the hero act at all, or, in the terms of the monomyth, venture "forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder" (p. 28)? The short answer is the *enemy*, or *villain*. The particular iterations of this figure vary according to historical context—ogre, tyrant, demon, communist, terrorist, etc.—but in all cases the villain causes some manner of disturbance in an otherwise peaceful existence. In Propp's (1968) words, the villain figure's "role is to disturb the peace of a happy family, to cause some

form of misfortune, damage, or harm. The villain(s) may be a dragon, a devil, bandits, a witch, or a stepmother, etc." (p. 27).

Unlike the hero, whose actions benefit the group, the villain is entirely self-interested; as Campbell (1968) puts it, "He is the hoarder of the general benefit. He is the monster avid for the greedy rights of 'my and mine.' The havoc wrought by him… is universal throughout his domain" (p. 15). The villain wants *more* for himself, and is, above all, a taker—of life, wealth, honour, freedom, or anything else valued by a given society. As a consequence of this insatiable taking, emptiness creeps in and a void is formed; the well eventually runs dry. The hero's journey therefore consists of preventing the monster from taking any more than he already has, and in returning what was lost:

> The composite hero of the monomyth is a personage of exceptional gifts…. He and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolical deficiency. In fairy tales this may be as slight as a lack of a certain golden ring, whereas in apocalyptic vision the physical and spiritual life of the whole earth can be represented as fallen, or on the point of falling, into ruin. (p. 35)

The hero alone possesses the "exceptional gifts"—virtues, blessings, athleticism, etc.—required to defeat the villain, for the villain is often a daunting foe indeed; and after all, he has to be, for otherwise the hero's accomplishment would not be so heroic.

Returning to the monomyth, the "fabulous forces" over which the hero must enact a "decisive victory" are often foreign, alien, aggressive, wholly Other; indeed, the greater the threat, the greater the rewards bestowed upon the hero. It is important to recognize that the villain represents an existential threat, both to the individual, as well as the individual's group. In the Anglo-Saxon epic, *Beowulf,* for example, the fantastic monster, Grendel, brings death not only to the Anglo-Saxon warriors he faces, but more significantly, to their worldview, their honour as warriors and comrades. Grendel is truly powerful, and only Beowulf is strong enough

to defeat him. Beowulf is summoned from Geatland to Hrothgar; he must travel to other-worldly

realms and defeat other-worldly, death-dealing creatures if he wants to restore order to his

community. In facing the enemy, it is not just Beowulf's life at stake, but his honour, and

moreover, the life and honour of the group to which he belongs. Grendel signifies death, and as

his antithesis, Beowulf signifies life.

The hero is therefore the symbol of regeneration and agency. As Campbell (1968) puts it,

"Wherever [the monster] sets his hand there is a cry…: a cry for the redeeming hero, the carrier

of the shining blade, whose blow, whose touch, whose existence, will liberate the land" (pp. 15-

16). The villain's death-grip over the land remains intact until it is removed by the hero, often

(though not always) through force. This removal—often in the form of an *aristeia*—constitutes

the hero's ultimate moment; indeed, the "whole hero-life is shown to have been a pageant of

marvels with the great central adventure as its culmination" (p. 294). Again, this is a symbolic, or

psychological victory, over what the villain represents (i.e. death). The hero-act is thus the

victory of life over death, and the hero's conquests are ultimately conquests over mortality. In

Campbell's words, "the sword edge of the hero-warrior flashes with the energy of the creative

Source" (p. 311).

However, the hero's journey is not complete once the villain is defeated: "When the hero-

quest has been accomplished… the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy."

The boon is brought back "into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the

renewing of the community, the nation, the planet" (Campbell, 1968, p. 179). Both the return and

the power to bestow boons are of the utmost importance. As we saw in the figure of Christ, the

hero's return from the supernatural realm signifies rebirth, the conquest of life over death:

> And therein lies his power to save; for his passing and returning demonstrate that
> through all the contraries of phenomenality the Uncreate-Imperishable remains,

> and there is nothing to fear. And so it is that, throughout the world, men whose function it has been to make visible on earth the life-fructifying mystery of the slaying of the dragon have enacted upon their own bodies the great symbolic act, scattering their flesh… for the renovation of the world. (p. 86)

The return from the unknown realm outside of time signifies our desire for a return from death; like Achilles, Socrates, or Jesus, we know we must first die in order to attain immortality, as immortality cannot be attained in our current, material, finite form; thus, immortality is always the immortality of another world, another mode of existence—in song, soul, or salvation.

Once returned, the final component of the (condensed)[12] monomyth is bestowing the boons one has attained through the heroic journey: The boon is brought back "into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet" (Campbell, 1968, p. 179). In other words, the benefits of the heroic action must now be conferred upon the hero's community (local or universal). The boon can be an object, such as a magical amulet, or treasure; it can be a lover, such as a princess; it can be more abstract, such as wisdom or understanding; or it can simply be a state of being, such as freedom. However, regardless of the particular iteration of the boon, it is always symbolic of *life*, "a symbol of life energy stepped down to the requirements of a certain specific case" (p. 175).

The most literal (and oldest) example of this life-giving boon is found in the Assyrian tale "The Epic of Gilgamesh." Fearful of death, Gilgamesh's ultimate quest is to locate the elixir of life, which grants immortality. He is "the strong man who would have everlasting life" (1972, p. 114), and after many trials, comes across the immortal Utnapishtim, who reveals "a mystery of the gods:"

> Gilgamesh, I shall reveal a secret thing, it is a mystery of the gods that I am telling you. There is a plant that grows under the water, it has a prickle like a

---

[12] Although not as numerous as Propp's 31 stages in *Morphology*, Campbell also lists many stages of the hero process not discussed here (17 total). They are usually subsets of the 4 components I have examined, including the encounter with a helper, the unanswered call, the refusal to return, the false hero revealed, and so on.

> thorn, like a rose; it will wound your hands, but if you succeed in taking it, then your hands will hold that which restores his lost youth to a man. (p. 116)

The attainment of immortality is far from painless; indeed, as we have seen it often requires a painful transformation or even physical death. Soon after his meeting with Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh locates the plant on the shores of the Waters of Death, and calls the ferryman to

> Come here, and see this marvellous plant. By its virtue a man may win back all his former strength. I will take it [home] to Uruk of the strong walls; there I will give it to the old men to eat. Its name shall be "The Old Men Are Young Again"; and at last I shall eat it myself and have back all my lost youth. (p. 116)

Gilgamesh is searching for his own immortality, but he also has his community in mind as well. Unfortunately, almost as soon as Gilgamesh acquires the plant, a serpent snatches it from him and, like the Biblical tradition which follows, humankind is deprived of immortality.

Nevertheless, although Gilgamesh is not successful, the boon he seeks is representative of all mythic boons. In Campbell's (1968) words, "The supreme boon desired for the Indestructible Body is uninterrupted residence in the Paradise of the Milk that Never Fails" (pp. 162-163). The hero's journey symbolizes our own trials and tribulations as we strive for understanding, to return to the timeless, formless realm of the eternal (unconscious). For the hero, "the perilous journey was a labor not of attainment but of reattainment, not of discovery but rediscovery…. From this point of view the hero is symbolical of that divine creative and redemptive image which is hidden within us all, only waiting to be known and rendered into life" (p. 36). Like Gilgamesh, we will inevitably fail in our attempts to attain immortality; however, also like Gilgamesh, we will go to great lengths in its pursuit.

For all the fantastical figures, images, locations, and events, the myth is ultimately about lived, material, finite existence. Beneath it all, it is the lowly body which motivates us:

> [O]ur conscious views of what life ought to be seldom correspond to what life really is. Generally we refuse to admit within ourselves, or within our friends, the

> fullness of that pushing, self-protective, malodorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell. Rather, we tend to perfume, whitewash, and reinterpret; meanwhile imagining that all the flies in the ointment, all the hairs in the soup, are the faults of some unpleasant someone else. But when it suddenly dawns on us, or is forced to our attention, that everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with the odor of the flesh, then, not uncommonly, there is experienced a moment of revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, woman in particular as the great symbol of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul. (Campbell, 1968, pp. 111-112)

For Campbell, myths and their heroes are nothing more than the manifestations of this attempt to "whitewash" and "perfume" the ugly, unjust, and insensible nature of the material world; they are not about fictional worlds, but the individual psyche, which must contend with an inevitable death. As Campbell articulates, the uncommon realm into which the hero ventures is merely the invisible portions of our own world, and so "the two kingdoms are actually one. The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know. And the exploration of that realm, whether willingly or unwillingly, is the whole sense of the deed of the hero" (pp. 201-202); or, the "mighty hero of extraordinary powers… is each of us: not the physical self visible in the mirror, but the king within" (p. 337). The physical self is mortal; the king within is transcendent.

Thus, our greatest achievements, our acts of heroism are the by-products of our attempts to deny the "tainted… odor of the flesh;" the trouble is, so too are our greatest atrocities. As we saw in the *Iliad*¸ heroism often comes at a terrible cost to human life. When Hector spears an Achaean hero through his throat he believes he is doing *good*. Likewise, when the crew of the Enola Gay drops the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, they are, ironically, acting out Aristotle's concept of good as the preservation of life. Instead of losing 20,000 Americans in a protracted guerrilla engagement, they opted to annihilate 80,000 Japanese in the blink of an eye. Good is the preservation of life, yes, but not just any life. And therein lies the rub. Good is the preservation of *my* life, and more to the point, *our* life.

The uncertainties in our own psyches become external, rather than internal problems, and external problems can be resolved through physical violence. In Campbell's (1968) words,

> Instead of clearing his own heart the zealot tries to clear the world. The laws of the City of God are applied only to his in-group… while the fire of a perpetual holy war is hurled (with good conscience, and indeed a sense of pious service) against whatever uncircumcised, barbarian, heathen, 'native,' or alien people happens to occupy the position of neighbor. (p. 144)

Moreover, myths also provide would be heroes with convenient symbols of dehumanization and justification. As Campbell notes, the "warrior-kings of antiquity regarded their work in the spirit of the monster-slayer. This formula, indeed, of the shining hero going against the dragon has been the great device of self-justification for all crusades" (p. 315). In contemporary Western discourse, the dragon is terrorism; during the Cold War it was the "Commies"; during WWII it was the "Huns".[13] In all cases, the enemy represents an existential threat, and so is no longer human, but merely a symbol of death and therefore a means to heroic ends.

This is the fundamental danger. In forgetting the symbolic nature of myth, we mistake people for their mythic function—the villain, the subordinate helper, the hero. In Campbell's words, "Symbols are only the *vehicles* of communication; they must not be mistaken for the final term, the *tenor,* of their reference.... Mistaking a vehicle for its tenor may lead to the spilling not only of value-less ink, but of valuable blood" (p. 219). The "evil" which arises from this fundamental misinterpretation is the primary subject matter for Ernest Becker's life's work.

4. Heroism and the Denial of Death

Becker is undoubtedly the driving force behind this dissertation. As such, he has peeked his head out from time to time. This section will be an in-depth overview and analysis of

---

[13] Terrorism, however, is not a physical entity, and so it is a difficult dragon to locate, let alone fight. Thus, representations of terrorism necessarily simplify and condense its complex political, cultural, or religious motives.

Becker's work. Much like Campbell, Becker is concerned with motive, or what makes people do what they do. The answer, according to Becker (e.g. 1973; 1975), is indefinite perpetuation, immortality by any means possible. The *kleos aphthiton*, or "unwilting fame," promised by the *Iliad* demonstrates the ambition of cultural artefacts generally: To defy nature itself. 3,000 years later, the antagonistic relationship between culture and nature has only been exacerbated. With all our advancements, we still seek the *kleos aphthiton* Achilles and Hector so desperately yearned for. Perhaps precisely because of all our advancements, however, the need to attain symbolic immortality via heroism has become much less explicit. In fact, according to Becker, it has been buried deep within the sub-conscious.

Following Otto Rank,[14] Becker argues that symbolic systems, or cultures, arose out of existential anxiety. For Rank, two major wish/fear combinations drive the human animal: Fear of life (individuation) and fear of death (unification). We fear life because it is an inherently alienating, lonely existence; no one else can truly understand another's personal, instant by instant experience. Yet, we also wish to be individuals, to express our individuality, or ego; we relish our uniqueness. Conversely, we fear death because it is the end of individual existence, the dissolution of the self. Yet, we also wish to lose our individuality and become one with what Rank (1950) simply refers to as *the All*, a Platonic/Jungian *whole* without individualized egos:

> The fear in birth, which we have designated as fear of life, seems to me actually the fear of having to live as an isolated individual, and not the reverse, the fear of loss of individuality (death fear). That would mean, however, that primary fear corresponds to a fear of separation from the whole, therefore a fear of individuation, on account of which I would like to call it fear of life, although it may appear later as fear of the loss of this dearly bought individuality, as fear of death, of being dissolved again into the whole. Between these two fear possibilities, these poles of fear, the individual is thrown back and forth all his life…. (p. 124)

---

[14] Rank's ideas are incredibly complex, especially since much of his work is comprised of responses to Freud and other detractors. A thorough analysis of his ideas, in all their nuance, would consume far more space than I have here. Thus, the following paragraphs are simply meant as a very broad overview of his influence on Becker.

Rank thus situates human existence between two poles: A birth which we do not remember, and a death which we cannot ever know through experience. Both states exclude the ego, and so, according to Rank, both represent wholeness or collectiveness.

As Robert Kramer (1995) observes, we do not possess the means to totally resolve this polarization; for the "healthy" individual, it simply becomes something we learn to negotiate:

> Sometimes it is fear of life—the fear of becoming and being oneself, separate and different from everyone else—that has the upper hand. At other times, it is fear of death—the fear of merging into the other, into the collective, and losing one's "dearly bought individuality"—that predominates. The eternal conflict between the wish for and fear of separation, and the wish for and fear of union, has no final solution…. Whereas there is no final solution to this dilemma, the "part-whole" problem, some solutions are healthier than others. (pp. 66-67)

For Rank (1989), the healthy way to negotiate these fears is through creative acts, such as artistic production. Indeed, the more tension between the drives for union and individuation, the more dynamic the creative environment, since it is "fear, fear of life and of death... that determines the urge to eternalize oneself in one's work" (p. 386).

Art is an effective means for mitigating these fear categories because it confers both individual and collective immortality. On the one hand, the artist relies on the symbolic resources of his particular community—their means of representation, historical context, and so on. On the other hand, in creating something unique, the artist asserts his or her individuality, and what is more, externalizes the self into something concrete and communicable. In Rank's (1989) words,

> the artist obtains his individual immortality by using the collective ideology for his personal creativity and, in this way, not only re-creates it as his own but presents it to humanity as a new collective ideology on an individual basis. Thus he himself becomes immortal along with his work. (p. 72)

Rank (1989) sees this relationship best analogized in the religion/art dichotomy, where the former represents a collective symbol system, and the latter represents the individual

application of this symbol system. The two are in fact different but complementary expressions

of the need to reify the spiritual world:

> There is no doubt that even in the historical times of art religion used it as a means to represent, in objective and concrete form, the contemporary idea of the soul…. It *had* to be made concrete, pictorial, and real, so as to *prove* its existence, and had to be presented in matter to demonstrate its indestructibility. (p. 15)

In concretely representing the decidedly not-concrete, the artist validates, demonstrates, or

"prove[s] its existence." And this, in turn, serves a death denying function: By externalizing the

soul, along with other invisible aspects of (supposed) being, the human animal grants itself a

degree of control over both the visible and invisible worlds. With the creation of a deity and

immortal soul, for example, we can invent ways to appease or please the deity, and in doing so,

receive rewards, such as rain, a plentiful harvest, healthy offspring, or, in short, *more life*.

Moreover, by using the collective's symbols, the artist propagates them, keeps them alive, and in

doing so, the particular belief systems from which they sprang as well. As Rank puts it, "art

preserves even dead or dying cultures, the epochs of human development" (p. 73). We can only

read about Achilles if the Greeks preserve their culture.

Art also confers immortality because it is a creative act, i.e. *poesis*. The "will to

production," according to Rank (1989), is always tied in to the desire to transcend the experience

of instinctual living, and therefore mortality:

> [E]xperience is the expression of the impulse-ego, production of the will-ego. The external difficulties in an artist's experience appear, in this sense, but as manifestations of this internal dualism of impulse and will, and in this creative type it is the latter which eventually gains the upper hand. Instinct presses in the direction of experience and, in the limit, to consequent exhaustion—in fact, death—while will drives to creation and thus to immortalization. (pp. 43-44)

Unlike the prison-like, inescapable bounds of instinct and physical experience, production

implies will, agency, and therefore the possibility of transcending the human condition. The

world of experience is the world of finitude; experience will inevitably end, or exhaust itself. Art, which exists both within and without the world of experience, is therefore uniquely situated to provide transcendence, or *escape* from the crushing certainty of finitude.

The work of art is thus intimately linked with the desire to transcend mortality, to work through the fear of death. The precise manner in which this manifests itself depends on both historical and individualized factors. For example,

> Whereas primitive art is perpetuated through abstraction, and Classical art achieves immortality through idealization, Romantic art rounds off this immense transformation process…. in making vivification its chosen mode of overcoming that fear of death from which the immortality-idea and urge to eternalization first sprang. (p. 71)

What is key is that art contains in it symbols of particular immortality ideologies, the symbolic means through which a particular culture deals with death anxiety. The desires to both create and "consume" art, according to Rank, spring from the fundamental anxieties which arise from existence. The diverse ways we cope with existential anxiety—and the consequences of such actions—constitute the bulk of Ernest Becker's work, who builds upon Rank's insights on existential anxiety and immortality ideologies.

One of the virtues of Becker's philosophy is that, like Rank, he begins with fundamental certainties, and goes from there. From a rhetorical perspective, Becker is useful because he is concerned with motivation; if we can understand what makes people tick, so to speak, then we can more readily understand what persuades them and why. According to Becker (2005), like all organisms, human beings are driven to seek out more life, to perpetuate existence, both individual and collective: "On the most elemental level," he observes, "the organism works actively against its own fragility by seeking to expand and perpetuate itself in living experience: instead of shrinking, it moves toward more life" (p. 205). The crux of Becker's thesis rests on

this primary, incontrovertible fact. Try as we might to dress up the human condition, we are

animals feeding on the life energy which surrounds us.

Becker's (1975) posthumously published *Escape from Evil*, his most comprehensive and

focused work, opens with a vivid description of this organismic existence:

> At its most elemental level the human organism, like crawling life, has a mouth, digestive tract, and anus, a skin to keep it intact, and appendages with which to acquire food. Existence, for all organismic life, is a constant struggle to feed—a struggle to incorporate whatever other organisms they can fit into their mouths and press down their gullets without choking. Seen in these stark terms, life on this planet is a gory spectacle, a science-fiction nightmare in which digestive tracts fitted with teeth at one end are tearing away at whatever flesh they can reach, and at the other end are piling up the fuming waste excrement as they move along in search of more flesh. (p. 1)

It is discomforting to hear human existence articulated in such terms, but we cannot doubt its

veracity. Precisely because it is discomforting, however, "this stomach-centered characteristic of

all culture is something we easily lose sight of" (p. 21).

At some point in our feeding frenzy, we attained self-awareness and realized that biology

alone would not suffice if we wanted to continue living; since all biological material is

susceptible to decay and ultimately death, we sought extra-biological, or "supernatural" means

by which to perpetuate ourselves. As we saw in our discussion of Lifton's (1983) "symbolic

immortality," symbols are transmissible, communicable, and can *spread* or *distribute* the self

where physiology cannot. As such, Becker (1975) asserts that

> man quickly saw beyond mere physical nourishment and had to conceive ways to qualify for immortality. In this way the simple food quest was transmuted into a quest for spiritual excellence, for goodness and purity. All of man's higher spiritual ideals were a continuation of the original quest for energy-power. (p. 22)

Unlike the "physical" world, which is the world of death and decay, the symbolic realm is fluid,

and unbound by the same physical and temporal constraints as physiological being. Thus, we

construct a symbolic self, which is really the composite image of the various selves we present to

the world. In Becker's (1971) words, "we are *metteurs en scene* not only in the fabrication of inner-newsreels, but also in the action of our social world; we not only edit the images of our films with great skill, but also fashion our spoken lines" (p. 110).

The construction of a symbolic self, negotiated through internal and external mediators, allows us to create an elevated, transcendent pseudo-self, which depends upon a curious relationship between the physical, visible world, and the semiotic, invisible world. Our actions must *mean* something—to both ourselves and others—if they are to be valued; the physical must be firmly underpinned by the semiotic, if they are to be meaningful. Becker (1971) uses the figure of the Western hero (typified by Clint Eastwood in the 1960s) to illustrate this point:

> In Western films the self must above all be silent and self-sufficient, but capable of exploding into brutal murder while maintaining a disarming smile. The Western hero, in fact, provides the best proof that sustaining a convincing self is the basis for enhancing cultural meaning. With nothing but penetrating eyes, charged silence, and an IQ of 80, why does this character thrill audiences to the core? The Western hero conveys little more—but nothing less—than unshakable conviction that underneath it all there is genuine meaning in man's action. The particular conspiracy to be worked on the world is preordained for each cultural plot. But in each case the object of social cynosure can be confident that he will be sustained by all others, if he plays his part well. (p. 110)

Through encountering others, the individual learns how not only to *act*, but how to *be*; thus, one observes, derives meaning from these observations, and applies this meaning to his or her own beliefs and actions.

But again, in observing how one should be, one makes the implicit assumption that the other's actions are meaningful, that they demonstrate inherent value, worth, or excellence. As Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) writes,

> When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matter are what they appear to be. (p. 17)

In other words, Goffman suggests that there is an assumed correlation between the "inner" and "outer" self (though this assumption is often wrong). For example, Achilles' actions reveal a noble spirit: His martial prowess is an expression of his inner excellence, and not the other way around. There is never any doubt in Achilles' abilities; he is never afraid of failure. However, Achilles does not make it into the *Iliad*—indeed the *Iliad* does not exist—if Homer and his culture did not value military prowess; without the attached meaning system, Achilles actions might not be viewed as the demonstration of higher virtues, but simply as murder.

Identity is thus constructed through a continuous feedback loop, where meaning influences action, and action influences meaning. And so by engaging in those beliefs or actions which are imbued with *positive* meaning, the individual gains self-esteem, and consequently fashions himself an identity not susceptible to the same death and decay as the bodily self. Where biology falls short, culture picks up the slack, so to speak. As Becker (1975) puts it, "culture gives man an alter-organism which is more durable and powerful than the one nature endowed him with" (p. 3). In "The Epic of Gilgamesh," Gilgamesh, as we have seen, knows he will inevitably die, and so looks to culture (via heroic action) for perpetuation:

> I have not established my name stamped on bricks as my destiny decreed; therefore I will go to the country where the cedar is felled. I will set up my name in the place where the names of famous men are written, and where- no man's name is written yet I will raise a monument to the gods. (1972, p. 72).

A more contemporary version of this aspiration is the desire to see one's "name in lights," or on YouTube, but the basic function remains the same.

However, unlike seeing oneself on YouTube, getting one's name stamped in bricks or shone in lights requires a certain degree of excellence and extraordinariness; one must be particularly good at something. And though this *something* varies according to cultural and

historical context , the designations "remarkable," "talented," "extraordinary," invariably depend

on a system of measurement: The remarkable are necessarily distinct from the mediocre, the

extraordinary from the ordinary, and so forth. Moreover, and this is the crucial point, such

designations can only be bestowed from *without*; someone else has to think the would-be hero is

remarkable in order for it to be so. Gilgamesh only wants his name stamped in bricks for others

to read; the same goes for Achilles' *kleos*.

Thus, culture does not only represent a means for perpetuating the self through symbols,

but also provides individuals with standards of value and meaning. These standards of value and

meaning are what Becker (1973) calls *cultural hero systems*, "a symbolic action system, a

structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behaviour, designed to serve as a vehicle for

earthly heroism" (p. 5). For a being thrown into the world ignorant of its laws and customs, this

is a great asset indeed. Through immersion in a particular culture, or hero system, we come to

understand what it is we are supposed to *do*—how we are supposed to live, mature, mate, work,

die and so on. We are given rules to follow and role models to emulate; we learn which actions

result in beneficial outcomes, and which do not.

Of course, this socializing process begins in childhood, and according to Becker (1971),

through parental figures:

> [T]he entire early learning period of the child is one in which he learns to *switch modes* of self-esteem. The child learns painfully that he cannot earn parental approval, or self-esteem, by continuing to express himself with his body [i.e. anal play]. He finds that he has to conduct himself according to symbolic codes of behavior in order to be accepted and supported. In other words, his vital sentiment of self-value no longer derives from the mother's milk [as Freud said], but from the mother's mouth. (p. 67)

Thus, if nature, represented by mother's milk, no longer provides sufficient nourishment for the

human animal, then symbol systems, represented by the mother's mouth, must make up the

remainder. And this idea of self-esteem should not be taken lightly; as Becker argues, self-esteem does "not represent an extra self-indulgence, or a mere vanity, but a matter of life and death. The qualitative feeling of self-value is the basic predicate for human action, precisely because it epitomizes the whole development of the ego" (p. 67).

Through cultural standards of value (beginning in the home), we can accrue self-esteem, and learn how to "make something" of ourselves; we can be *good* and influence the world in which we live. To receive an honourable designation signifies a) belonging to a larger community; and b) being valued within that community. When we say we do not want our "good name" tarnished, what we really mean is we value our reputation, the way we are perceived, or what people hear (*kluô*) about us. Culture thus provides a means for constructing a symbolic self, a heroic *name*, which is not subject to the same material failings as the body, and which makes us special. In spite of all this we are animals first and foremost, and what is more, we know it.

The fact that we are biological beings programmed to survive while also knowing death is inevitable creates a potentially paralyzing tension. In Becker's (1973) words,

> we might call this existential paradox the condition of *individuality within finitude*. Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to man… the status of a small god in nature…. Yet, man is a worm and food for worms. This is the paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it. (p. 26)

The need to deny our fundamental creatureliness is thus a significant motivating factor in how we think and act: We try to stand out, to convince ourselves and others that we are more significant than worms or worm food. In short, we yearn to be heroes, those individuals honoured by their societies and celebrated through poetry, song, sculpture, and most recently, digital technologies (O'Gorman, 2010). As an animal aware of *and* fearful of death, "Man needs

self-esteem more than anything; he wants to be a cosmic hero, contributing with his energies to

nothing less than the greatness and pleasure of the gods themselves" (Becker, 1975, p. 37).

For Becker (1973), self-esteem functions as a buffer from the true nature of the human

condition; in constructing an identity out of meaningful, heroic deeds, the individual "rises

above" the mere biological existence of other animals:

> [E]verything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He… drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness—agreed madness… disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same. (p. 27)

Although we need not accept Becker's sweeping absolutism here, his basic point stands. Like the

structure and figures of myth, this "madness" manifests itself in diverse ways, but in all cases it

is simply a generally agreed upon way to disguise that part of our existence which is little more

than a movement from one meal to the next. The particular manifestations of this heroic cover-up

are *culturally prescribed*, or culturally specific. Thus, one culture's conception of the hero, or

"hero system," may differ significantly from another's. For example, contemporary, Western

heroism may be signified by a large house, impressive salary, or a spot on the cover of *Time*

magazine. In 12th Century England, however, heroism may be bestowed upon the most devout

Christian, or the bravest knight. In all cases, these hero systems provide the criteria for standing

out, and therefore the means for transcending death.

Exchanging lowly physical being for higher, spiritual being does not wholly disquiet our

anxiety, however; if it did, we would live in a far different world. Instead, we have merely

shifted our anxieties from the physical realm to the symbolic. As Becker (1975) puts it,

> What men have done is shift the fear of death onto the higher level of cultural perpetuity; and this very triumph ushers in an ominous new problem. Since men must now hold for dear life onto the self-transcending meanings of the society in

> which they live, onto the immortality symbols which guarantee them indefinite duration of some kind, a new kind of instability and anxiety are created. (p. 5)

In other words, in addition to physical survival, we now must also ensure our belief system's survival, evangelize on its behalf. As we saw in the *Iliad*, the need to defend and expand one's worldview often comes at a terrible cost, and, according to Becker, is responsible for much of humanity's evil against itself: When the validity of a particular belief system means life or death, people will go to great lengths to assert its legitimacy.

Although hero systems vary according to cultural context, there are recurring motifs. Generally speaking, the hero is the one who a) demonstrates the higher virtues, such as courage; and b) performs his acts in service of the *good*, which, again, Aristotle defines in the *Rhetoric* as "the preservation of life" (1.5). The hero is one who risks his or her life for the good of the group, and in doing so, demonstrates excellence. This idea of making a difference for the betterment of the group (either local or universal) is at the heart of conventional heroism. According to Becker (1975), the first and clearest iterations of the hero were warriors and hunters, "[b]ecause obviously these qualities helped to secure life, to assure the perpetuation of the tribe**.** Exploits in the danger of hunting and war were especially crucial" (p. 43). Figures such as Gilgamesh, Achilles, and Sampson typify the warrior hero. Gilgamesh is one whom "no one has ever prevailed against…, he is strong as a star from heaven" (1972, p. 63); Achilles possesses a "Mars-like presence" (*Iliad*, XXII, 116); and Samson "slew a thousand men" with the jawbone of an ass (*Judges* 15:15). Each warrior fights on behalf of his nation, if not in motive (as in Achilles' case) then at least in outcome.

It would seem the wars of the 20th and 21st centuries have tarnished the image of the warrior-hero: WWI, the Vietnam/American war, the Iraq war, etc. were all fought without a clear, direct threat to *our* citizens, and so they are not generally regarded as "worth it." As

Becker (2005) observes, "The nation represents victory and immortality.... It must give tangible, straightforward victories or its credit is dissipated in the hearts of its citizens" (p. 117). In other words, heroes are only heroes if their actions are valued, if their cause is just. That being said, we do continue to see its remnants. In much of the Western world, we uncritically refer to members of the armed forces as "heroes," especially if they have fallen in battle. In Ontario, for example, a stretch of Highway 401 utilized to transport soldiers killed in Afghanistan has been dubbed the "Highway of Heroes" (Warmington, 2010). On November 11th of every year we hold Remembrance or Veteran's Day ceremonies; we wear poppies, "lest we forget." Part of the lasting appeal of the warrior-hero is that we know war is always a very real possibility, and so we need people to fight them. In other words, if a nation is invaded, its inhabitants would hope that their military can protect them, and this fear of attack, invasion, or death is a useful rhetorical tool.

As effective as it might be as an immortality ideology, the warrior is a dangerous occupation. Truth be told, most people would much rather gain recognition from deeds which do not require the risk of life and limb. The dominant hero system of our age is undoubtedly capitalism, and this is not surprising. Wealth provides the means to purchase medicine, weapons, and buffers the individual from the reminders of physical vulnerability, which come from lacking the material necessities of life. The citizens of wealthy nations often have the highest standards of living; they have access to food and water; they are healthy, and happy. As such, it is not difficult to see why the wealthy have always been held in such high esteem.[15] The "great" nations of a given age are the most prosperous, powerful and influential; in our present moment, money is the most direct path to prosperity, power and influence. And the same holds true at the

---

[15] Of course, it depends on the particular hero system. An ascetic monk does not revere the materially wealthy, for example. However, generally speaking, the wealthy have been held in higher regard than the not-wealthy.

individual and local levels as well. Through capital we can buy more food than we need, live in larger dwellings than we need, we can create a *surplus*.

For Becker (1975), the very concept of a surplus speaks directly to the relationship between capital and death transcendence:

> Man, the animal who knows he is not safe here, who needs continued affirmation of his powers, is the one animal who is implacably driven to work beyond animal needs precisely because he is not a secure animal.[16] The origin of human drivenness is *religious* because man experiences creaturliness; the amassing of a surplus, then, goes to the very heart of human motivation, the urge to stand out as a hero, to transcend the limitations of the human condition and achieve victory over impotence and finitude. (p. 31)

Capital provides an avenue for covering up our creatureliness, for shielding ourselves from the naked, hungry, scavenging animals we really are. In Becker's words, "money is the human mode *par excellence* of coolly denying animal boundness, the determinism of nature" (p. 82).

In addition to providing for the material necessities of life, capitalism also provides fertile ground for heroic activity, since it is a) rooted in competition (an economic *aristeia* perhaps); and b) success is easily measurable. Capitalism's "winners" are easy to recognize, since success is measured in dollars, cars, gadgets, vacations, and property; these are all easily identifiable, as they can be seen. It is no wonder consumerism trumps organized religion as the dominant immortality ideology of our day; as Becker observes, the "symbols of immortal power that money buys exist on the level of the visible, and so crowd out their invisible competitor" (p. 84). This element of competition (*agon*) appears to be an unfortunate but invariable aspect of human being; capitalism is simply the present framework through which to measure oneself, a means for standing out among (and over) others.

---

[16] I am not comfortable with Becker's anthropocentrism, but whether or not we are the *only* animal to face death anxiety is not significant in my mind.

In the age of the scientific method, the immortality-to-come promised by religion cannot hope to compete with the immediate surge of self-esteem granted by capitalism. As such, we put our faith in money and the markets; we judge ourselves and each other according to bank account or neighbourhood, and hope we can "move up" in life. Again, however, relative ranking means success only comes at the cost of another's failure. This, according to Becker (1975), is an inescapable reality of the capitalist hero system: "Modern man cannot endure economic equality because he has no faith in self-transcendent, otherworldly immortality symbols; visible physical worth is the only thing he has to give him eternal life…. He dies when his little symbols of specialness die" (p. 85).

This is why, according to Becker (1975), people are so loathe to admit they are wrong; since the belief in a particular meaning system is what buffers us from death anxiety, calling the buffer into question can be a source of significant distress:

> Each person nourishes his immortality in the ideology of self-perpetuation to which he gives his allegiance; this gives his life the only abiding significance it can have. No wonder men go into a rage over fine points of belief: if your adversary wins the argument about truth, *you die*. Your immortality system has been shown to be fallible, your life becomes fallible. History, then, can be understood as the succession of ideologies that console for death. (p. 64)

Since human beings share a similar fate, face similar fears and uncertainties, we all wonder about the same fundamental issues, and as we saw through Campbell's work, we tend to express and work through these uncertainties in a structurally similar, but superficially distinct manner. Unfortunately, it is these superficial differences[17] which are most visible, and so constitute the greatest source of tension. As Becker (1971) suggests,

> in things social, man is the only discreditor of man.... One of the main reasons that cultures can be so directly undermining to one another is that, despite their many varieties, they all ask and answer the same basic questions. So that when two

---

[17] I am not trying to downplay the significance or validity of particular cultural iterations of death denial; I mean "superficial" in the sense of "surface," rather than "silly" or "spurious."

different ways of life come into contact they clash on the same vital points. (p. 113)

Understanding the competitive nature of hero systems is of the utmost significance; not only do individuals compete within individual hero systems,—who received the most lucrative salary?—hero systems themselves compete with one another for dominance—capitalism or communism? Democracy or monarchy? Christianity or Islam? Long hair or short hair? It is preposterous to say that God lives in the mountain, for he *clearly* lives in the sky. And so on. When we consider what is riding on the validity of particular belief systems, it is no surprise differing worldviews often clash.

In *The Immortalist*, which mines the same philosophical territory as Becker, Alan Harrington (1969) summarizes the point as follows:

> Cruelty can arise from the aesthetic outrage we sometimes feel in the presence of strange individuals who seem to be making out all right.... Have they found some secret passage to eternal life? It can't be. If those weird individuals with beards and funny hats are acceptable, then what about my claim to superiority? Can someone like that be my equal in God's eyes? Does he, that one, dare hope to live forever too—and perhaps crowd me out? I don't like it. All I know is, if he's right I'm wrong. So different and funny looking. I think he's trying to fool the gods with his sly ways. Let's show him up. He's not very strong. For a start, see what he'll do when I poke him. (qtd. in Becker, 1975, p. 113)

And this brings us to the culmination of Becker's work, the impetus of his entire project: The drive to stand out as heroes comes with tragic consequences; where there are winners, there must be losers.[18]

As we saw in the *Iliad*, war is appealing in part because it provides an easily recognizable, death defying avenue for proving one's specialness (i.e. through the *aristeia*). Indeed, while Achilles performs his bloody *aristeia* in books XX and XXI of the *Iliad*, he is continually described as superior to the rest of the field, in both ferocity and stature. At the end

---

[18] This will become especially clear in chapter three's discussion of propaganda and Nazism.

of routing the Trojan army—including many heroes, though not yet Hector—Achilles is pictured alone, atop his horse, covered in the blood of his victims:

> Beneath Achilles' one-hoof'd horse, shields, spears, and men lay trod,
> His axle-tree and chariot wheels all spatter'd with the blood
> Hurl'd from the steeds' hoofs and the strakes. Thus to be magnified,
> His most inaccessible hands in human blood he dyed. (XX, 447-450)

Through Achilles' gory "accomplishment," he is "magnified," and "inaccessible." Achilles is not only inaccessible because he cannot be reasoned with at this point; he is also inaccessible because like the gods, he is beyond all others, too high to be reached.

Achilles' triumph comes through the spilling of blood, and as Becker (1975) notes, "[m]en spill blood because it makes their hearts glad and fills out their organisms with a sense of vital power; ceremoniously killing captives is a way of affirming power over life, and therefore over death" (p. 102). In killing the Trojans, Achilles is acting out his particular culture's hero system better than anyone else, and in doing so, is afforded the available means of immortality, in this case the *kleos* of the *Iliad*. However, Achilles' survival of the combat, and his gazing at the bloodied battlefield, likewise allow him to feel as if he has cheated death, that is to say, defeated it. As Rank puts it, "the death fear of the ego is lessened by the killing, the sacrifice, of the other; through the death of the other, one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying, of being killed" (qtd. in Becker, 1975, p. 99). Killing is in essence a sacrifice: The sacrifice of *your* life for *mine* or *ours*. There is an inherent *life value* designation at play here; only certain individuals and groups deserve to live as we do, to occupy the same quasi-divine place on earth.

As such, although Achilles is "the prince of tragedies," (*Iliad*, XX, 420) to the Trojans, he is hailed by the Achaeans as "most excellent of Greece" (*Odyssey*, XI, 627) and as Odysseus asserts, "in life [his] eminence was ador'd by all" (636). Once we cast our lot with a group, it is our duty as a member of that group to sustain it, but as Achilles' *aristeia* illustrates, this service

often comes at the expense of others. The human animal requires self-esteem as much as any material necessity, and the primary means to accrue self-esteem is often through *agon*, or competition, and the ultimate form of competition, with the greatest stakes (death) and greatest rewards (life) is of course warfare. War thus provides the clearest but most destructive way to demonstrate one's specialness, and if the warrior can defeat an opponent in a particularly brutal fashion, that specialness is only magnified.

This brings us to another crucial point: The threat, or villain, always and necessarily *precedes* the hero. Put another way, the villain is always logically prior to the hero. Without a dragon to slay, and a culture which values dragon slaying, the knight cannot prove his worth, and therefore cannot attain symbolic immortality. In light of Becker's thesis, this makes sense: The concept of heroism arose out of the need to defeat death, an enemy always-already there, programmed into our very being; death is and always has been the first and most visible manifestation of evil:

> Once we have an animal who recognizes that he needs prosperity, we also have one who realizes that anything that works against continued prosperity is bad. And so we understand how man has come, universally, to identify disease and death as the two principal evils of the human organismic condition. Disease defeats the joys of prosperity while one is alive, and death cuts prosperity off coldly. (Becker, 1975, pp. 2-3)

We cannot defeat death as an internal, unchangeable state, but we can defeat it as an external, mutable symbol.

Thus, by labelling aspects of the external world "evil," Becker (1975) suggests, we give ourselves the means to eradicate evil and therefore death:

> All you have to do is to say that your group is pure and good, eligible for a full life and for some kind of eternal meaning. But others like Jews or Gypsies are the real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and bringing disease and weakness into your vitality. Then you have a mandate to launch a political plague, a campaign to make the world pure. (p. 93).

As we shall see in chapter three, this becomes the justifying principle employed by the Nazis and other perpetrators of genocide. Although these are extreme examples, even when heroism does not take an explicitly militaristic or murderous form, it invariably depends on the conquest of others. Admission into the "cool" clique in elementary school often involves teasing, bullying, or excluding others. The front, roomy section of the plane is reserved for those who can afford it; for those who cannot, behind the curtain, please. In all cases, individuals find ways to stand out among the crowd, and this often only comes at the expense of others. Indeed, exclusion is the first step toward violence, physical or otherwise.

But how are such "groups" set up in the first place? How do we know which group, and which heroes to emulate, which ones to avoid and demonize? Which groups and figures offer the greatest path to heroism, and which are the *means* toward heroism? How do we *propagandize* for a belief system in the first place? The answer to all these questions is, essentially, *through media*, which we will take up in the next chapter. As we shall see, media offer death transcendence in many of the ways described by Becker and the other figures in this chapter: They allow us to extend the self beyond our physical limitations, while also providing (and propagating) standards of value for which to measure ourselves.

Chapter 2: The Death Denying Function of (New) Media

> Being may perhaps best be said to be the ongoing manner in which everything that is, presences; i.e., it is the manner in which, in the lastingness of time, everything encounters man and comes to appearance through the openness that man provides…. Being manifests itself continually anew.
>
> - Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology"

> Life is the conquest of mobility. As a process of 'exteriorization,' technics is the pursuit of life by means other than life.
>
> - Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, Vol. I

Thus far, we have seen that human beings are animals who are compelled to survive yet acutely aware of their own finitude. As a way to avoid "final destruction," we seek alternative, "supernatural" means by which to propagate the self. Symbol systems allow us to perpetuate the self symbolically through communication, and provide standards of meaning and value by which to understand ourselves and each other. Moreover, we saw that by demonstrating the "higher" characteristics (virtues) of a given culture, the individual stands out, gains recognition, and receives honours. Chief among these honours is the symbolic perpetuation of the self through art and other communicative modes, such as song or writing. This "symbolic immortality" is a significant motivator, and so its requisite conditions can be used for rhetorical purposes. But until now we have neglected a vital aspect of symbolic immortality, namely, the means by which meaning and identity are recorded, stored, and transmitted in the first place. In other words, what are the technical, logistical components of symbolic immortality? How exactly does it work?

The short answer is, through communication media. Gilgamesh goes to great lengths to see his name "stamped in bricks;" Hector slaughters countless Achaeans in order to become

immortalized in song; Shakespeare promises his lover the immortality of the sonnet: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (Sonnet 18, 13-14), and in doing so earns his own. In all cases, media serve to *exteriorize* the self; the symbols which remain after death preserve an aspect of the once-present, corporeal self. Gilgamesh only hopes to have his name stamped in bricks so that it will later be *remembered*, *recalled*, and *recited* long after his physical death. In Heideggerian terms, although this symbolic immortality is not Being in the sense of material presence, it is a form of Being nevertheless. Through symbol systems in general, and what Bernard Stiegler (e.g. 1998) calls "mnemnotechnologies" in particular, the self attains a form of existence wholly dependent on communication media. In this view, it is neither religion nor heroism which are the true purveyors of selfhood after death, but *media*, the vehicles of, and means to, immortality.

This chapter begins with a discussion of Heidegger's "Being-towards-death," and then moves to the Derridean concepts of the trace and inscription. It then examines media as prostheses, capable of extending both individual and collective identity beyond the temporal and spatial limitations of physiology. The works of Friedrich Kittler and Marshal McLuhan also figure prominently in this section. Media, and indeed all technology, are the material means through which we enact our heroic death denial; they allow us to exteriorize identity, concretize the soul and other self-idealizations (O'Gorman, 2010). They also provide us with access to the past; they let us know where we fit in an overall narrative, i.e. what is expected of us. In short, they tell us how to be heroes, how to etch our names into the cultural fabric of the day. This mediated tension—bringing meaning in and sending it out—forms the basis of the human condition, and signals the means through which we come to negotiate the world and mortality.

1. Being-towards-death

To return to an example from the previous chapter, the symbolic immortality afforded by *kleos* is "symbolic" in that it relies on symbol systems for perpetuity; however, it is also symbolic in the same sense that a *victory* is symbolic—that is, "empty," or "insubstantive." When Hector vies for *kleos*, he is not expecting literal immortality, the perpetual regeneration of cell and organ tissue (as Gilgamesh did); rather, he hopes to secure a renown which will *outlast*—but not forestall—his physical death, and which will serve as a substitute or placeholder for him after he is gone. Inherent in the concept of *kleos* is a sense of residual "presence:" Hector will not *be there* when his deeds are (re)told and (re)heard, yet in some way, it seems to him and to us that the (re)telling and (re)hearing *reanimates* him; in speaking his name, he is temporarily recalled from the dead and once again made present in our world, the world of the living. The Iliadic hero's obsession with a death to come constitutes a hyper-realization of Heidegger's "Being-towards-the-end" or "Being-towards death."

For Heidegger (2008), Being-towards-death is the essence of Dasein, "Being-in-the-world." As finite beings we experience a world caught between two abysses, the before and the after. In Heidegger's words, "Everydayness is precisely that Being which is 'between' birth and death" (p. 276). Our orientation toward an inevitable end, always on the horizon, is what in fact characterizes Dasein—i.e. limit (finitude) and therefore temporality. According to Heidegger, the individual experience of death is not a part of Dasein, but is precisely what lies outside of it:

> Death does indeed reveal itself as a loss, but a loss such as is experienced by those who remain. In suffering this loss, however, we have no way of access to the loss-of-Being as such which the dying man 'suffers.' The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just 'there alongside.' (p. 282)

The act of dying lays outside of direct experience and so it is something perpetually in front of us: "The 'ending' which we have in view when we speak of death, does not signify Dasein's Being-at-an-end, but a *Being-towards-the-end* of this entity. Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is" (p. 289). Although death is the end of Dasein for the deceased, it is not the end of Dasein as such; others continue to exist in the world, and continue to *concern* themselves with the departed. In other words, although the dead do not, or *cannot* experience the living, the living can continue to experience the dead.

Heidegger takes up this paradox of "Being" without "Being-in-the-world" as follows:

> Does not dying mean going-out-of-the-world, and losing one's Being-in-the-world? Yet when someone has died, his Being-no-longer-in-the-world… is still a Being, but in the sense of the Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more of a corporeal Thing which we encounter. In the dying of the Other we can experience that remarkable phenomenon of Being which may be defined as the change-over of an entity from Dasein's kind of Being (or life) to no-longer-Dasein. The end of the entity *qua* Dasein is the *beginning* of the same entity *qua* something present-at-hand. (2008, p. 281)

After death, Hector loses his corporeality and therefore his direct and personal link to Dasein, as does Churchill, Eisenhower, or anyone else; yet, because these are "great" people, we observe their deaths, mourn their loss, and honour their memory. So although the deceased no longer exist in the same form as they did while alive, they nevertheless continue to influence us, or make their presence felt. This "Being-no-longer-in-the-world" is a genre of Being, so to speak, but without a direct, material engagement with the world.

Yet, for Heidegger, this description of the dead as merely "present-at-hand" is not satisfactory. According to Heidegger, we generally seem unable to see the deceased as a mere *thing*, even (or especially) when gazing upon a corpse; instead, "This something which is just-present-at-hand-and-no-more is 'more' than a *lifeless* material Thing. In it we encounter something *unalive*, which has lost its life" (p. 282). As present-at-hand, a human corpse is no more

significant than a bird's corpse, or a rock for that matter; but of course, it does mean something

different than the dead bird or rock. We do not just cast it aside, and this is at least partially

because in the dead we see our own future, and so we continue to give meaning to it and imbue it

with sacred significance. As Heidegger articulates the point,

> The 'deceased…' has been torn away from those who have 'remained behind,' and is an object of 'concern' in the ways of funeral rites, interment, and the cult of graves. And that is so because the deceased, in his kind of Being, is 'still more' than just an item of equipment, environmentally ready-to-hand, about which one can be concerned. In tarrying alongside him in their mourning and commemoration, those who have remained behind *are with him*, in a mode of respectful solicitude.… In such Being-with the dead, the deceased *himself* is no longer factically 'there.' However, when we speak of 'Being-with,' we always have in view Being with one another in the same world. The deceased has abandoned our '*world*' and left it behind. But *in terms of that world* those who remain can still *be with him*. (p. 282)

Put another way, though the deceased is not able to be with *us*, we can still be with *him*, as

"Dasein is essentially Being with Others" (p. 281). The concept of *kleos*, hero cult, or the phrase,

"so and so will live on in our thoughts and memories" speaks to this.

This works in part because the Other is always external in the first place (experientially

speaking); even in its presence it is always at least partially a symbol, a substitution for the

experiencing thing (person) itself. So we are used to using metaphors as substitutions for other

people long before their passing. Thus, even when an individual is not physically present, his or

her absence can still be felt by those who remain behind—either through memory, or perhaps by

encountering a scent, picture, or song may which may evoke the deceased's presence. In this way,

the absent individual continues to *influence* Dasein after his or her death, and continues to exert a

certain degree of agency. It is precisely through this phenomenon of influencing-without-presence

that individuals can hope to perpetuate their influence after death.

For Heidegger, as much as we feel loss at the death of another, it remains an external event, and concerning oneself with the dead through ceremony, sentiment, and so on, is a way of externalizing death, of distancing oneself from it. It is, in effect, putting death into discourse, where it is shaped and given meaning by the public, or what Heidegger (2008) calls *the they*: "In Being-towards-death, Dasein comports itself *towards itself* as a distinctive potentiality-for-Being. But the Self of everydayness is the 'they'. The 'they' is constituted by the way things have been publicly interpreted, which expresses itself in idle talk" (p. 296). The "everydayness" and "idle talk" Heidegger refers to is in effect the cultural hero systems of Becker, or immortality ideologies of Rank: They are not *only* distractions, but frameworks through which to view the world, and through which to deny one's death.

In bringing death into public discourse (through media), we deny our own, individual deaths; it is a coping strategy for dealing with the inevitability of mortality. In Heidegger's words,

> Factically one's own Dasein is always dying already; that is to say, it is in a Being-towards-its-end. And it hides this Fact from itself by recoining 'death' as just a 'case of death' in Others—an everyday occurrence which, if need be, gives us the assurance still more plainly that oneself is still 'living.' (2008, p. 298)

And so in externalizing death, and by giving it meaning,

> the 'they' provides a *constant tranquilization about death*. At bottom, however, this is a tranquilization not only for him who is 'dying' but just as much for those who 'console' him. And even in the case of a demise, the public is still not to have its own tranquility upset by such an event, or be disturbed in the carefreeness with which it concerns itself. Indeed the dying of Others is seen often enough as a social inconvenience, if not even a downright tactlessness, against which the public is to be guarded. (p. 298)

The way a particular society enacts this "tranquilization" differs, but it is a panhuman constant[1] and constitutes a way to externalize, understand, and therefore mitigate death.

---

[1] Even cultures which ostensibly face death without fear will almost always believe in some form of afterlife or continuance of an immaterial soul. Indeed, as a "worldview," even atheism is a form of death denial.

Tranquilization is an instance of what Heidegger calls "inauthentic" Being-towards-death. In this inauthentic mode, "One *knows* about the certainty of death, and yet 'is' not authentically certain of one's own" (2008, p. 302). It is as if we think something will bail us out at the last moment. Ironically, Heidegger himself appears to hold out hope for death-escape, though from a stoic, removed philosophical perspective of course: "If 'death' is defined as the 'end' of Dasein— that is to say, Being-in-the-world—this does not imply any ontical decision whether 'after death' still another Being is possible, either higher or lower, or whether Dasein 'lives on' or even 'outlasts' itself and is 'immortal'" (p. 292). There are possibilities which perhaps exist outside of death, outside of (or perhaps a continuation of) Dasein as we empirically experience it in the here and now, so there is at least a chance that life continues after corporeally vacating Dasein.

One of the primary tranquilizers available to us is technology, which not only serves as a distraction, but also allows us to extend our life and influence tangibly and materially. In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger (1982) explores technology's role in our relationship with Dasein, our default Being towards death. The problem, as Heidegger sees it, is that we take the biblical commandment to subdue the earth to heart, and with vigorous zeal. Everything in nature—including other human beings—becomes something to exploit for our own ends. Trees are there to provide firewood, building materials, and weaponry; animals are there to provide material sustenance, cheap labour, and for appeasing the gods when the time calls for it. In Heidegger's words, human beings are always already challenged "to exploit the energies of nature" (p. 18). Thus humanity's relation to nature is one of "standing reserve:" Nature waits for us to exploit its energies, which is to say *technologize* it. This is what leads Heidegger to make his famous assertion that "the essence of technology is nothing technological" (p. 4); rather, like Being-towards-death, it is an *approach*, a way of experiencing Dasein.

For Heidegger, the essence of technology is what he calls *Gestell*, or "enframing," our approach to nature as standing reserve, technology in waiting. In Heidegger's words,

> Enframing means the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve. Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological…. [T]echnological activity… always merely responds to the challenge of Enframing, but it never comprises Enframing itself or brings it about. (1982, pp. 20-21)

Yet, in framing nature in this way—i.e. as standing reserve—an odd reversal occurs: We no longer utilize nature to satisfy our immediate material needs, but in fact become slaves to technology and technological "progress." We build up surpluses, seek never-ending reserves of energy, and appear unable to stop building up these reserves. It is as if we no longer call upon nature to do our bidding; rather, *Gestell* means we are called upon *by* nature to continually exploit it. As Heidegger puts it, "If man is challenged, ordered, to do this, then does not man himself belong even more originally than nature within the standing-reserve?" (p. 18). In this view, technology no longer serves us, but directs us, pushes us forward under the guise of "advancement" and "progress." Like the rest of nature, we become objects, instruments of technology rather than masters of it.

With this in mind, Heidegger is by no means a luddite. As Escobar et al. (1994) put it:

> Science and technology, for Heidegger, are ways of bringing forth new realities, new manifestations of being…. Technology for Heidegger also has an important ontological role in that the world becomes present for us through technological links of various kinds…. (p. 213)

In other words, technology serves a vital existential and hermeneutic function, for we cannot access each other, or the past, without technology. Technology helps us understand and contextualize our environment by granting us access to that which is not immediately present, and moreover, it provides a means for *projecting* oneself into a future where one is no longer present.

Technology is thus a "vehicle" (medium) for extending our selves across space and time; whether the technology is a stone carving, or a contemporary technology like the personal computer, technology allows us leave a mark on Dasein for others to encounter once we are gone. In this sense, part of Dasein's mystery is that it appears to exist independently of the individual's participation within it. We are born into Dasein and it is already here, and solipsism aside, will presumably continue after we leave it. Yet, we only know this through symbol systems and technology, both of which constitute *supplements* to physiological being. Indeed, supplementarity can be viewed as the underlying mechanism which allows for symbolic perpetuation in the first place, i.e. the concept that one thing can stand in for another. With this in mind, I will now examine the history and philosophy of the supplement, and its relevance to transcending finitude.

2. Supplementarity Through Technics

At their core, media are recording devices that store individual and cultural memory for future reception and (re)transmission. Yet the history of recording, of putting into record, is also permeated by discourses of *reality* and *being*. Although "media" and "being" appear to operate in separate, indeed, antithetical, ontological and epistemological realms, they in fact mutually determine one another. There is a famous scene at the end of the *Phaedrus* where Socrates and Phaedrus are discussing the relative merits of various inventions. In illustrating a particular point on writing, Socrates relates the story of Theuth, who was said to have "invented numbers and arithmetic, geometry and astronomy, dicing, too, and the game of draughts and, most particularly and especially, writing," (274d) and King Thamus, the ruler of Egypt.

Theuth parades his inventions in front of King Thamus, but when it comes to writing, the king is not impressed, for, he suggests,

> The fact is that this invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it. They will not need to exercise their memories, being able to rely on what is written, calling things to mind no longer from within themselves by their own unaided powers, but under the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves. So it's not a recipe for memory, but for reminding, that you have discovered. And as for wisdom, you're equipping your pupils with only a semblance of it, not with truth. Thanks to you and your invention, your pupils will be widely read without benefit of a teacher's instruction; in consequence, they'll entertain the delusion that they have wide knowledge, while they are, in fact, for the most part incapable of real judgment. (275a - 275b)

In other words, writing constitutes a form of intellectual "cheating:" If we are able to store knowledge externally, which is to say preserve it for future reading, then the intellect will atrophy, since it will no longer need to remember or understand on its own; we can always just "look it up," so to speak.[2] In addition to memory atrophy, King Thamus' rebuke also indicates a certain *impurity* associated with written text and its future reading: Writing is merely an additional degree removed from the original signified, a mere "semblance" of the Truth. Unlike speech, which comes from the soul, writing is external or "alien" to us.

The scene from *Phaedrus*, and Derrida's (1997) subsequent deconstruction of it, serves as an exemplar of "the logic of the supplement" (p. 7), the law of succession, and the privileging of the "originary" in a dichotomous pair (e.g. presence/non-presence, speech/writing, good/evil, soul/body, natural/artificial, and so on). As Jonathan Culler (2007) articulates the point, the "supplement is an inessential extra, added to something complete in itself, but the supplement is added in order to complete, to compensate for a lack in what was supposed to be complete in itself" (p. 103). In other words, the supplement is an add-on, an additional layer to the thing as it already is, and which compensates for its host's inherent lack.

In the *Phaedrus*, writing is an "inessential extra" which merely dilutes meaning; speech, on the other hand, constitutes "the living word of knowledge which has a soul, and of which

---

[2] As Bernard Stiegler (1998) observes, we face similar problems today, except now, "everyone is concerned about the effects of the mini calculator on the arithmetical skills of future generations, or automatic spelling correctors" (p. 86).

written word is properly no more than an image" (275d -275e). Speech is more "present," more extemporaneous and therefore more "valid" than writing, its mere image. Yet, as Stiegler (1998) puts it, "speech is already a prosthesis" (p. 116), and so in Derrida's (1997) words, "writing is the supplement *par excellence* since it marks the point where the supplement proposes itself as the supplement of the supplement, sign of a sign, taking the place of a speech already significant" (p. 281). The spoken word is always already a medium; speech is already a signifier, a substitution for something else—a thought, thing or concept—and so as a substitution for speech, writing is a supplement of an already existing supplement. The implications of this (i.e. the supplement, or *differance*) are that there are no solid, extra-symbolic grounds upon which one can base assertions of essential, originary, or natural being. Instead, we are always using signs to refer to other signs.

If writing is the supplement to speech, then *identity* is the supplement to the mortal self. What we call "identity" is always already a supplement, a "concretization," in Rankian terminology, and therefore an artificialization of the self, one's "true" nature. Socrates looks forward to death because it brings about his liberation from the prison of the flesh; it is a return to "true," originary being. It does not occur to him that in fact his body is the only "truth," that the soul is artificial, or supplementary; it does not occur to him that his soul, his "true" identity is in effect a *compensation*, a fulfillment of nature's ultimate lack (i.e. of life). Plato's eternal soul makes up for this "life-deficiency" in nature by shifting the plain of existence from one of decay and finitude to one of immutability and eternality.

Homeric *kleos*, on the other hand, fulfills life-deficiency through symbolic substitution, a set of signifiers—e.g. song or narrative—which stand in place for the deceased hero. In this way, the Homeric hero is truly the most self-aware of all heroic death-deniers; he is aware of this symbolic substitution before it occurs. He does not see it for anything other than it is—a poor,

symbolic substitution for eternal life, a mere metaphor. Still, he spends his entire existence attempting to "fix" the metaphor's meaning, so that his excellence is undeniable and unambiguous. He tries to construct a "name," a legacy of unwilting renown. Unlike Plato's metaphysical doctrine, the Homeric hero is entirely aware of what is at stake: A heroic life culminating in a heroic death at best assures an uneven exchange of *kleos* for *bios* and nothing else. Many immortality ideologies simply deny this distinction exists.

What Hector realizes is that "Hector," does not only signify Hector the man, but in fact signifies *mortality*, a finite existence which relies on symbolic trickery for its extension. The concept of name propagation finds its exigency in the act of naming itself; again, the name is a way to supplement nature's life-deficiency. But through supplementation comes revelation: Humanity begins to see itself as mortal, to "feel death," in Heidegger's words, as soon as it begins to name the external world and each other. As Derrida (2002) suggests,

> it seems to me that every case of naming involves announcing a death to come in the surviving of a ghost, in the longevity of a name that survives whoever carries that name. Whoever receives a name feels mortal or dying precisely because the name seeks to save him, to call him, and thus assure his survival. (p. 389)

The name reveals the reality of finitude, our Being-towards-death; it reveals the exigency which spurs the need for naming in the first place, a future and inevitable absence.

In this way the name is a harbinger of death. Indeed, according to Derrida (1973) the very concept of an "I," and therefore of identity, is always already a function of mortality:

> My death is structurally necessary to the pronouncing of the *I*. That I am also 'alive' and certain of being alive comes over and above the meaning-to-say.... The statement 'I am alive' is accompanied by my being-dead, and its possibility requires the possibility that I be dead; and conversely. (pp. 96-97)

To speak of one's living existence is to speak of one's eventual demise. The very fact that we require something to *stand in our place*—the "I," a name, an image—reveals the possibility of

absence, which, in its extreme form, is absence from the world. As Peggy Kamuf (2005) observes, "Derrida will affirm that if the 'I' must be able to function with the same meaning in my absence, then that absence—my death—is structurally inscribed in the possibility of its repetition, the ideality of its meaning" (p. 54). Ironically, this reliance on repeatability, or lack of a fixed essence, is precisely what grants the name its potential immortality.

Thus, the paradox of naming is that, on the one hand, it provides a means for transcending the material boundaries of nature, for assuring survival, denying one's creatureliness, and therefore, affirming one's immortality; however, on the other hand, in conferring this extra-biological existence the name reveals itself as a *compensation*, a substitution or supplementary consolation prize for an inevitable (and ultimate) loss, "which is neither a present to come nor a present past" (Derrida, 1997, p. 315). The name is a supplemental self, the self-signified, and as a supplement not confined to the individual mortality of its *bearer*, it can "jump" from living memory to living memory through the repetition of communication media. It is not "nailed" to the physical existence of its bearer. In Kamuf's (2005) words,

> one's name, one's signature is as Juliet analyzes it, 'no part of thee.' Because the name, the signature is not the bearer of the name, it is also always the mark of the definitive detachment that others must experience upon the death of the name's bearer, when the name will cease to be a possible form of address to someone else living and commence to function, as it were, independently of any individual bearer. (p. 34)

In life, the name serves as a substitute for the bearer herself, and although the relationship is by no means identical, the same can be said in death. Hector knows his *kleos* will only succeed if it is (re)heard and (re)told by future generations; his name will have to stand in for him. And as Becker (1975) observes, constructing a lasting name is of the utmost importance:

> [W]hat man really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction without significance. Man wants to know that his life has somehow counted, if not for himself, then at least in a larger scheme of things, that it has left a trace, a trace that

has meaning. And in order for something once alive to have meaning, its effects must remain in eternity in some way. (p. 4)

The trace of the name, which is always already a trace to begin with, is our only link to immortality in the material world. But because it is always already a trace, it is not susceptible to the decay of the flesh.

Of course, although the name still functions as a placeholder while Hector is alive but not present, there are aspects of death-absence which are distinct from mere spatial-absence (not present but still living). Grief, sadness, pragmatic losses (e.g. of particular skills), all play an integral role in characterizing particular experiences of absence. In short, Hector continues to influence the world, in others, after he has died, but in a different manner than when he was alive. As such, we should not entirely conflate the supplement with the biological entity itself; indeed, it is the tension between the two which characterizes human existence. As Culler (2007) puts it,

> The ubiquity of the supplement does not mean that there is no difference between the presence of [individuals] and their 'absence,' or between a real event and a fictional one. These differences are crucial and play a powerful role in what we call experience. But effects of presence and of historical reality arise within and are made possible by supplementation, by difference, as particular determinations of this structure. (p. 106)

In short, the Other we experience as another being in Dasein is not the same as the "memory" or loss we experience in his or her absence.

Thus, supplementarity is never the *whole* of the thing, but a mere synecdoche. In our "inauthentic" Being-towards-death, however, we at times conflate the two. As Derrida (1997) writes, this conflation in fact plays a crucial role in the development of individual identity:

> Reason is incapable of thinking this double infringement upon Nature: that there is *lack* in Nature and that *because* of *that very fact* something *is added* to it. Yet one should not say that Reason is *powerless to think this*; it is constituted by that lack of power. It is the principle of identity. It is the thought of the self-identity of the natural being. It cannot even determine the supplement as its other, as the irrational

98

and the non-natural, for the supplement comes naturally to put itself in Nature's place. The supplement is the image and the representation of Nature. (p. 149)

Again, Socrates views his body as supplemental (and inferior) to his pure soul. There is a certain backwardness at play: The soul-supplement, constructed through reason, is not deemed a supplement at all, but originary and natural; the lack, on the other hand (finitude, uncertainty) is viewed as supplemental, something added to, or fallen from, the ideal—in effect, material existence is described as adding a hole to the ideal being of the world of forms.

Homeric *kleos*, on the other hand, relies on no such reversal. Indeed, it encapsulates the nature and *telos* of all supplementarity; it can be viewed as the most "literal" of all supplements, the proto-supplement perhaps, an *add-on* to material being. As far as symbolic immortality is concerned, *kleos* is by far the least metaphysical; it is a perpetuity effected through the material world, i.e. through media. Out of all the various types of immortality, *kleos* is perhaps the only one which demonstrably exists. It is true that its "benefits" are always "yet to come," as they depend upon a future audience to recall the heroic name; however, the would-be hero hears *other* heroic names recited through material, cultural artefacts, again and again.

This dependence on externality (others) and repeatability—in a future "telling" through song, writing, or any other medium available—is the precise character which lends *kleos* its permanence. As Peggy Kamuf (2005) observes, Derrida's interpretation of the supplement "amounts to effecting a reversal of the conventional, metaphysical derivation of the sign as re-presentation of an original presence: as pure ideality, that presence derives from the possibility of repetition and not the reverse" (p. 53). In other words, it is a name's repeatability, not originary immutability which allows it to outlast physiological being. For Derrida, the lack of a fixed origin, an originary lack of presence, is characteristic of all concepts, and constitutes what he calls a "hauntology." In Derrida's (2006) words,

> To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration. (p. 202)

For our purposes, this is significant because if the origin is always already a ghost, then the origin is potentially immortal—i.e. because ghosts cannot "die."

This is the most important property of the spectre of self-hood, or identity: If it is symbolic, immaterial to begin with, then it does not die. By invoking the name "Hector" here, we propagate his identity, albeit in a very limited manner; indeed, it is simply Hector's ghost, or ghost's ghost whom we invoke, but it appears nevertheless. Hector is no longer in-the-world, but his spectral being persists through our invocation. He spends his whole life trying to assure our perpetual invocation, but he of course cannot be sure. This uncertainty of the future recall, and its reliance on a future audience is part of *kleos'* gamble, and is why heroes try so desperately to cement one, fixed, unequivocal narrative: Hector's ghost can only be "reanimated" in our personal invocations, and in invocations to come.

To use a historical example, Churchill has likewise attained *kleos*, although of a different variety than Hector's. Still, like any individual who died before my birth, I can never encounter Churchill in the flesh. However, I can encounter his supplement, his *kleos*, as a set of symbols across a diverse array of communication media—film, photography, print, audio recording, his clothes, his childhood home, and so on. The accumulation of Churchill's name across all of these media forms constitutes a transmedial "story" of Churchill, which is not identical to Churchill himself, but nevertheless perpetuates his name and so grants him a form of symbolic immortality. Not unlike the Hellenic warrior, Churchill has secured himself a *kleos aphthiton* by performing "great" deeds; he has built a name for himself, and through supplementarity has become a larger-than-life character, whose name continues to be re-heard and re-told.

For both Hector and Churchill, the demonstration is key. In charging into battle and routing the Grecian army, Hector *demonstrates* (signifies) courage, valour, prowess, etc.; he is in effect using the "symbols" of the heroic code[3] to construct his narrative, to compensate for originary life-deficiency in the form of *kleos*. In contributing to the largest land invasion in human history (i.e. "D-Day"), Churchill likewise adds to his narrative and constructs a legacy which outlives him. In this sense, *kleos*, and the name in general, is in effect a surplus of identity, a carry-over which emanates from natural existence into non-present-being. But it is only so because it exteriorizes and futurizes identity, puts it out there for others to hear (record), remember (store), and retell (transmit).

It is certainly *earned* through earthly acts—killing a Greek hero, or orchestrating an offensive—but *kleos* is not attained in the here and now. Honour (*timé*), recognition (*thymos*), material spoils, etc., are all contemporaneous rewards; the hero enjoys them on earth. These are merely elements, or building blocks of *kleos*, however, for *kleos* depends entirely on future reception. If one accrues sufficient honour(s) in one's life, then in effect one constructs a heroic narrative of the self, which is (ideally) told, heard, retold and reheard at a later date, for all eternity.[4] *Kleos* is thus a comingling of present (physical) action, and future (symbolic) remembrance, of inward virtue and external artefact; as an image, representation, or substitution of the self, it is a supplement, "neither in nor out of Nature" (Derrida, 1997, p. 149). Again, it is this ability to straddle the boundaries of nature which provide *kleos* with its life granting properties: It stems from empirical being, but as soon as it occurs (ruptures) it becomes supplementary.

If we recall from Nagy (1999) that "*kleos* should have simply meant that which is heard, from *klûo*, 'to hear'" (ch. 1, para. 2), we see that it is necessarily a term of futurity, something

---

[3] The heroic code itself, of course, is likewise a supplement.
[4] The first "telling" in the Greek tradition comes from the Muses, who provide inspiration for the poet.

which occurs *after* the fact: X happens, it is observed, *then* put into symbols (communicated), and *then* we hear about it. Hector kills Patroclus, and *then* we hear about it through the *Iliad*; Custer makes his last stand, and *then* we hear about it through word of mouth or newspapers. Like all supplements, there is a necessary, temporal and ontological separation between the physical act and the *kleos* derived from it.[5] The pinnacle of *kleos* is *kleos aphthiton* or "un-wilting renown;" unlike the "immortality of the Golden Age," which "is specifically correlated with the *suspension of a vegetal cycle*" (ch. 10, para. 7), mere mortals must depend on continual repetition rather than suspension, rebirth rather than immutability. *Kleos aphthiton* thus signals the pinnacle of futurity and repeatability, wherein the hero is necessarily absent in its presence; indeed, the success of *kleos* is utterly contingent upon its distance from the historical presence of the individual: The greater the distance the better and more successful the *kleos*.

Kleos is the pinnacle of heroism because it suggests that the hero's *self* is/was of such force and power that it emanates across cosmic distances in space and time. As such, the supplement that is *kleos* is always coming; it never fully arrives, as it is projected into an endless cycle of recording (i.e. hearing) and transmission (i.e. telling). As Derrida (1997) suggests,

> It is the strange essence of the supplement not to have essentiality: it may always not have taken place. Moreover, literally, it has never taken place: it is never present, here and now. If it were, it would not be what it is, a supplement, taking and keeping the place of the other. (p. 314)

Again, though *kleos*, the symbolic substitution for the physical self, lacks essentiality, this is in fact its greatest virtue: Like the "ideality" and "repeatability" of the name, this is what grants *kleos* the flexibility and fluidity required for outlasting individual finitude. Unlike the physical self, whose "essence" is grounded in the material, finite world, *kleos* seamlessly moves beyond the

---

[5] As many media theorists note (Virilio, Stiegler, Kittler, etc.) the advent of "live" television and certain digital technologies do away with this gap entirely.

geographical and temporal restrictions of physiological being. *Kleos* is a series of hearings and tellings, a constant movement between internalization and exteriorization.

Furthermore, *kleos* is an "idealized" idealization, a heroic and hyperbolic form of transcendence. The superhuman virtue embodied in Homer's heroes is made manifest through *kleos*, a series of (re)iterations, or physical manifestations in the form of symbols (spoken, written, taped, and so forth). If Hector could somehow remain "factically" in Dasein for all eternity, he need not spend so much time constructing his narrative legacy, since he would not need the supplement that is *kleos*. In other words, if Hector could live forever, then there is no need to build a legacy, since there is no need to exist as a shade, a memory in the minds of future generations at all. Unfortunately, he cannot, and so we will grant him yet further perpetuation.

While Hector lays dying at Achilles' feet in the *Iliad*, Hector attempts to project his influence into the material world after he is gone; his final words take the form of a vow, of *retribution* to come: "mark what vengeance th' equal fates / Will give of me this rage, when in the Scean gates / Phoebus and Paris meet with thee" (*Iliad*, XXII, 311-313). Hector's invocation of retribution is essentially an *a priori* reclamation of his honour, for as Huizinga (1955) observes, "Vengeance is the satisfaction of the sense of honour, and honour will be satisfied no matter how perverse, criminal or morbid" (p. 94). In avenging Hector's death—a vengeance which exists outside the *Iliad*—Phoebus and Paris alter Hector's story, from one of shame to one of vengeance, and in doing so restore a portion of his lost honour. Since he no longer possesses agency in the material world, this reclamation cannot possibly come from Hector, but must be enacted by others on his behalf at a future date.

This concept of seeking justice for the dead (i.e. restoring honour) is, according to Derrida (2006), an indication of the logic of the supplement at play, for

> Is there ever any justice, commitment of justice, or responsibility in general which has to answer for itself (for the living self) before anything other, in the last resort, than the life of a living being, whether one means by that natural life or the life of the spirit? Indeed. The objection seems irrefutable. But the irrefutable itself supposes that this justice carries life beyond present life or its actual being-there, its empirical or ontological actuality: not toward death but toward a *living-on* [survie], namely, a trace of which life and death would be themselves but traces and traces of traces, a survival whose possibility in advance comes to disjoin or disadjust the identity to itself of the living present as well as of any effectivity. (xx)

With no other alternative, Hector relies on the idea(l) that "justice carries life beyond present life;" he has lost *kleos*, lost the ritual of funeral and monument (so he thinks), and lost honour through the desecration of his body. Yet he continues to hope for deferred honour up until the moment he dies; his last words are an invocation of future honour, and future memory.

In a similar manner, Bernard Stiegler (2009) relates a scene from several of Plato's dialogues (*Crito*, *Apology*, and *Phaedo*), wherein Socrates asks his audience to essentially implement his ideas after his death, and in particular, to apply his insights to the interpretation of state law. As Stiegler (2009) observes,

> this *death* has the *legacy* of an *obligation*: that of *continuing to interpret* the laws of the City *beyond* the death of Socrates, just as much as *from* that death, a death that becomes also a kind of survival, a *kleos*, a posterity…. [6] In that regard, Socrates' death *remains* incomplete—charged with 'potentials.' (p. 6)

When Socrates asks his disciples to carry on his legacy, when Hector vows a future vengeance to come at another's hand, they leave the story open, so to speak; their deaths, which is to say their narratives, "remain incomplete." And again, it is precisely this aspect of eternal incompleteness—of always *needing* something further—which allows "Socrates" and "Hector" to be heard, remembered, and retransmitted perpetually.

---

[6] These are rhetorical ellipses indeed; the omitted section reads, "even if not, as Plato will incorrectly demonstrate, an immortality." It is true that *kleos*, and by extension, heroism, does not *actually* grant immortality; rather, it is an illusion, and a dangerous one at that.

As Socrates and Hector illustrate, the perpetuation of the self is wholly dependent on exteriorization, repetition, and therefore, *obligation*: It is up to an exterior Other, and his or her access to communication media, to keep the story *alive*, to continually retell it. This exteriorization is at the heart of individual identity, both in and after life:

> At the very moment I speak to you, I am in the process of individuating myself: individuating myself means seeking to constitute the symbolic coherence of my utterances. But I will only succeed in individuating myself *if I succeed in making you individuate yourselves with me*. If my individuation succeeds, it will have to have succeeded in you. (Stiegler, 2009, p. 3)

Individuation and exteriorization are the ends of *kleos* and all forms of symbolic immortality. A "symbolic coherence of my utterances" is essentially another way of saying "self-narrative." As a life narrative which exists to provoke a future obligation of recall (i.e. in others), *kleos* functions as a meta-supplement, as it supplements life with words as literally as possible. But these are words which matter; indeed, which matter more than anything else.

For Stiegler, this process of exteriorization exemplified by *kleos* is in fact characteristic of all technics; in other words, the supplement is always technical. As Stiegler (2008) puts it, "All supplement is technics, and all supplementary technics is a storage medium 'exteriorizing' a program" (p. 8). The cultural infrastructure upon which the concept of *kleos* is predicated—i.e. the media which allow *kleos* to exist and function—is an example of what Stiegler calls "organized inorganic matter" (1998, p. 49), a system external to (but dependent upon) the *bios*. As we have seen, *kleos* is in effect a supplement for nature's life-deficiency, and it is precisely this originary lack which, according to Stiegler, defines the human condition.

In the first volume of *Technics and Time*, Stiegler (1998) articulates this point through a close reading of the myth of Prometheus:

> In the myth of Prometheus in Plato's *Protagoras*, man arrives because of something forgotten by Epimetheus, who had distributed all the qualities, leaving man naked,

in a default of being, having yet to begin being: his condition will be to supplement this default of origin by procuring for himself prostheses, instruments. (p. 114)

Thanks to Epimetheus' forgetfulness, it now falls to the human to find and make its own qualities, its own coping mechanisms for living in the world. We are not born with a porcupine's quills or an eagle's eyesight, and so Prometheus gives us fire, and we are given *foresight*, the prerequisite for technology and innovation. For Stiegler, this supplementarity is our determining characteristic, in other words, *the* aspect which makes us "human."

The supplement, then, is not something which occurs *after* the "rupture" that is the emergence of the human; rather, this supplementarity is what defines the human. In other words, the rupture is in fact the emergence of the supplement into Dasein; there was no such thing as supplementarity before us. We have always (already) been the animal who knows it lacks. At the heart of this recognition lies the capacity to recognize deficiency, coupled with the foresight *and* technical prowess necessary for supplementarity, which can only exist if alternatives are available (real or imagined), i.e. if there is *possibility.* The moment possibility is "opened up to us," in Heidegger's words, we imagine possibilities external to our immediate environment (such as immortality), and so fall out of mere nature. We can never be clear how exactly the fall occurred, since by definition it falls outside of (prior to) technics, and therefore we have no access to it.[7] In Stiegler's (1998) words,

> Only the animal is present at the origin of humanity. There is… no essential difference between man and animal, unless it be an inactual possibility. Where there is a difference, man is no longer, and this is his denaturalization, that is, the naturalization of the animal. Man is his disappearance in the denaturalization of his essence. Appearing, he disappears: his essence defaults.... By accident. During the conquest of mobility. Man is this accident of automobility caused by a default of essence. (p. 121)

---

[7] Stiegler, following Lero-Gourhan, suggests that our shift from quadupedalism to bipedalism—thus "freeing the hand" —is almost certainly a contributing factor in our fall.

At some point during our "movement," our organismic quest for more life, we discovered *possibility*, and developed imagination, abstraction, externalization, denaturalization, etc., and at that precise moment we fall, and are no longer "merely" animal and no more. From this point on, we are something *extra* than our animality. The human and the technical thus have a "transductive," or mutually co-dependent relationship; in short, "there is no *who* without the *what*" (Stiegler, 1998, p. 141).

We can only call the animal "natural," and "animal," if there is something unnatural and unanimalistic to compare it against, which in this case is supplementarity. And like God's commandment for Adam and Eve to "subdue" the earth and all its inhabitants in *Genesis*, we grant the supplement precedence over inferior, base nature; it becomes something to use for our own advances—i.e. standing reserve. As Derrida (2002) observes, "The animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another living creature" (p. 391). In other words, we are privileged in our supplementarity. Crucially, it is not just this fall from natural purity which characterizes the human, but our *awareness* of our fallen, deficient nature. We are in the world, comported towards death, and so to compensate we supplement biology in infinitely creative and diverse ways.

Derrida (2002) perfectly captures this sentiment during a discussion of animality and nakedness: "[T]he property unique to animals and what in the final analysis distinguishes them from man, is their being naked without knowing it. Not being naked therefore, not having knowledge of their nudity, in short without consciousness of good and evil" (p. 373). The human *knows* it is naked once it has fallen (as we see in *Genesis*), and so compensates for its nakedness via the supplement of clothing. The animal, unaware it lacks anything, roams in oblivious impropriety; it thinks everything is fine as is, and so has no use for clothing (technics).

Of course, the human is not unique in its ability to manipulate tools as such; in the early 1960s Jane Goodall observed chimpanzees using grass shoots and twigs to extract termites from inside a mound, for example (e.g. Goodall, 1971). What is unique to the human is that we use technics to *pass on* this technology to others, and more importantly, to future generations; the chimpanzee does not leave behind instruction manuals for "termite fishing," but we do. And this passing-on is effected through a process of exteriorization; more specifically, through mnemonic exteriorization. Drawing on Husserl, Stiegler discusses three forms of "retention" or memory: Primary (the perception of the event); secondary (recalling the perception of the event); and tertiary (externalized, technical memory, accessible by others).

According to Stiegler (2007), only tertiary memory belongs to the human alone, as it is enacted through technics, even when the technical object is not explicitly designed to serve a mnemonic function:

> Human memory is originarily exteriorized, and that means that it is **technical from the start**. It takes shape first of all as a lithic tool, two or three million years ago. A spontaneous memory support, the lithic tool is **not however made to store memory**: not until the late paleolithic period do **mnemotechniques as such** appear. Ideogrammatic writing springing up after the neolithic period leads to the **alphabet**—which yet today organizes the agenda of the manager, but this calendary object is henceforth an apparatus: the **personal data planner**; and it is no longer a mnemotechnic, but a **mnemotechnology**. (para. 2, bold in original)

In other words, not all technical objects are mnemotechnologies, i.e. are not explicitly designed to function mnemonically as writing, film (or a day planner) may be. But they do constitute a "spontaneous memory support," a sort of inorganic transmission of information, which, crucially, is available to others.

Stiegler applies this retention triad to human evolution, wherein genetic memory (DNA) represents primary retention; epigenetic memory (environmental influences on the genes) represents secondary retention; and *epiphylogenetic* memory represents tertiary retention or

external memory. Human beings share genetic and epigenetic memory with all other animals, as this is information passed on organically. However, epiphylogenetic memory—technical *and* cultural memory—is inorganic and so unique to the human. Stiegler defines epiphylogenesis as

> the conservation, accumulation, and sedimentation of successive epigeneses, mutually articulated. Epiphylogenesis is a break with pure life… [and] bestows its identity upon the human individual: the accents of his speech, the style of his approach, the forces of his gesture, the unity of his world. (1998, p. 140)

In other words, we are born into a world and culture which teaches us its ways through technics—how to kill prey with spears, how to communicate one's ideas, how to behave when eating, all come down to us through technics.

Furthermore, the attributes of "conservation, accumulation and sedimentation" are key, for it is precisely technology's ability to record, store, and grant access to information which characterizes it. Epiphylogenesis is essentially the evolution of technology, the history of innovation; it is the movement from stone flint to spear to the atom bomb. These technologies are in fact inscriptions, and in Belinda Barnet's (2004) words,

> these inscriptions comprise a structure of inheritance and transmission, a structure that accumulates with each successive generation. It is a structure which exists outside our own genetic limitations, outside the finite lifetime of the individual, but which nonetheless carries in it our collective wisdom: the ideas and experiences that we have had, the techniques that we have learned, the tools and artefacts that we have created. (para. 26)

Even in tools, a part of its maker lives on in the object itself.

When Heidegger speaks of Dasein's "already-thereness,"—we are born into a world which exists prior to us—we can only access this past through technics. As Stiegler (2008) suggests,

> since access to this already-there is only possible to the extent to which the fact of its exteriorization guarantees its preservation (which has constituted the phenomenon of technics since the origin of epiphylogenesis), technical specificities, as the medium or ground for the recording of the past, condition the modalities according to which *Dasein* has access to its past, for each age. (p. 5)

How do we know what Plato said, or how we should behave in public, or why we live in a liberal democracy? In short, through technics and epiphylogenetic memory. In Stiegler's (2006) words,

> mankind has access to a third memory, supported and constituted by technics. A shaped flint-stone forms itself by shaping in organized inorganic matter: the technician's gesture enframes an organization that is transmitted via the inorganic, introducing for the first time in the history of life the possibility of transmitting knowledge acquired individually, but in a non-biological way. This technical memory is epiphylogenetic: it is at one and the same time the product of individual epigenetic experience, and the phylogenetic support for the accumulation of knowledge constituting the intergenerational cultural phylum. (para. 23)

This "access" and inorganic transmission is only granted via technics, since we cannot directly engage with those who came before us, i.e. those who have left Dasein. What is key is that this third memory is not wholly distinct from the other two; indeed, subjectivity is dependent on the particular interactions between them.

We can once again return to Homeric *kleos* to illustrate how the three forms of memory interact with one another:

- Primary retention: Hector's *aristeia* is observed by the Muses;

- Secondary retention: The Muses communicate Hector's deeds to the poet via divine (internal) inspiration;

- Tertiary retention: The poet sings Hector's praises in front of an audience, where it is (re)heard, remembered, and (re)told.

We hear of Hector's valour, admire it, observe the honours derived from it, and want it for ourselves. On Hector's end, throughout the *Iliad* he is most concerned with tertiary memory: He understands his *bios* will die, and that it cannot be preserved. What can be preserved, however, is his external, symbolically constructed name, his *kleos*, or life supplement. Because *kleos* is not organic, or in Stiegler's words, "organized inorganic matter," it is not susceptible to the finitude of

the *bios*. Thus, as long as people continue to "access" this memory through cultural artefacts, Hector's name lives on.

I do not draw on the example of *kleos* haphazardly; as we have seen, *kleos* is in effect the most literal life supplement, wholly dependent on tertiary or epiphylogenetic memory. This life-extension is in fact the *telos* of all technics; in Stiegler's (1998) words, "as a process of exteriorization, technics is the pursuit of life by means other than life" (p. 17). The concept of *kleos* rests on this proposition, as do the medical sciences, and as we shall see, information and entertainment (mnemo)technologies as well. In all cases, they are examples of extension, a means towards securing more time amongst the living. However, the technical supplement arrives with a terrible cost. With Prometheus' gift of foresight, we become aware that our existence is characterized by finitude, or, in Heideggerian terms, our comportment to Dasein takes on the character of Being-towards-death. As Stiegler (1998) puts it, the moment the supplement arrives,

> Everything will thus… come with the feeling of death: death itself, labor, education, language, society, love. *Homo oeconomicus, faber, laborans, sapiens*: the logical, reasonable, or speaking animal, the politico-social animal, the desiring animal, all that traditional philosophy has always used to qualify the human race, from Plato to Aristotle to Marx and Freud—this all comes only after this accident by which man enters into the disastrous feeling of death, into melancholy. (p. 131)

Faced with the impending abyss, the human animal attempts to supplement its fragile biology with more permanent, socio-technical forms of being through education, economics, art, philosophy, and so on. And in doing so, we can create an "artificial" world which outlasts us, and because of this allows us to partake in its long-lastingness. Thus, as Stiegler (1998) observes,

> it is here,... in the double of the technical and the human, or rather in the double question of technics and the human that *the relation between anthropology and technics* appears as a *thanatology*. Everything happens in one stroke at the moment when, the accident arriving, originary man slips over into mortality. (p. 125)

Technics drive us into mortality, but they are humanity's only weapon against the finitude of individual Being. In other words, technical objects are always about death transcendence; they are our means for supplementing nature's fundamental life-deficiency.

However, like Derrida's discussion of the name, in granting us more life technics reveals nature's lack—that is, the need to seek out more life in the first place. And so like the heroes of the *Iliad*, we try our best to leave something behind after we are gone, a trace or legacy. Barnet (2004) summarizes the point wonderfully:

> Our awareness of death is what drives us to create archives, technologies of retention and storage. We leave traces of ourselves and our experience in other people's memories, in the memories of our children; but also in the nonliving—in writing, in objects and artefacts, on cave walls, in woven rugs and on computer screens, in language and culture. We leave traces of our experience outside ourselves as individuals, traces that will not be lost when we die, but will remain. (para. 25)

In knowing we will die, we attempt to exteriorize an aspect of the self, an idealized self whose trace can later be accessed through media. The trace/supplement is always technical, and always supplements nature's life-deficiency. Technics grant us access to a non-lived past, and therefore, perhaps a non-livable future as well. With this in mind, I will now turn to several instances of the trace as it exists in explicit mnemotechnologies, media specifically designed to serve mnemonic functions.

3. The Ghost(s) in the Machine

Much like the poetry of the Homeric tradition, contemporary communication media provide a means for extending and perpetuating the self through extra-biological or "super-natural" processes; an individual's name, voice or image can be stored and recalled, thereby preserving an aspect of that individual. The German media theorist Friedrich Kittler takes this to its extreme, suggesting that "what remains of people is what media can store and communicate"

(1999, pp. xl-xli). Although different media store and communicate their information in distinct ways, the general concept holds true—song, writing, film, and so on, all function to preserve both individual and collective memory; in short, they serve a death denying function.

Indeed, Kittler (1999) ultimately associates media with the immortality of the ephemeral, suggesting that "ghosts, a.k.a. media, cannot die at all. Where one stops, another somewhere begins" (p. 130). Furthermore, just as Derrida and Stiegler view writing and technics as supplementary (compensations), Kittler (1990) asserts that media "begin with a physiological deficiency" (p. 231). Like all technics/supplements, media owe their existence to an originary lack at the core of the human; they provide a supplement which can be left behind, and as such, "[m]edia always already yield ghost phenomena" (Kittler, 1999, p. 22); to record is to provide access to a past (reality) no longer there.

This may be the case with all media, including oral and orthographic media; however, unlike speech or writing, certain electronic media, such as the phonograph and photograph are wholly dependent on presence. We can write about unicorns which do not exist, but we cannot photograph them. Likewise, while the written word requires us to "hallucinate" the people, scenes and events it portrays, the phonograph and photograph *actually* record the event as it happens and are able to reproduce aural or visual content. In Kittler's words, "[o]nce memories and dreams, the dead and ghosts, become technically reproducible, readers and writers no longer need the powers of hallucination. Our realm of the dead has withdrawn from the books in which it resided for so long" (1999, p. 10). We no longer need to read *about* Hector, or *rely* on the Muses, the poets, and so on; with contemporary recording devices we can *see* or *hear* any future Hector's deeds for ourselves. As Winthrop-Young (2011) observes, for Kittler, "Writing operates by way of a symbolic grid which requires that all data 'pass through the bottleneck of the signifier' (Kittler

1999:4), whereas phono-, photo- and cinematagraphic analog media process physical effects of the real" (p. 59). The written word may always function as a "hauntology," but for Kittler, phonographic and photographic representation *requires* a material, physical origin to record.

Similarly, in his discussion of photography and personal loss in *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (1982) makes similar claims: "Painting," for example, "can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often 'chimeras'" (p. 74). Again, the photograph relies on presence; it cannot photograph something not there. Non-present text, objects, or people can certainly be added *later*, but the photograph itself depends on presence in a way painting or writing do not. And in this way,

> The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest *shared* hallucination (on the one hand 'it is not there,' on the other 'but it has indeed been'): a mad image, chafed by reality. (p. 113)

The photograph is true on the level of time in that it represents the past: The person or event actually existed in the past, as proven by the photograph. Yet the person or event in the photograph is not actually there, in the presence of the viewer.

In "The Rhetoric of the Image," Barthes (1993) writes that the photograph

> establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the this (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its *having-been-there*. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*. (p. 44)

When Barthes holds the photograph of his dead mother, he looks at her non-present image; it evokes her memory, and so in this sense she is present. However, this is merely a hallucination of course; she is not *really* there. What is true is that she *once was*, and this is what the photograph attests to. Indeed, it can attest to nothing else; in Barthes' (1982) words, "In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: She is going to die: I shudder… over a

catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe" (p. 94).

For Barthes, the photograph ushers in a hyper-realization of mortality: The individual is able to see another or himself as a "has-been," something in the past; in holding and gazing upon a photographic image, especially if it is one's own, one is in effect holding his future remnants, his ghost in his own hand. And so it is this which provokes Barthes (1982) to assert that all the "young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death" (p. 92). Like the name, the photograph attempts to supplement finitude, and in doing so reveals the originary lack it tries to conceal. On the one hand, the photograph can record a person or event, attest to its (previous) existence, and grant a symbolic perpetuity not provided by biology. In Barthes' words, "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (p. 4). On the other hand,

> however 'lifelike' we strive to make it (and *this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death*), Photography is a kind of primitive theatre… a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead. (p. 29, emphasis mine)

This is the paradox of the photograph: In our "mythic denial" of death, we bring death to the fore.

When we gaze at a photograph—designed to preserve—what we are really looking at is Being-that-was, and in doing so we become aware that it is our lot to be a "once-was" as well. Like religion, photography simultaneously reminds the individual of his death while also offering compensation for it. In Barthes' (1982) words, "Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life" (p. 90).[8] That which produces Death whilst trying to preserve

---

[8] Stiegler has covered Barthes' take on photography extensively, especially in his 2002 essay "The Discrete Image."

life is characteristic of all media, indeed all technics. Kittler (1990) summarizes the point with

striking efficiency: "The death of man and the preservation of corporeal evidence are one" (p.

237); for better or worse, the two are inseparable from one another.

In his introduction to *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Kittler (1999) discusses the

relationship between spectrality and media since the mid-19th century:

> [T]he invention of the Morse alphabet in 1837 was promptly followed by the
> tapping specters of spiritistic séances sending their messages from the realm of the
> dead. Promptly as well, photographic plates... furnished reproductions of ghosts or
> specters, whose black-and-white fuzziness only served to underscore the promise
> of resemblance. Finally, one of the ten applications Edison envisioned for his
> newly invented phonograph in the *North American Review* (1878) was to record
> 'the last words of dying persons'. (p. 12)

Kittler and Barthes would perhaps scoff at the life-extending properties of Homeric orality; when

compared to the new(er) media which have emerged over the past two centuries, poetry, and its

reliance on the semi-permanence of speech, pales in comparison: We need not (re)imagine those

whom we have lost, but can merely consult their image or voice as it actually existed.

Yet in all cases, each medium serves a similar function; just as Homeric *kleos* is centered

around life extension—and therefore, death denial—so too are (more) contemporary recording

media, and indeed all media. As Kittler (1999) observes,

> The realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of
> a given culture. If gravestones stood as symbols at the beginning of culture itself,
> our media technology can retrieve all gods. The old written laments about
> ephemerality, which measured no more than distance between writing and
> sensuality, suddenly fall silent. In our mediascape, immortals have come to exist
> again. (p. 13)

In other words, although all media, or to be more specific, all mnemotechnologies, serve similar

functions—i.e. to record, store and transmit information—the phono- and photograph both allow

us to resurrect the dead's "real" image or voice, the particular way it imprints itself on film or

cylinder (the phonographic equivalent of vinyl). In Kittler's (1990) words, "Edison's invention

was not called a phonograph for nothing: it registers real sounds rather than translating them into phonemic equivalencies as an alphabet does" (p. 232). The phonograph is a direct replication of an aspect of the absent individual, and so the signifier/signified gap is closed considerably; the trace is closer to its origin.

Media, then, are above all the conveyors of the trace, the supplement. Or more accurately, they are always already supplements of supplements; they cannot transport the physical self, but only the name, image, voice, and so on. At best, they only ever proffer a partial representation, a mere synecdoche of the material, empirical, individually experiencing being. The best we can do is construct a surrogate self which will outlast physiological being. However, there is still another way in which technical prostheses generally, and media in particular, serve a death denying function: Not only do they preserve our memory when dead, they also grant us *extension* when alive, that is, they grant us power above and beyond what nature grants us. Media are thus not only memory supplements, but in McLuhanian terminology, supplements of the central nervous system as well. They allow us to kill prey larger than we are, protect ourselves from the elements, project our selves into immersive digital realms of infinite complexity. In short, they grant us powers nature did not, and as Becker (1975) notes, "All power is in essence power to deny mortality…. Power means power to increase oneself, to change one's natural situation from one of smallness, helplessness, finitude, to one of bigness, control, durability, importance" (p. 81).

4. Extensions of Man

Thus far, we have moved from the orality of the Greeks, to the impure permanence of writing. From there, we moved on to electric media—the telegraph, phonograph and photograph. And as we move from epoch to epoch, from medium to medium, a pattern begins to emerge: Epiphylogenesis moves from slower to faster speeds, and becomes capable of bridging greater and

117

greater distances. Permanence becomes easier to achieve, as audiences can be reached with greater efficiency, and data can be stored and transmitted with greater ease. With the onset of each new technology and each new medium, our reach extends further across space and time. The newest media, then, will always be the media which a) flatten distance the most, and b) extend our reach the most. It is with this idea that Marshall McLuhan (1964) opens *Understanding Media*:

> After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time. (p. 19)

Oral communication required a certain degree of presence and synchronicity, and therefore permanence was difficult to obtain. With writing, however, presence is no longer necessary for communication and subsequently, permanence comes easier.

This expansion outward is then hastened by Gutenberg's printing press, which allowed communication to spread and flourish like never before. For McLuhan (1996), the printing press ushers in a new era of sociological complexity; it allows ideas to spread *en masse*, and as

> a drastic extension of man… shaped and transformed his entire environment, psychic and social, and was directly responsible for the rise of such disparate phenomena as nationalism, the Reformation, the assembly line and its offspring, the Industrial Revolution, the whole concept of causality, Cartesian and Newtonian concepts of the universe, perspective in art, narrative chronology in literature and a psychological mode of introspection or inner direction that greatly intensified the tendencies toward individualism and specialization engendered 2000 years before by phonetic literacy. (p. 233)

Whether or not the printing press is *solely* responsible for these later movements and theories is irrelevant; the point remains that the explosion of tracts, periodicals, etc., provided the means for disseminating messages to large numbers of people, the prerequisite for political mobilization. After Gutenberg, ideas can reach new, disparate audiences; in short, they can go viral.

This is because, as McLuhan (1996) observes, "The most important quality of print is its repeatability; it is a visual statement that can be reproduced indefinitely, and repeatability is the root of the mechanical principle that has transformed the world since Gutenberg" (p. 234). Thus, the individual who wants to get his or her name and ideas "out there," can do so much more readily, and moreover; his or her symbolic self can be repeated *ad infinitum*. Hector's name no longer requires the presence of the Muses to bear witness, but the stamp of the typeface. And although McLuhan does not make the explicit link between media and death, as *kleos* does, in Michael MacDonald's (2006) words, "McLuhan understood that media—from the gramophone and the camera to the typewriter and the telephone—are not simply mechanical objects but profoundly human responses to sensory impairment, dismemberment, mourning, and death" (p. 506). The particular mechanical objects change, but their underlying function does not.

As media increasingly annihilate distance, according to McLuhan (1996) our march towards *im*mediacy will eventually result in a "tribal all-at-once culture," the "demise of spoken language and its replacement by a global consciousness" (p. 251). In its ideal form, "the new society will be one mythic integration, a resonating world akin to the old tribal echo chamber where magic will live again: a world of ESP" (p. 251). When asked by his interviewer if he is "talking about global telepathy," McLuhan answers, "Precisely" (p. 252). Discounting McLuhan's metaphysics, from a historical perspective media clearly "progress" in a manner that sees its participants more engulfed by, and yet less aware of it; it seemingly disappears altogether. In this way, media march towards their own destruction; their apotheosis lies in their dissolution. If the pinnacle is a global ESP, then media will have outlived their usefulness the moment they reach it.

It is important to note that McLuhan's conception of media is very inclusive, and in fact very much resembles Stiegler's notion of technics, as discussed earlier. In McLuhan's (1996)

words, "my definition of media is broad: it includes any technology whatever that creates extensions of the human body and senses, from clothing to the computer" (p. 228). As a supplement to skin, clothing can be said to "extend" the skin, as all "technology is an extension of our own bodies" (p. 226). Similarly, the computer, as a supplement to older communicative modes can be said to "extend" one's communicative influence.[9] However, because we are shaped by the media systems which engulf us, human beings are often unaware of this extension as an extension. For McLuhan, both extension and invisibility are characteristic of all media:

> [A]ll media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment. Such an extension is an intensification, an amplification of an organ, sense or function, and whenever it takes place, the central nervous system appears to institute a self-protective *numbing* of the affected area, insulating and anesthetising it from conscious awareness of what's happening to it. (p. 226)

In writing, I am able to communicate my thoughts to others, for good or ill. While Stiegler differentiates between technologies and mnemotechnologies, McLuhan does not. As Lister et al. (2009) observe, "McLuhan conflates technologies and mediums [sic] in this way because he views both as part of a larger class of things; as extensions of the human senses: sight, hearing, touch, and smell" (p. 78).

But like Heidegger's hammer, which only reveals itself as an entity *apart* from us when broken, media empower us precisely by concealing their existence as media. Merleau-Ponty makes this point when discussing a blind man's use of a cane: "The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch and providing a parallel to sight" (qtd. in Ihde, 1990, p. 40). For McLuhan, Merleau-Ponty's cane is a medium, as it (re)mediates the visual and the tactile. Yet to the blind man the cane is invisible, both literally and figuratively

---

[9] By this I simply mean the number of people one can communicate with. There is a strong relation here with the original meaning of *kleos*, from *kluô*, "to hear."

speaking; he does not *see* it, but while using it, he does not sense the cane as anything other than an extension of his own hand and perceptive schema. Thus, when his cane strikes a curb, it provides him with information in a manner similar (in principle) to antennae: The information travels from the cane, to the hand, eventually ending up in the perceptual regions of the brain. In linking the blind man with the external world, the cane conceals itself as a mediator between himself and that world.

As Don Ihde (1990) observes, this is because "[p]erceptual extension is not limited by the outline of my body or the surface of my skin" (p. 40); rather, tools provide us access to a supplementary form of perception, constituted by both artificial and physiological entities. Indeed, whether we are explicitly aware of it or not—and especially when we are not—interacting with technology is a basic aspect of human being. In Ihde's words, "our existence is *technologically textured*, not only with respect to the large dramatic and critical issues which arise in a high technological civilization—such as the threat of nuclear war…— but also with respect to the rhythms and spaces of daily life" (p. 1). Ihde points out that our days are filled with technological interaction from the moment we awake. For example, we often awake via technological means in the form of an alarm; we then might make some toast, watch some television, drive to work, and so on (p. 1). Media not only extend both the body and the consciousness,[10] but because they are so ubiquitous, we often fail to realize it. Indeed, as Ihde puts it, "simply because of its familiarity we may overlook both the need for and the results to be obtained by a critical reflection upon our lives within this technologically textured ecosystem—perhaps better termed a *technosystem*" (p. 3). And this is precisely why we should always be alert.

---

[10] These are not necessarily separate entities, but imagining one is in France is not the same as physically being there, for example.

Yet it should be noted that for McLuhan, different media grant different types of extension. With the onset of electric media, if not a new form, then a new degree of extension emerges:

> The electric media are the telegraph, radio, films, telephone, computer and television, all of which have not only extended a single sense or function as the old mechanical media did—i.e., the wheel as an extension of the foot, clothing as an extension of the skin, the phonetic alphabet as an extension of the eye—but have enhanced and externalized our central nervous systems, thus transforming all aspects of our social and psychic existence. (1996, p. 234)

McLuhan makes a distinction between the "bodily" extension of the mechanical age, and the extension of the central nervous system which results from electric media—i.e. from the telegraph onward. Whereas mechanical media extend parts of the body, electric media extend parts of the brain. Moreover, while mechanical media tend to extend just one sense, electric media extend several or all senses simultaneously.

For example, television, which McLuhan (1964) calls "the most recent and spectacular electric extension of our central nervous system," (p. 317) allows us to view—and to be affected or influenced by—images and sounds which in previous epochs could only have been seen and heard "in person." In the past, a single event could only be viewed by those gathered together in space *and* time; with the television, however, audiences can view the same event across vast geographic and temporal divides. Likewise, with the telephone we no longer need be "in earshot" to hear another's voice, or for another to hear ours. Rather, the very concept of being "in earshot" changes drastically; it is no longer dependent on physical proximity, but by access to electronic technology. The entire world becomes accessible, or in McLuhan's (1964) famous words, "electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village" (p. 20).

Unlike the inherent futurity of Homeric *kleos*, in the electronic age we need not wait to hear about Hector's deeds *after* he has committed them; rather, we are now often able to view them as they happen. For McLuhan, temporal and spatial distance is lessened with each new

medium. We see the hyper-realization of this concept in our current age. Although we have not yet reached McLuhan's techno-utopian vision of collective ESP, the internet and other digital media have undoubtedly led to an increase in information exchange, communication, and therefore extension. In its most extreme form, McLuhan's sense of extension is realized in the desire to replace the body altogether. In its ideal form, this concept is perhaps best described in William Gibson's (1984) *Neuromancer*.

In the world of *Neuromancer,* the computer offers nothing less than sublime ecstasy. The protagonist, Case, uses "cyberspace" to leave the confines of material finitude; "he'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high,… jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix" (p. 5). In Gibson's novel, the physical, "meat" world represents the mundane, limitation, pain and death. Technology, on the other hand, represents exhilaration, transcendence, an escape from finitude and unparalleled freedom, "bodiless exultation" (p. 6).

Even stylistically, Case's experience of cyberspace is described in a stream-of-consciousness mode, which distinguishes it from the rigid structures of reality:

> Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray. Expanding—And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distance less home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity…. And somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face. (p. 52)

The fluidity and vibrancy of cyberspace is contrasted with the dull, "white painted loft" of material reality. In Case's universe, technology extends the central nervous system to such a degree that it obliterates material awareness; that is, technology no longer *supplements* the physiological, but *suppresses* and *supplants* it. Case's body is "somewhere," but "distant" and its mechanical, physiological actions do not enter his awareness. He is not aware of his hands

interacting with the computer interface any more than Merleau-Ponty's blind man is aware of his cane; it is there, to be sure and necessarily so, but its externality to the sensing individual disappears almost entirely. "Tears of release" streak down Case's face, but this happens "somewhere" else, far removed from his perceptual world. In the world of *Neuromancer*, cyberspace essentially acts as an anaesthetic (very much in line with Heidegger's "tranquilization") which numbs the body.

In cyberspace, Case's entire central nervous system is extended into the matrix, a place characterized by its lack of materiality, which is to say absence of space and time. What is numbed or anesthetised is his bodily awareness; but what is Case "insulated" from, if we borrow McLuhan's terminology? In short, he is insulated from the material world, the world of personal and inevitable mortality. Gibsonian cyberspace serves a death denying function via hyper-extension, a movement away from the body. In Gibson's world, cyberspace represents the outer limits of extension; indeed, the limits of extension are defined by the contemporary media of any age, so that whichever medium is newest extends the most. This continual extension, which emanates outward from the body, is the defining characteristic of all media: Gibson's cyberspace "extends" the extension initiated by the stone flint, and whichever medium succeeds cyberspace will be the new hyper-extension. Ultimately, this extension is about seeking more life, in supplementing *bios*.

Case's bodilessness is not only reserved for science fiction, but is a promise of many contemporary technologies as well, such as Virtual Reality (VR). According to Ann Balsamo, communication and entertainment media also promise us transcendence by offering an extra-bodily experience, another "realm" divorced from the physical world: "At the heart of the media promotions of virtual reality is a vision of a body free universe" (1995, p. 229), something distinct

from, and superior to, material reality. As Balsamo (1996) notes, VR "is promoted as a body free environment, a place of escape from the corporeal embodiment of gender and race" (p. 123). Furthermore, although they are "high-tech," and constitute the "holy grail" of entertainment media, "new [VR] technologies are implicated in the reproduction of at least one very traditional cultural narrative: the possibility of transcendence, whereby the physical body and is [sic] social meanings can be technologically neutralized" (p. 128). This narrative promises to cut the anchor, so to speak, from grounded existence; like Socrates, we often feel as though our bodies weigh us down, or prevent us from reaching our true potential.

In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles speaks of her own VR experiences:

> I can attest to the disorienting, exhilarating effect of the feeling that subjectivity is dispersed throughout the cybernetic circuit. In these systems, the user learns, kinesthetically and proprioceptively, that the relevant boundaries for interaction are defined less by the skin than by the feedback loops connecting body and simulation in a techno-bio integrated circuit. (1999, p. 27)

Hayles does not suggest this experience is akin to Case's "bodiless exultation," since the body plays an important role in subjectivity; however, like Case she is exhilarated by the expansion of her subjectivity into a "cybernetic circuit." It suppresses the "real" world, with all its depressing reminders of death; each stub of the toe, each growl of the stomach reminds us we are not long for this world. Thus, when Case laughs "somewhere else" without realizing it, his laughter does not derive from humour, but from the joy of transcending bodily existence and therefore death.

VR is still very much in its infancy, however, and few have access to high quality VR devices. Nevertheless, as I will discuss in more detail in chapter four, the videogame medium promises many of the life-extending qualities of VR, albeit in a diluted form. Like all media, virtual worlds allow us to extend our selves, to become *immersed* in something external to us—a good novel, film, or even song grants this immersion/extension. However, where VR further

supplements this extension is in its interactivity; unlike other media, it allows us to exert influence in a world supplementary to, and seemingly less material than, the physical world. At a very basic level we can impact the virtual environment through our decisions, and when we do, we are extending our influence and agency. When they are at their best, virtual environments allow us to feel powerful, to feel as if we are more than worm food, as Becker (1973) might say. They allow us to deny our creaturliness, to be *more than* physiology and become "a techno-bio integrated circuit" in Hayles' words. They allow us to be physically present in one location in space and time, but in some way other spaces and times as well.

But can media generally, and VR in particular actually provide the "body free universe" they promise? In a word, no. "The body," Balsamo (1995) suggests, "can never be constructed as a purely discursive entity;" rather, "the material and the discursive are mutually determining, and non-exclusive" (pp. 219-220). In other words, as much as symbol systems constitute lived experience, as biological beings we can never do away with physiology completely. Thus, when thinking about extension and presence in virtual worlds, we must be careful not to fall victim to what Salen and Zimmerman (2004) have called the "immersive fallacy,"

> the idea that the pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually transport the participant in to an illusory, simulated reality. According to the Immersive Fallacy, this reality is so complete that ideally the frame falls away so that the player truly believes that he or she is part of an imaginary world. (p. 450)

This is not to suggest that the concept of immersion itself is fallacious, or that it does not exist; rather, Salen and Zimmerman merely critique the idea that immersion is the *most* important feature of a virtual world, or that the experience of immersion can ever be total, reaching the depths described in *Neuromancer*. Although many may dream of a future when complete bodily transcendence is possible, we are a long way off still.

The idea that technology can grant us *literal* immortality is of course ancient, as evidenced by the various attempts to find or create the elixir of life; however, it has in many ways hit a fever pitch in our current age of biotechnology and seemingly infinite storage space. For example, a "Transhumanist" organization called "Longecity" (2002) subscribes to an "immortalist philosophy," which "is based upon the idea that humans only have one life and one chance to live. There are no alternative states to the current state other than oblivion. Thus, what we experience now and the life we have now is the only alternative" (para. 1). Unlike other immortality ideologies which promise life *after* death, the immortalists advocate for the negation of death altogether; there is nothing "symbolic" about this immortality.

In their words, their philosophy "has nothing to do with a religious or spiritual immortality and more to do with a sustainable form of life that is never-ending and attainable in the physical world we live in now" (para. 3). Unlike our ancestors, "Advancements in science and technology are opening up new possibilities in the field of life extension. We are on the threshold of great breakthroughs in nanotechnology, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence" (para 4). In this vein of immortalism, salvation rests neither in the symbolic immortality of *kleos* nor the eternality of the soul, but in the material here-and-nowness of "advanced" technology: "Thus, staying alive is [an] exceedingly important thing. There are no second chances after death, barring the success of Cryonics" (para. 10).

A famous proponent of immortalism is the author Ray Kurzweil, who has written extensively on both immortality and cybernetics. His basic thesis rests on an application of Moore's Law to biomedical technologies. Moore's Law states that the "complexity for minimum component costs" increases "at a factor of two per year" (Moore, 1965). In other words, every two years or so engineers are able to "cram" twice as many components (transistors) onto a microchip

than before, without incurring significant cost increases. This results in an exponential growth in

processing power, speed, and so on. For Kurzweil, (2009) however, "this remarkable exponential

growth is not just limited to computer and communication devices. It is now applicable to our own

biology" (p. xiv). Thus, the gradual upward trend of human life expectancy will hasten, so that

> Immortality is within our grasp. The knowledge exists, if aggressively applied, for you to slow aging and disease processes to such a degree that you can be in good health and good spirits when the more radical life-extending and life-enhancing technologies become available over the next couple of decades. (Kurzweil, 2004, p. iv)

By taking advantage of current life-extension technologies, as well as living a healthy lifestyle, the

individual has the chance to "make it" to the next life-extending epoch.

Both Longecity and Kurzweil represent what is generally known as "transhumanism,"

the belief in technology's ability to alter the course of human evolution. In *The Transhumanist*

FAQ, Nick Bostrom et al. (2003) define transhumanism as "a way of thinking about the future that

is based on the premise that the human species in its current form does not represent the end of our

development but rather a comparatively early phase" (p. 4). Our current form is imperfect,

vulnerable and finite, and so it requires supplementation; evolution simply takes too long to

correct the problem, and thus human beings must look to their own devices. As Bostrom writes,

> Today we can foresee the possibility of eventually abolishing aging and we have the option of taking active measures to stay alive until then, through life extension techniques and, as a last resort, cryonics. This makes the illusions of deathist philosophies dangerous, indeed fatal, since they teach helplessness and encourage passivity. (p. 37)

At heart, the transhumanists are simply using the technological means at their disposal to combat

death anxiety, just as the Egyptians' utilized mummification, and the Greeks looked to *kleos*.

As noted, one key difference is that the transhumanists remove metaphysics from the

equation entirely, or rather, banish death to the realm of metaphysics. Since we do not experience

personal death, there is no *truly satisfactory* empirical evidence for its existence; therefore,

perhaps *I* will be different, and discover a means for avoiding death altogether. And since we

cannot empirically verify an afterlife, the presence of a "soul" and so on, then our only salvation

must come from earthly, material means (i.e. technology). Thus, in accepting the inevitability of

death, most of the world is comprised of "death apologists" (p. 37), quitters who merely follow the

herd to slaughter. With enough will and technological innovation, the transhumanists argue,

disease, aging and death can be overcome.

Don Ihde (1990) calls this and similar viewpoints beliefs in "the *technological fix*" (p. 7).

The technological fix is essentially a techno-utopian idealism, the belief that technology—and

technology alone—can solve all of humanity's problems. According to Ihde this

> single system utopianism now has taken hold in much bionic-health science
> activity. From clearly helpful prosthetic devices and experimentation thereon,... the
> high technology medical experimenters have turned to internal bionics (artificial
> kidney, artificial heart—although the artificial brain still seems far off!) Lying
> embedded in such experimentation is a clear indication of beliefs about
> technological fixes vis-a-vis human-technology relations. (p. 7)

Like the supplement, inherent in the concept of the technological fix is the notion that Nature is

broken in the first place; it is found to be wanting and we must pick up the slack.

Transhumanism and its proponents demonstrate that, as Marcel O'Gorman (2010) writes,

"Like myth and religion, technological innovation and the sublime rhetorics of 'progress' that

accompany it serve primarily to mitigate the terror of human finitude" (para. 12). According to the

logic or innovation and progress, death is simply a problem our innate ingenuity has yet to solve,

but we can be confident in the fact that it *will* be solved. In the most literal sense, as the

immortalists and transhumanists intimate, we see this in the form of cryogenic preservation, or

advances in the medical fields generally (O'Gorman, 2010).

Yet, technology and communications media also confer immortality in a less explicit manner; in addition to both physical and sensory extension, they also provide us with meaning systems, ways for understanding the world, and guidelines for how we should act. Media record, store and transmit, to be sure, but how is it that we become worthy of storage and transmission in the first place? How do we earn our spot in external, cultural memory? To address these questions, in the next chapter I will turn my attention to media's *other* death denying function, namely, their transmission and dissemination (propagation) of particular hero systems, the paths to immortality. What does it mean to be a hero, and how can we get there? In other words, I will now turn away from *form* and back towards *content*.

A

Chapter 3: Heroism and Villainy in Propaganda

> To draw the individual into the net of propaganda, each technique must be utilized in its own specific way, directed toward producing the effect it can best produce, and fused with all the other media, each of them reaching the individual in a specific fashion and making him react anew to the same theme – in the same direction, but *differently*…. Each medium is particularly suited to a certain type of propaganda.

> - Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*

In the previous chapter, I examined the technical means by which media confer symbolic immortality, and extend the self. In this chapter, I will conduct a qualitative, content analysis of various media forms and their use of heroism as a rhetorical device, and in particular, as these rhetorics of heroism are used for the purposes of propaganda. Just as media have extended the physical and sensory self since their inception, they have also been used for a particular, violent form of extension. Warfare is often less about martial than informational superiority; outflanking an enemy intellectually and communicatively is just as important as outflanking him in the field. Indeed, the flanking manoeuvre itself is predicated on information, synchronicity, and communication: The location of the enemy, character of terrain, signals, codes, and so on, all must be properly understood and communicated before enacting the manoeuvre.[1]

As Paul Virilio (1989) puts it, "*the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception.* In other words, war consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the 'immateriality' of perceptual fields" (p. 7). Thus, domination and conquest, the seizure and maintenance of power, do not depend on weaponry as much as on persuasion: Soldiers must first be persuaded to fight, populations must be persuaded to support a campaign, and enemies must be persuaded that fighting is not in their

---

[1] This information comes from my training as an infantryman in the Canadian Forces (2003-2006).

best interest. Communication media, therefore, are and have always been a vital component of any successful military, imperialist, or political (domestic) engagement. Indeed, the outcome of an engagement is almost always directly related to informational superiority (Kittler, 1999).

For example, as Harold Innis (2007) argues, with the advent of writing, and especially papyrus, new avenues for conquest and domination were opened up:

> The old magic was transformed into a new and more potent record of the written word. Priests and scribes interpreted a slowly changing tradition and provided a justification for established authority. An extended social structure strengthened the position of an individual leader with military power who gave orders to agents who received and executed them. The sword and pen worked together…. The written record signed, sealed, and swiftly transmitted was essential to military power and the extension of government. (p. 30)

With the emergence of writing, orders could be stored and transmitted with a speed and range previously unavailable. They allowed for new systems of governance, the codification and dissemination of laws and customs, and so on. In Innis' words, "Small communities were written into large states and states were consolidated into empire. The monarchies of Egypt and Persia, the Roman empire, and the city-states were essentially products of writing" (p. 30). With each new communicative mode, the possibilities for expansion are increased exponentially.

The importance of a commander's ability to give orders to individuals not immediately in front of him or her cannot be overstated, as it allows for an all new level of strategic planning. Long lasting imperialist campaigns are nearly impossible without a speedy and reliable communication system. Successful military action requires that all units are aware of each other's movements and positions, as effective engagements require a high degree of coordination and synchronicity. If, for example, the cavalry attacks when it is not supposed to, or if a flanking manoeuvre is not enacted at the right time, then there is a far greater chance for defeat. In short, organization is at the heart of the successful military engagement, and communication is its

lifeblood; the fastest, farthest reaching communication systems will almost always win the day. Thus, McLuhan is (for once) not hyperbolic when he asserts that "the phonetic alphabet was the greatest processor of men for homogenized military life that was known to antiquity" (1964, p. 76). Each individual soldier must know his or her role. It is better to distribute orders on papyrus to one's field officers than to rely on oral messengers, whose death signals the death of the message, who may or may not accurately relay orders, and whose memory cannot possibly store all the nuances of a complex battle strategy.[2]

Before a particular battle strategy is planned, however, before any fighting takes place, there is perhaps an even more important role for media to play in both external and internal engagements, and this is in the form of what can be broadly conceived as *propaganda*. There are several approaches one can take when analyzing propaganda. In accordance with Becker, I will examine the role of the hero and villain figures in propagandistic discourse, but of course, not all propaganda employs these devices. One of the virtues of the hero and villain figures is that they constitute a sort of ideological shorthand, and reveal the ideological underpinnings of a given society—their ideals and aspirations, their hopes and fears. As we shall see, the hero and its antitheses, the villain and scapegoat, are common rhetorical tropes in the service of propagandistic discourses. However, it is perhaps prudent to first define our subject.

1. Definitions and History of Propaganda

The term, "propaganda," is of course a polysemous and contentious term; indeed, it can mean almost anything, and as such it is hotly contested. Although everyone does it, so to speak, and it is utterly ubiquitous, few governments or organizations would admit to employing it; terms such as "education," "news," or "Information Operations" (IO) sound much less malicious.

---

[2] That being said, even today so-called "runners" are used if and when other means of communication are nullified.

The term "propaganda" does have an origin, and its origin is telling. According to John Ferguson (1978),

> Propaganda… is not, as many think, a neuter plural, 'things to be propagated,' but an abbreviation of the Roman Catholic *societas de propaganda fide* of 1622 (fellowship for the propagation of the faith). There is no classical Greek or Latin word for 'propaganda' in the modern sense. (p. 257)

This society essentially organized and oversaw the various Catholic missions around the world. *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* describes this organisation as follows:

> The Sacred Congregation *de Propaganda Fide*, whose official title is "*sacra congregatio christiano nomini propaganda*" is the department of the pontifical administration charged with the spread of Catholicism and with the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs in non-Catholic countries. The intrinsic importance of its duties and the extraordinary extent of its authority and of the territory under its jurisdiction have caused the cardinal prefect of Propaganda to be known as the "red pope." (Benigni, 1913, para. 1)

The "spread of Catholicism" was (ostensibly) the mission's primary purpose; missionaries would travel to "heathen" lands in order to convert indigenous peoples to Catholicism.

However, there were of course economic, political, and ideological factors at play as well, and the missionary narrative in effect allowed imperial powers to conquer other lands in the name of "saving" them. The overlap between missionary work and imperialism is addressed in the *Encyclopaedia* entry:

> The propagation of the Faith was a matter of such vital importance as to demand for its work an entire congregation. The reconquest for the Church of the lands severed from it was not of greater importance than the evangelization of the vast regions then being explored by courageous adventures. America, Africa, the Far East, opened up new lands, new peoples, new conquests; the Church, conscious of her natural mission to evangelize the world, felt obliged to act and to act quickly, especially as Holland and England, while striving eagerly for commerce and colonial expansion, were also bent upon spreading everywhere the doctrines of Protestantism. (Benigni, 1913, para. 2)

As we see, the missions also served imperial and political aims, and sought to stem the spread of Protestantism, which is to say the spread of other European powers.

But the *official* motivation for missionary work in general, and the propaganda society in particular, is to bring the word of Christ to the uninitiated, to "evangelize the world." It is, in effect, an answer to Christ's call to his disciples: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (*Matthew* 18: 18-20). The essence of the Christian narrative is that Christ is killed, and resurrected, thereby saving humanity from sin, i.e. death. However, this salvation can only come to those who *believe* in Christ as redeemer, for "whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have eternal life…. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already" (*John* 3:15-18). And so the Catholic missions are, officially and in their purest sense, missions of salvation: They bring life to those doomed to die; it is the noblest ends of perhaps any persuasive effort, on the face of it.[3]

Although the term has been reworked in all manner of ways, propaganda as we understand it today—if we understand it—retains this life-granting function. It is true that the concept preceded the term, but even before it was "propaganda," what it propagated was life. If we are to understand propaganda, we must understand its methods and motivations, its use in influencing or manipulating "the masses." But what is equally important is that we understand why the masses buy into it at all; that is, what do they (we) get out of propaganda? Like Becker's cultural hero systems, propaganda provides people with meaning, standards of value, and figures to emulate or denigrate.

In Jacques Ellul's (1973) words, propaganda provides people "with a complete system for explaining the world, and provides immediate incentives to action. We are here in the presence of an organized myth that tries to take hold of the entire person" (p. 11). Propaganda

---

[3] Because the ends are so admirable, however, they have served as justification for many atrocities.

tells us how to act; it convinces us that a particular course of action is either beneficial, necessary, honourable, and heroic. The complexity of existence requires guidance and navigation; it is not always clear how we should act or what we should believe. Thus, according to Bernays (1928), "To avoid such confusion, society consents to have its choice narrowed to ideas and objects brought to its attention through propaganda of all kinds. There is consequently a vast and continuous effort going to capture our minds in the interest of some policy or commodity or idea" (p. 11).

Because propaganda is often associated with a shadowy, conspiratorial form or persuasion, it is a contentious term. Indeed, as Mark Wollaeger (2008) observes, its designation as such often depends on one's subject position, for "one person's propaganda is another person's information, and the distinction between the two is often difficult to draw" (p. 2). There have, however, been many attempts to define it. For Bernays (1928), one of the first great propaganda theorists, the "mechanism by which ideas are disseminated on a large scale is propaganda, in the broad sense of an organized effort to spread a particular belief or doctrine" (p. 20). "Modern propaganda," Bernays suggests, "is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea, or group" (p. 25).

In *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Jowett and O'Donnell (2006) define it as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist;" it is a "subcategory of persuasion" (p. 7). In *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky (2002) define it in terms of the mass media's ability to let the "powerful… fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about, and to 'manage' public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns" (p. lix). The *OED* defines it as the "systematic dissemination of

information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view." This latter definition illustrates the negative connotations which have become attached to propaganda. However, associating "propaganda" with "false" or "misleading" is problematic, since it obfuscates the fact that all ideas need to be "propagated," not just the false or political.

In his seminal work *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, Jacques Ellul (1973) provides what I think is the most comprehensive and precise definition of the term: "Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization" (p. 61). The great virtue of this definition is that it emphasizes the *psychological* character of propaganda; the fact that participation can be both *active* and *passive* highlights propaganda's often unconscious workings. In addition to focusing on the propagandist, Ellul devotes a great deal of time to the "propagandee" as well; this individual, continually engulfed in mass media, looks to propaganda to tell him or her what to think and what to do.

It would appear that every medium has been utilized for propagandistic purposes. Indeed, even objects we may not normally think of as media serve as propaganda. For example, as John Ferguson (1978) observes, one of the "most obvious area for public propaganda is one that is sometimes forgotten—buildings" (p. 257). A larger than average dwelling, for example, may signify superiority or status. In the extreme case, temples, palaces, and buildings such as the Coliseum served as signifiers for magnificence and superiority. Likewise, currency can serve as a propaganda instrument as well. Ferguson notes that "The principal propaganda instrument of the ancient world in general, and the Roman Empire in particular, was the coin," and this makes sense since "a single coin may pass through hundreds of hands; a particular coin-type millions. A

word or two can carry a message for the literate; a suitable image or emblem will speak to literate and illiterate alike" (p. 276). To have one's image duplicated countless time onto metal is to demonstrate one's significance and more importantly, one's legitimacy as ruler.

Indeed, according to Bernays (1928), propaganda was likely first used in order to establish and maintain authority:

> Proclaiming the divinity of kings was a step of the first importance in gaining the worshipful obedience of subjects. Rulers impressed themselves upon the people through the erection of statures and other monuments…. Sculpture, painting, oratory, became tools in affecting attitudes and actions of the public. (pp. vi-vii)

In magnifying himself through cultural artefacts, such as sculpture and song, the ruler attempts to persuade his subjects that he is powerful, wise, and most of all, that he has the gods' favour. Yet, as Leo Oppenheim (1979) observes, this self-deification was not solely done for domestic purposes, as "the king had to communicate meaningfully in two directions: with his own subjects and with the outside world, which means with his enemies" (p. 111). Unfortunately, a persuasive means for demonstrating one's worth or impressiveness is war itself—i.e. war *as* propaganda, rather than its forerunner—and with this war was no longer waged for material purposes alone, but "was undertaken to proclaim and demonstrate the glory of the king and his god rather than to extend the empire" (p. 120).

This signals, in effect, the movement away from wars of necessity to wars of ideology; victory is no longer motivated by land or resources, but "is presented as the patent and final proof of divine support and ultimately of royal legitimacy" (Oppenheim, 1979, p. 121). War becomes a rhetorical device, in other words, a means for persuading one's people and enemies of one's worthiness and legitimacy. But the war or fighting itself is not enough for a propaganda campaign; after all, propaganda is a system of communication, and so the war must be chronicled, valorized and continually (re)mediated. Thus, through song, sculpture, painting, or

138

any other representational mode, "We see… the emotion-charged symbolic rendering of a historic event and not the recording of a reality in time and place" (Oppenheim, 1979, p. 122).

The human king, who may have only won a battle due to blind luck, is valorized and immortalized through propaganda; he becomes a hero, a demigod, someone who demonstrates divine favour and superhuman virtue. And this becomes a powerful means for getting others to do one's bidding. Indeed, as Kittler (1997) observes, "War, as opposed to sheer fighting, has been for a long time an affair of persuasion. It came into being only when people succeeded in making others die for them" (p. 117). One must believe a cause is just in order to risk his or her life for it, and this "justness" is articulated through propaganda.

However, effective propaganda does not utilize just one medium—*just* architecture, *just* coinage, *just* oration, and so on. The key, according to Ellul (1973), is to use *all* media at *all* times, for they all "can serve as a means of propaganda and everything must be utilized" (p. 13). Indeed, a propaganda effort "must be total. The propagandist must utilize all the technical means at his disposal—the press, radio, TV, movies, posters, meetings, door-to-door canvassing…. Each usable medium has its own particular way of penetration" (p. 9). In order

> To draw the individual into the net of propaganda, each technique must be utilized in its own specific way, directed toward producing the effect it can best produce, and fused with all the other media, each of them reaching the individual in a specific fashion and making him react anew to the same theme—in the same direction, but *differently*…. Each medium is particularly suited to a certain type of propaganda. (p. 10)

Propaganda is only effective if it is omnipresent and unrelenting; there can be no sphere of influence left unchecked, as each aspect of the individual's day must be infiltrated by propaganda. In Ellul's words, a "propagandist must combine the elements of propaganda as in a real orchestration" (p. 12). The proliferation of mass media means that as time progresses, the propagandist has more instruments to arrange in his orchestra, and that he can reach more people

in shorter amounts of time; he has more "voices" through which to convey his message.

With the onset of the mass media, first truly utilized for propagandistic purpose in the First World War (Creel, 1920), a small group of people can broadcast their message and influence a very large audience simultaneously. As Bernays (1928) suggests, in mass media

> The minority has discovered a powerful help in influencing majorities. It has been found possible so, in the present structure of society, this practice is inevitable. Whatever of social importance is done to-day, whether in politics, finance, manufacture, agriculture, charity, education, or other fields, must be done with the help of propaganda. (pp. 19-20)

Ideas have to be *sold* in order for them to be implemented, much like commodities or goods on a store shelf. Propaganda is thus the material means by which ideas are disseminated and negotiated, bought and sold.

George Creel (1920), who worked for the United States Committee on Public Information during the First World War, writes about the link between advertisement, media saturation, and propaganda in his landmark text *How We Advertised America*. Like Ellul's "orchestration," Creel writes that there was

> no medium of appeal that we did not employ. The printed word, the spoken word, the motion picture, the telegraph, the cable, the wireless, the poster, the sign-board—all these were used in our campaign to make our own people and all other peoples understand the causes that compelled America to take arms. (p. 5)

In times of war, and especially total war, the public must believe in the righteousness of their cause, and that the war is in fact furthering their cause.

Indeed, for Creel (1920), the propaganda campaign is as vital to the war effort as bullets, beans and blankets, since "The approval of the world meant the steady flow of inspiration into the trenches; it meant the strengthened resolve and the renewed determination of the civilian population that is a nation's second line" (p. 3). Again, people will fight if the cause is deemed just. Thus, instead of soldiers and sailors, propaganda's "front line" consists of propagandists

fighting for the "hearts and minds" of a population; instead of arms, their weapon is rhetoric, in the form of speech, film, literature, posters, and so on. Creel's favourite "soldiers" were a volunteer group known as "The Four Minute Men, an organization that will live in history by reason of its originality and effectiveness, [and who] commanded the volunteer services of 75,000 speakers, operating in 5,200 communities, and making a total of 755,190 speeches, every one having the carry of shrapnel" (p. 7). Creel is valorizing the propagandist here, emphasizing the importance of the homefront on the war effort.

Although propaganda existed before WWI, this conflict, Bernays (1928) suggests, "gave emphasis to the development of planned techniques in professional public relations. The Committee on Public Information… focused attention on the importance of ideas as weapons" (p. xxxii). Without material dissemination, ideas are useless; they are only weaponized through media, and then turned into propaganda. For if people do not hear or see the message, then the propagandist cannot influence their thoughts and actions; the trick lies in forcing the audience to encounter propaganda wherever they may be.

Now, it is clear why a ruler or ruling class uses propaganda, namely, to establish and maintain control, and to get people to do the "dirty work," so to speak. In Bernays' words, propaganda is used "to mold the mind of the masses [so] that they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction" (1928, p.19). Or, as Herman and Chomsky (2002) put it in their discussion of contemporary, mass media, propaganda is used "to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government or dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public" (p. 2). This end of propaganda is unambiguous; however, why is it that people "buy" into it in the first place? In other words, what makes propaganda *persuasive*?

From a Beckerian perspective, we could say that propaganda is in effect the rhetorical, material manifestation of particular immortality ideologies, or hero systems. The propagandist needs us, to be sure, but no more than we need him. As Becker (1975) puts it, "From earliest times men asked to be mystified, and right away there were those ready to fill the role" (p. 147). We *want* to be told how to live and what to believe. We crave stability. Even the so-called freedom of liberal democracy has its laws, both social and legislative, and these grant desperately needed meaning. As Ellul (1973) suggests, "Through the myth it creates, propaganda imposes a complete range of intuitive knowledge, susceptible on only one interpretation, unique and one-sided, and precluding any divergence (p. 11). Propaganda shapes our views, and explains the world according to reductive, easy-to-understand narratives. And in placing ourselves within these narratives, we gain understanding and an avenue towards perpetuity via symbol systems.

Of course, neither meaning nor even death transcendence are necessarily "bad" in their own right. However, the danger arises when propagandists exploit our need for meaning and death transcendence. Becker (1973) summarizes the danger as follows:

> Society provides the second line of defense against our natural impotence by creating a hero system that allows us to believe that we transcend death by participating in something of lasting worth. We achieve ersatz immortality by sacrificing ourselves to conquer an empire, to build a temple, to write a book,… to create an information society and global free market. (p. xiii)

When the King of Assyria, or the President of the United States decides to build or expand his empire, there are invariably willing participants. And this is because the empire or broader cultural context provides the individual with the means for defying finitude, even when—or especially when—dying in its service.

However, as Becker (1973) points out, kings and presidents will only find willing participants if the cause is deemed just:

> Man will lay down his life for his country, his society, his family. He will choose to throw himself on a grenade to save his comrades; he is capable of the highest generosity and self-sacrifice. But he has to feel and believe that what he is doing is truly heroic, timeless, and supremely meaningful. (p. 6)

In the *Iliad*, Hector fights because there is meaning in it: He fights not only for *kleos*, but for Troy and his family as well. These are all meaningful and worth fighting for. Likewise, in Ellul's words, "The worker, the soldier, and the partisan must all believe in what they are doing, must put all their heart and good will into it; they must also find their equilibrium, their satisfactions, in their actions" (1973, p. 23). The cause must be worthwhile and just, and it is this sense of "justness" which is the rhetorical heart, the persuasive aim of all propaganda. This is why the existential-threat scenario is so commonly employed: There is nothing more "just" than self-defence.[4]

However, as Oppenheim (1979) observes, honour and prestige (heroism) are also commonly employed as justifications: "Wars are consistently presented as defensive or punitive actions, undertaken because tribute or homage were denied, or to reconquer lost territory" (p. 121). The hero systems of particular cultures differ, but one way or another, it is always *their* fault that we are at war with them; they are attacking, or if not then planning to, and besides, they have attacked us in the past. Or, if they fail to pay homage and we do nothing, they will think we are weak, grow bold and attack later. In all cases, the fault lies with the enemy, the bringer of chaos; we on the other hand, bring order and stability.

This dual image of the aggressive Other and peaceful self/hero is a key narrative figure in all propaganda. Regardless of medium or mode, the villain is always portrayed as an existential threat, often motivated by nothing other than sheer malevolence. And as we saw in chapter one, where there are villains there are heroes; indeed, the villain necessarily precedes the hero and

---

[4] The failures in Vietnam and Iraq can at least partially be attributed to a failure to convince the public that their lives were imminently threatened by these countries.

signals the opportunity for heroism. This is why the hero/villain dichotomy is such a common propagandistic trope. It is clear, and easy to recognize, as there is no question about whom one should identify with. And more importantly, the concept of heroism signifies the conquest of life over death. As such, propaganda provides the individual with two stark choices—life or death. Hitler (1971), the embodiment and realization of rhetoric's destructive potential, wrote that propaganda must "not have multiple shadings; it has a positive and a negative; love or hate, right or wrong, truth or lie, never half this way and half that way, never partially" (p. 183).

This is, of course, the sort of binarism which post-war continental philosophy sought to undermine, for propaganda works best when there is no middle ground, no opportunity for compromise. In Ellul's (1973) words, "Propaganda ceases where simple dialogue begins" (p. 6). With this in mind, it is easy to see why the hero and villain figures are so prevalent in propaganda, since they allow for a clear, easy to recognize us/them dichotomy at a glance. In these figures, the propagandist can convey all the audience needs to know about the conflict in a few brief words or images: *They* are evil and wish us harm; *we* are righteous and must vanquish them in self-defence.

2. Constructing the Villain and Finding a Scapegoat

In "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle," Kenneth Burke (1974) argues that Hitler's rise to power in Germany had as much to do with his use of rhetoric and mass media as his use of force. After suffering through the hardships which resulted from the Treaty of Versailles, the German people felt defeated, humiliated, and unfairly treated. As we saw in chapter one, the need to feel worthy, dignified, and ultimately *magnified* is a fundamental human drive; in 1930s Germany, there was very little to feel good about, and very few sources from which one could derive self-esteem. But just because there are no readily-available sources does not negate the organismic

need for self-esteem, however; on the contrary it amplifies it. Thus, as Burke (1974) asks, immediately before Hitler arrives, are the German people "not then psychologically ready for a rationale, *any* rationale, if it but offer them some specious 'universal' explanation?" (p. 218). For Burke, Hitler's "genius" lied in his ability to recognize this national self-esteem deficiency, and to exploit it for his own purposes. He devised a way to both *explain* their state of affairs, while also providing a *solution*, a way to reclaim German honour.

Thus, the complex political, economic, and ideological factors which contributed to Germany's situation were supplanted with a few simplistic, infinitely repeated slogans. And this is because, as Hitler states, "all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan" (1971, pp. 180-181). This aspect of repeatability is the essence of not just propaganda but all rhetoric; in Burke's (1969) words, "we must think of rhetoric not in terms of some one particular address, but as a general *body of identifications* that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill" (p. 26). By repeating and normalizing certain constant themes—the superiority of the German "race," the conspiracies of external forces, etc.—which by their nature play on the psychological need for cosmic significance, Hitler was able to construct a consistent narrative which identified certain figures as the cause of Germany's ills, and certain others as its remedy.

Perhaps ironically, Hitler spends several sections of *Mein Kampf* begrudgingly paying homage to the Allied Powers' use of propaganda; he marvelled at their clarity, consistency, and effectiveness. It is no surprise then that like Creel and Bernays suggested, the Nazis used all available media at their disposal—pamphlets, speeches, posters, television, radio, and film were all employed to deliver the same underlying messages. As Hitler (1971) states, "a slogan must be

presented from different angles, but the end of all remarks must always and immutably be the slogan itself" (p. 185). This, above all, is behind Hitler's success. As Burke (1974) suggests, one of the major takeaways of Nazi propaganda is that it "has shown, to a very disturbing degree, the power of endless repetition" (p. 217). But it is not just the fact of repetition which interests Burke; rather, it is the *effect* of this repetition. He asks, "is it possible that an equally important feature of appeal was not so much in the repetitiousness *per se*, but in the fact that, by means of it, Hitler provided a 'world view' for people who had previously seen the world but piecemeal?" (p. 218). The world view provides an "alternate" explanation of events; unlike the Treaty of Versailles, which forced Germany to accept both moral and economic liability for the war,[5] Hitler's world view absolves the German people of all guilt and lays it squarely on external, non-German Others. In Burke's words, Hitler "provided a *non-economic interpretation of economic ills*" (1974, p. 204).

This non-economic interpretation is, of course both racial and ideological in nature: It is not the Germans' fault after all, but the Marxists, the Jews and the Gypsies who are really to blame. The Nazis used this blame-shifting tactic, to be sure, but the fact is so do all parties in a conflict. In *Faces of the Enemy*, Sam Keen (2004) demonstrates that propagandists across temporal and geographical divides employ common rhetorical techniques for valorizing one's heroes and demonizing one's enemies. For example, representing the enemy as Death itself, the first and most primary enemy, was a device employed in WWII by the Japanese, Russian, German, and American propaganda departments. Other recurring images include the enemy as beast, rapist, and barbarian (Keen, 2004). In all cases, the enemy is depicted as an unambiguous evil which poses an existential threat. Evil is something not only external to, but different from,

---

[5] Article 231, the so-called Guilt Clause: "Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies."

"me" and "us." It is an abomination, an irrational, inhuman, monster. "At the core of evil," Philip

Zimbardo (2008) suggests, "is the process of dehumanization by which certain other people or

collectives of them, are depicted as less than human, as non comparable in humanity or personal

dignity to those who do the labelling" (para. 1).

As a distinct Other, we feel neither sympathy nor empathy when evil is eradicated; on the

contrary, we rejoice and praise the hero who eradicated it. The dancing in the streets in America

which followed Osama Bin Laden's death, for example, speaks to this. Burke, Keen and

Zimbardo all illustrate the rhetorical nature of evil; that is, they demonstrate the rhetorical means

by which evil is defined, and that designations of evil are almost invariably conferred for

persuasive purposes, relying on the exploitation of stock images and stereotypes. And as

Zimbardo (2008) argues, the rhetoric of dehumanization can have drastic consequences:

> That image of a dreaded enemy threatening one's personal well-being and the
> society's national security emboldens mothers and fathers to send sons to war,
> and empowers governments to rearrange priorities to turn ploughshares into
> swords of destruction…. It is all done with words and images. (paras. 12-13)

These figures constitute a series of "scapegoats," which Burke (1989) defines as "the

'representative' or 'vessel' of certain unwanted evils, the sacrificial animal upon whose back the

burden of these evils is ritualistically loaded" (p. 294). There is thus an inherent "purifying"

function at play in the scapegoat.

By transferring evil from the society onto the sacrificial Other, the society has an

external, tangible avenue for eliminating evil; a physical act (killing or exile) removes

metaphysical properties (sin or evil). In Becker's (1975) words, "inferiority and animality… is

projected symbolically onto the scapegoat and then destroyed with him" (p. 95). Jan Bremmer

(1983) examines the concept of the scapegoat (*pharmakos*) as it appears in several, distinct

populations, including the Old Testament Israelites, the Greeks, Romans, Indians, and Tibetans

(p. 299). We see perhaps the clearest and most literal manifestation of the scapegoat concept in

the Hebraic Old Testament, when God orders Aaron to take

> two goats, and present them before the LORD at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the LORD, and the other lot for the scapegoat…. And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness. (*Leviticus* 16:7-8, 21-22)

All of Israel's "iniquities" are transferred onto the sacrificial goat, which is then removed from

the land (exiled). The land is thus purified of sin, and God is appeased.

According to Bremmer (1983), there is evidence that "in exceptional times, such as

drought or famine, certain ugly people were selected and sacrificed" in ancient Greece, and

likewise, "at the Thargelia, a festival for Apollo, a man with white figs around his neck was

expelled from the city as a purification for the men, and another man with black figs for the

women" (p. 301). In all cases, Bremmer suggests, the scapegoat figure serves a common, life-

granting function, as "the elimination of one or two members saves the whole of the community"

(p. 302). In imbuing the scapegoat with the community's evils, and then removing it, the

community is saved, the "impurity" is removed, and life can continue. The particular

manifestations of the scapegoat differ—"criminals, slaves, ugly persons, strangers, young men

and women, and a king," but as Bremmer argues in his analysis of the Greek scapegoat, "these

different *signifiers*… possess the same *signified*… since all these categories have in common that

they are situated at the margin of… society" (p. 303).

The scapegoat ultimately serves a cathartic, purifying function: After the scapegoat has

been symbolically imbued with the society's unwanted evils, it is destroyed, and with it the evils

it represents. Since we cannot control things like weather, disease, or death, the scapegoat

provides a psychologically necessary solution; it provides us with a sense of control over the

natural world we simply do not possess, and moreover, it allows us to confront and symbolically

conquer all that is evil in an observable way. As Burke (1974) suggests, "if one can hand over his

infirmities to a vessel or 'cause,' outside the self, one can battle an external enemy instead of

battling an enemy within" (p. 203). In the post-war German context, Hitler transferred

Germany's guilt and sins upon particular groups, and in doing so this guilt was removed from the

rest of the population.

Yet, as we see in the Oedipus story, this marginal figure need not be poor or insignificant,

but merely an "outsider." According to Bremmer there are two primary forms of the scapegoat:

> On the one hand we find the poor, the ugly, the criminals, who only occur in historical rites. This must have been such a recurrent feature of the scapegoat rituals that the words used to denote the scapegoat—*pharmakos*, *katharma*, *perikatharma*, *peripsema*—soon became terms of abuse. On the other hand there are the attractive, aristocratic royal figures, who are found only in the mythical and unhistorical tales. (1983, p. 304)

It is very clear why the figures in power would not choose to sacrifice themselves in real life; in

mythology martyrdom is noble and grants immortality; however, in

> real life, during the annual scapegoat ritual, there was of course little chance that the king (if any) would sacrifice himself or his children. Here, society chose one of its marginals. Nevertheless the people realized that they could not save their own skin by sacrificing the scum of the polis. For that reason the scapegoat was always treated as a very important person. (p. 305)

In short, sacrifice sounds good in myth, but much less so in real life.

Using an "important" or powerful scapegoat appears counter-intuitive, especially in light

of 20th Century scapegoating techniques, which relied on dehumanization. However, even

Hitler's characterization of Judaism and Marxism relied on granting them a certain degree of

power, albeit in the forms of cunning, underhandedness, and other ignoble traits. After all, if they

were not at least partially powerful, how could they have brought down such a glorious nation as Germany? Consider this propaganda poster from Nazi Germany:

Fig. 1. "Behind the enemy powers, the Jew" circa 1943. Courtesy U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Here the Jewish scapegoat is simultaneously vile yet powerful. His facial features are over exaggerated; he wears a top hat (wealthy); he is fat (greedy), and so on. Yet, in spite of these characteristics, great nations act in his interests. The Russians, Americans, and British are all at the behest of the Jew. The message here is that although Germany may *officially* be at war with Russia, America and Britain, it is *actually* the Jew behind the aggression against Germany.

This poster visually reinforces Hitler's narrative that external powers, in particular the Marxists and the Jews, were responsible for German suffering, both before and during WWII. The Germans are portrayed as not responsible; instead, as Hitler (1971) writes in *Mein Kampf* they are victims of Jews and Marxists, a "venomous plague… whose goal is and remains the

destruction of all non-Jewish national states" (p. 168). They are powerful enough to pose an existential threat, yet, they are "vermin" and a "venomous plague" nevertheless.

Hitler, of course, is not concerned with logical contradiction, but this inherent contradiction is in fact a necessary aspect of the scapegoat: It must be valuable enough to appease the gods, but not so valuable that its absence harms the rest of the community. It must be worthy of taking on the sins of a nation, but at the same time utterly expendable. In Bremmer's (1983) words, "we conclude that in historical reality the community sacrificed the least valuable members of the polis, who were represented, however, as very valuable persons" (p. 307). Bremmer is clear that in the Greek tradition, "the *pharmakos* stayed alive" (p. 317); although the scapegoat may have been beaten or mistreated, he or she was usually removed through exile rather than murder. It is not until later traditions that the scapegoat is killed. But functionally, exile and murder are identical since expelling "the scapegoats in practice amounted to killing, since, like the dead, they disappeared from the community, never to return" (p. 318).

Whether Hitler exiles his scapegoats to ghettoes, or murders them in concentration camps, he *removes* them, and in doing so symbolically purges Germany of all its ills. And thus Germany is reborn, renewed, and able to take its rightful place as a world power. According to Bremmer (1983), the rebirth motif is fundamental to the scapegoat; in the Greek tradition, "the expulsion of the scapegoat in the religious calendar preceded a day of seasonal renewal" (p. 319). The scapegoat's expulsion coincides with the "natural" renewal which comes from the change of seasons, and life is affirmed. And this "pattern is fully understandable: no new beginnings before a *katharsis* of the old situation" (Bremmer, 1983, p. 320). This may be why the scapegoat figure, like Campbell's monomyth, is so pervasive: We can only attain eternal life through rebirth, and the scapegoat catalyzes this rebirth.

Although the scapegoat may have sprung from metaphysics, it serves some very earthly purposes, such as unifying a population. In the early scapegoating rituals, "It was typical of stoning that everybody present took part in it," and one of the effects of this is that the "involvement of all persons in the expulsion of one member of the group helps reconstitute that group" (Bremmer, 1983, p. 315). An easy and effective way to create group cohesion is through projecting internal evils outwards: If there is plague, poverty, starvation, mass unemployment, etc., then blaming an external foe at once provides a desperately needed answer, and simultaneously shifts the blame from the ruling class. As Rene Girard (1989) puts it, "A disease with a name seems on the way to a cure, so uncontrollable phenomena are frequently renamed to create the impression of control" (p. 4). In identifying certain marginalized groups or individuals as the cause of suffering, the ruling class can mobilize a population against a common enemy. In his discussion of the Jewish scapegoat during the Black Plague, Girard writes, due "to the mechanism of persecution, collective anguish and frustration found vicarious appeasement in the victims who easily found themselves united in opposition to them by virtue of being poorly integrated minorities" (p. 40). And in banding together against an identifiable "cause," the individual is at once granted both a sense of agency and a sense of belonging to a larger group.

Becker (1975) likewise argues that the scapegoat is a tool for uniting a population, and for deflecting attention away internal injustices and projecting them outwards: Since its beginnings, "the State" has always

> 'solved' its ponderous *internal* problems of social justice by making justice a matter of triumph over an *external* enemy. This was the start of the large-scale scapegoating that has consumed such mountains of lives down through history and continues to do so today, right up to Vietnam and Bangladesh: what better way to forge a nation into a unity, to take everyone's eyes off the frightening state of domestic affairs, than by focusing on a heroic foreign cause? (p. 98)

Again, in Hitler's rhetoric, the economic perils which arose after WWI were not the result of incompetent leadership or military miscalculation, but the powerful yet inferior enemies of Germany. In the logic of the scapegoat, we need only unite and exterminate *them* in order to reclaim our independence and way of life.

This form of propaganda, centered around an external Other, is what Ellul (1973) calls the "propaganda of agitation," and as Ellul suggests, "most of Hitler's propaganda was propaganda of agitation" (p. 71). Propagation of agitation is designed to incite hatred, prejudice, or violence against an individual or group of individuals. Although Ellul does not explicitly utilize the term "scapegoat" here, the central idea remains the same:

> Hatred is probably the most spontaneous and common sentiment; it consists of attributing one's misfortune and sins to 'another,' who must be killed in order to assure the disappearance of those misfortunes and sins…. Propaganda of agitation succeeds each time it designates someone as the source of all misery, provided that he is not too powerful. (p. 73)

A great deal of Hitler's propaganda campaign focused on blaming others, who in turn could be removed from the greater community without much opposition. He reinforced his self-narrative as saviour in this very public campaign to remove all traces of Jewish identity or culture from the Third Reich. Thus, Hitler simultaneously "identifies" the problem (or *disease*) on one hand, while offering its solution (or *cure*) with the other. This is a powerful rhetorical technique, and unfortunately, a powerful one. As Burke (1974) puts it, Hitler utilized "the Jew… as his unifying devil-function" (p. 194), and so the scapegoat is "a device that unifies all those who share the same enemy" (Burke, 1989, p. 121).

In order for this unification to work, however, the scapegoat must pose a clear and existential threat: It must be made explicit that the violence against the scapegoat is both justified and necessary; if this can be achieved, then the propagandist is much more likely to persuade his

audience that violence is in fact desirable. In Girard's (1989) words, "the persecutors [must be] convinced that their violence is justified; they consider themselves judges, and therefore they must have guilty victims" (p. 6). As noted above, the scapegoat is almost invariably depicted as the aggressor; it is always *his* fault. Indeed, perhaps the most common justification for war (including the pre-emptive strike) is self-defence. Creel (1920), for example, notes that his group

> wanted to reach people through their minds, rather than through their emotions…. We wanted to do it, not by over-emphasis of historical appeal, but by unanswerable arguments that would make every man and woman know that the war was a war of self-defense that had to be waged if free institutions were not to perish. (p. 100)

We see a clear binary at play here: If we do not wage this war of self-defence, our free society, our entire way of life will crumble. And Creel is quite right, this *is* an "unanswerable" argument, for the alternative to fighting, we are told, is death and final destruction.

Consider the following Nazi propaganda poster, which depicts the Soviets and Jews as bringers of death:

Fig. 2. "Bolshevism without a Mask." Courtesy U.S. Library of Congress: LC-USZC4-14434

Here we see that the enemy is depicted as a threat not only to Germany, but indeed to the entire globe. The Soviets are depicted as Death itself, an inhuman monster intent on world domination; with the Soviet advance comes a wave of fire, death, and destruction. Through this fairly simple image, the audience is told that its homes and entire way of life are in danger. Thus, the German cause is both just and heroic since the enemy poses both a direct, personal threat, as well as a more general, "global" threat; in opposing the Soviets, the German nation is participating in a righteous struggle of cosmic significance.

Hitler (1971) employs this figure of a threatening enemy Other throughout *Mein Kampf*. For example, while describing Germany's rationale for fighting in WWI, he writes that the

> aim for which we were fighting the War was the loftiest, the most overpowering, that man can conceive: it was the freedom and independence of our nation, the security of our future and food supply, and—our national honor, a thing which, despite all contrary opinions prevailing today, nevertheless exists, or rather should exist, since peoples without honor have sooner or later lost their freedom and independence, which in turn is only the result of a higher justice, since generations of rabble without honor deserve no freedom. Any man who wants to be a cowardly slave can have no honor, or honor itself would soon fall into general contempt. (p. 177)

The war was fought for the "loftiest" purposes: freedom, independence, food security, and honour; in short, for life and for way of life. For Hitler, "The most unbeautiful thing there can be in human life is and remains the yoke of slavery" (p. 178), and so in exterminating the plague which enslaves them, they can regain their independence, honour, and way of life. Hitler here demonstrates the Beckerian principle that great evil and suffering can result from fighting for what one considers "honour" and "righteousness."

Although contemporary propaganda is not quite as bombastic, it and the scapegoat figure continue to persist. Contemporary mass and digital media have simply provided more avenues for disseminating, contesting, and producing propaganda/scapegoats. If, as Ellul suggests, the

propagandist must create an "orchestra" of propaganda, then each new medium constitutes a new instrument, a new voice to combine with the instruments already in play. Like the Four Minute Men of WWI, the vitriolic rhetoric of *Mein Kampf,* contemporary propaganda likewise constructs an enemy Other who is hyper-imbued with evil characteristics.

For example, the televised address has played a prominent propaganda role since live television was possible (e.g. Kittler, 1989; Virilio, 1989), and continues to do so today. When Roosevelt declared war on Japan after Pearl Harbor, for example, he not only used radio, but the television as well. More recently, when announcing the "beginning of operations" in the second Iraq war on live television, George W. Bush (2003) informed his audience that "at this hour American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to *defend the world from grave danger*" (para. 1, italics mine). The attack is not an attack at all, but a noble defense against a "grave danger." In closing, he then reassures those watching that they "have no ambition in Iraq, except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people" (para. 8). The military action, in this case clearly offensive, is not described as offensive; rather, it is a "pre-emptive" operation whose sole purpose is to "remove a threat" already there.

Likewise, when announcing the death of Osama Bin Laden, Barack Obama (2011) asserts that Bin Laden "had openly declared war on the United States and was committed to killing innocents in our country and around the globe. And so we went to war against al Qaeda to protect our citizens, our friends, and our allies" (para. 5). And later, that the "American people did not choose this fight. It came to our shores, and started with the senseless slaughter of our citizens" (para. 16). Any political motivation behind the attacks, for instance, are not considered;

rather, they are simply described as a "senseless slaughter" perpetrated by an entity "committed to killing innocents." Again, it is aggression *against us* which causes war, not our aggression.

There is good reason for describing acts of war in terms of necessity, self-defence, and ultimately, survival. As Lasswell (1971) observes, most people are uncomfortable supporting a war unless there is no viable alternative; it is too costly in both blood and treasure:

> So great are the psychological resistances to war in modern nations, that every war must appear to be a war of defense against a menacing, murderous aggressor. There must be no ambiguity about whom the public is to hate. The war must not be due to a world system of conducting international affairs, nor to the stupidity or malevolence of all governing classes, but to the rapacity of the enemy. (p. 47)

The failure to win sustained popular support for the second Iraq war may be due in part to the lack of any clear, definable danger. The pretext for the war was precisely because Iraq sought to produce weapons of mass destruction: In George W. Bush's (2003) words,

> Year after year, Saddam Hussein has gone to elaborate lengths, spent enormous sums, taken great risks to build and keep weapons of mass destruction. But why? The only possible explanation, the only possible use he could have for those weapons, is to dominate, intimidate or attack. (p. 11, para. 13)

Regimes such as Iraq, which "seek and possess nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons," constitute the "gravest danger facing America and the world" (p. 8, para. 5). Thus, when it became clear that Iraq did not in fact possess any such weapons, support for the war plummeted.

In all cases, however, whether in the World Wars, Vietnam, or the War on Terror, the enemy is depicted as an absolute Other, who is intent on bringing death and destruction. Of course, there are variations; after all, Hitler, Bush, and now Obama addressed different audiences in different contexts. But this merely reflects a difference in audience—i.e. context—and not function. This is not equating Hitler's rhetoric with Bush or Obama's; the similarities merely reflect the panhuman need for the scapegoat, or of enemies generally, for without them there is no opportunity for heroism and thus immortality. This brings us to an unnerving fact about the

scapegoat: namely, that it was with us all along. The scapegoat figure only works by playing on *already existing* symbols and beliefs. In Burke's words, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your way with his… You give the signs of such consubstantiality by deference to an audience's 'opinion'" (1969, p. 55). Hitler did not *create* anti-Semitic sentiment, but merely amplified it.

Anti-Semitism of course is as ancient as Semitism, but Reisigl and Wodak (2001) trace Hitler's particular brand to the Social Darwinist theories which became popular in the late 19th Century; according to Reisigl and Wodak,

> 'Race theorists' interpreted history as a 'racial struggle' within which only the fittest 'races' would have the right to survive…. [T]he terms 'antisemitism' and 'antisemitic,' which in retrospect cover the whole range of religious, economist, nationalist, socialist, Marxist, culturalist, and racist prejudicial aversion and aggression against Jews, were most probably coined in 1879 in the agitational, anti-Semitic circle of the German writer Wilhelm Marr. (p. 4)

Hitler simply used the "science" of social Darwinism to exploit an already extant prejudice. The Jew, a "marginal" figure, is presented as an acceptable outlet for guilt, anger, shame, and hatred. Indeed, Hitler made anti-Semitism not only acceptable but heroic: If we cannot feel heroic because of our wealth or military might, then we can at least fall back on ethnic superiority. After all, as Burke (1974) observes, when "a State is in economic collapse… you cannot possibly derive dignity from economic stability" (p. 205). And so Hitler shifted the terms of heroism from economic, material superiority (a hallmark of German identity), to racial, ideological superiority.

For example, below are two images taken from a 1936 children's book entitled, *Trau Keinem Fuchs auf gruener Heid und keinem Jued auf seinem Eid* ("Trust No Fox in the Green Meadow and No Jew on his Oath") by Elwira Bauer.

Fig. 3. Courtesy U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

On the left we see the tall, muscular, fair, industrious German; he appears godlike, and contributes to the land with his labour. His head is held high and his physique is impressive. On the right we see the dark, short, fat, bald, Jew with grossly exaggerated facial features. He does not work with his hands or on the land, but in a bank, or office. His "strengths" are in finance, cunning and trickery. Unlike the German who builds, the Jew merely takes. In this depiction, to simply be a non-Jewish German is to be heroic. The two images are in essence antithetical, and their proximity to one another only highlights their disparity. Indeed, the very layout of these images reinforces a clear hierarchy. The panel on the left, containing the German, is taller and narrower than the panel on the right. The left panel towers over the right, further signifying German dominance. Thus, not only is the German depicted as superior in content, but in form as

well. In Bauer's book, we see the early age at which propaganda indoctrination begins.[6] The

children are taught that their very blood is heroic, that they are superior to other "races".

As Burke (1974) observes, this binary, hierarchical opposition was essential to the Nazi

narrative, and "the two keystones of the opposite equations were Aryan 'heroism' and 'sacrifice'

vs. Jewish 'cunning' and 'arrogance'" (p. 208). It is this antithetical relationship between the

scapegoat and the hero who eradicates it that characterizes all propaganda; modern mass media

simply allow for greater saturation, more means for defining what is to be reviled and revered.

Again, the image of heroism is so rhetorically and psychologically powerful because it provides

us with standards of value, and just as importantly, a sense of significance and belonging.

This is why Becker (1975) is correct when he concludes that the "logic of scapegoating…

is based on animal narcissism and hidden fear. If luck, as Aristotle said, is when the arrow hits

the fellow next to you, then scapegoating is pushing the fellow into its path—with special

alacrity if he is a stranger to you" (p. 109). When I kill another I affirm that the gods favour me,

that I am worthwhile and significant; the need for scapegoats reveals our selfish, "narcissistic"

urge to magnify ourselves at the expense of others. The scapegoat thus fulfills an important

psychological need to project one's sins outwards, to alleviate oneself from the guilt of life. The

scapegoat is something to denigrate, to stand over and above; in acting against the scapegoat, the

individual affirms his position as a special being of worth and significance.

Becker summarizes the function and consequences of scapegoating succinctly as follows:

> All you have to do is to say that your group is pure and good, eligible for a full
> life and for some kind of eternal meaning. But others like Jews or Gypsies are the
> real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and
> bringing disease and weakness into your vitality. Then you have a mandate to
> launch a political plague, a campaign to make the world pure. (1975, p. 93)

---

[6] Of course, the concept of "early indoctrination" is not unique to Nazi propaganda. For example, many organized religions encourage exposure to their doctrines and rituals at a young age (e.g. "Sunday school").

They are vermin, not human like us, divine and cosmically significant. It is *they* who are responsible for all our ills, and so removing them from the community, by exile or murder, becomes not only desirable, but *heroic*. Indeed, the scapegoat is rhetorically powerful precisely because it provides an outlet for heroism, something we desperately need.

3. The Hero at War and on the Homefront

In contrast to the external enemy—who must be purged for the sake of the community—is the hero, the representative for all that is good in "us." The hero's function is to ultimately defeat "the enemy" and in doing so preserve the well being of the group. If the scapegoat is the representative of all that is evil and unappealing, the hero is its direct antithesis, and the relationship between the two is ancient. According to Bremmer (1983), the expulsion of the scapegoat coincided with festivals celebrating heroic victories:

> The scapegoats were expelled on the sixth of the month Thargelion…. It is rather surprising to note that on the same day that the scapegoats were expelled the Greeks also celebrated the fall of Troy, [and] the victories of Marathon and Platea…. Evidently the expulsion of evil was felt so intensely that this seemed to be the appropriate day to celebrate these victories. (p. 318)

Even in ritual, the scapegoat and the heroic are inextricably linked, and this is because rebirth, regeneration, and reanimation are common to both. The scapegoat represents all that is evil, the antithesis of life; in eliminating the scapegoat, the hero eliminates evil, and therefore death.

The hero figure is a key component in the manipulation of beliefs or actions, since the hero figure serves as a representative of all that is revered in the group, and so becomes a symbol of that group. In Ellul's (1973) words, the "collective will always be best idealized, patterned, and represented by the hero. The cult of the hero is the absolutely necessary complement of the massification of society" (p. 172). Just as the scapegoat serves a "unifying function," so too does

the hero; like the scapegoat, it functions to de-individuate the citizen by enveloping him under the banner of the group, since adhering to a certain version of the heroic signifies belonging to, or "losing oneself within" a group. As Becker (1975) notes, "banners don't wrap themselves around men: men invent banners and clutch at them; they hunger for believable words that dress life in convincing meaning" (p. 142). These banners are the hero systems which people gather under, and ferociously defend as a means for combating finitude.

However, these banners also provide standards of value by which to measure ourselves; one's inscription onto the cultural fabric can only be effected through heroic action, deeds worthy of praise. In a passage very much reminiscent of Becker, Ellul (1973) discusses the need to feel heroic and propaganda's role in satisfying this need:

> [M]an cannot stand being unimportant; he cannot accept the status of a cipher. He needs to assert himself, to see himself as a hero. He needs to feel he is somebody and to be considered as such. He needs to express his authority, the drive for power and domination that is in every man…. Only propaganda provides the individual with a fully satisfactory response to his profound need. (p. 147)

Propaganda is persuasive precisely because it taps into this need to feel heroic; the propagandee is told that he or she can "make a difference" by acting in a certain fashion.

Hitler (1971) uses the heroic device to remarkable effect. As the following passage demonstrates, he is even able to turn the shame of defeat into immortal heroism:

> Thousands of years may pass, but never will it be possible to speak of heroism without mentioning the German army and the World War. Then from the veil of the past the iron front of the gray steel helmet will emerge, unwavering and unflinching, an immortal monument. As long as there are Germans alive, they will remember that these men were sons of their nation. (p. 166)

Whatever the reason, losing the World War was not due to any lack of courage or heroism on Germany's part, and the heroes of the war are rewarded with *kleos aphthiton*. This provides incentive for future generations to join his cause, as the fruits are articulated in terms of glory

and immortality. Hitler does not write *Mein Kampf* for reflection's sake alone; he reflects on the past as a means for influencing future action, and unfortunately he succeeded. As Ellul (1973) suggests, "propaganda takes over the literature of the past, furnishing it with contexts and explanations designed to re-integrate it into the present" (p. 14). In this way, *Mein Kampf* is more about laying the groundwork for WWII than it is about WWI.

Propaganda provides individuals with an opportunity to feel significant, and that they belong to something greater than themselves; as such, they are willing to put themselves at great risk to attain heroism and assure the perpetuation of the group. It is precisely this willingness to self-sacrifice for the greater good that is at the heart of the image of the hero; the hero fights for and protects others at great personal risk. Consider the following WWII posters which represent the dual nature of the war hero:

Fig. 4. Courtesy Northwestern University Library   Fig. 5. Courtesy McGill University Digital Library

On the one hand, the hero is a protector; he is a family man, who only fights to protect innocence, as signified by sleeping children. On the other hand he is a warrior, who brings the fight to the enemy. He leads the charge with his bayonet fixed, ready for battle. Just as the father watches over his family, the warrior seemingly watches over the world.

This is the dual image of the hero—gentle in peace and ferocious in war. The same man who tucks his kids into bed kills the enemy with great efficiency; in this context, the hero is thus an individual of both compassion and ferocity. The two go hand in hand, as the soldier who bravely defies death on the battlefield is only heroic if his or her cause is just. It is hard to dispute the merits of protecting children, but again, it is precisely this absence of disputability which lies at the heart of propaganda. While most people, truth be told, find themselves all too willing to sacrifice others for their own sake,[7] the hero does the reverse and demonstrates a willingness to sacrifice him or herself for the community.

For Becker (1975), this selfless extraordinariness is what defines the hero:

> This is the price of our natural animal narcissism; very few of us, if pressured, would be unwilling to sacrifice someone else in our place. The exception of this of course is the hero. We admire him precisely because he is willing to give his life for others instead of taking theirs for his. Heroism is an unusual reversal of routine values, and it is another thing that makes war so uplifting, as mankind has long known: war is a ritual for the emergence of heroes, and so for the transmutation of selfish values. In war men live their own ennoblement. (p. 109)

It does not matter whether or not the hero is actually fighting for selfish reasons, or that he was afraid in combat; rather, it is the construction of the heroic myth which truly matters. The hero is heroic because he or she demonstrates selflessness and bravery in the presence of mortal danger.

The role of propaganda, then, is to define the terms of heroism according to the propagandist's interests. Even in times of war these aims are not always martial in nature; on the

---

[7] Becker speaks in the context of war, but the principle holds true generally as well. For instance, North Americans want cheap goods and gadgets like iPhones; the working conditions of the people making these goods are ignored, set aside. One can become an econo-hero of sorts by buying only fair trade goods.

contrary, a great deal of propaganda is not directed at young men aged 18-49, but to the "homefront." And like the would-be recruit, the propagandist utilizes the rhetoric of heroism to influence non-combatants as well. Now, it is clear that the "true" heroes are those fighting at the front; however, since there are inevitably segments of the population which cannot (or will not) be sent to the front, the state must seek alternate means to encourage people to help the war effort, and the principal means for achieving this is again the hero figure.

The common themes of domestic heroism usually revolve around supporting the war effort, primarily through buying war bonds, contributing labour, and responsible rationing.
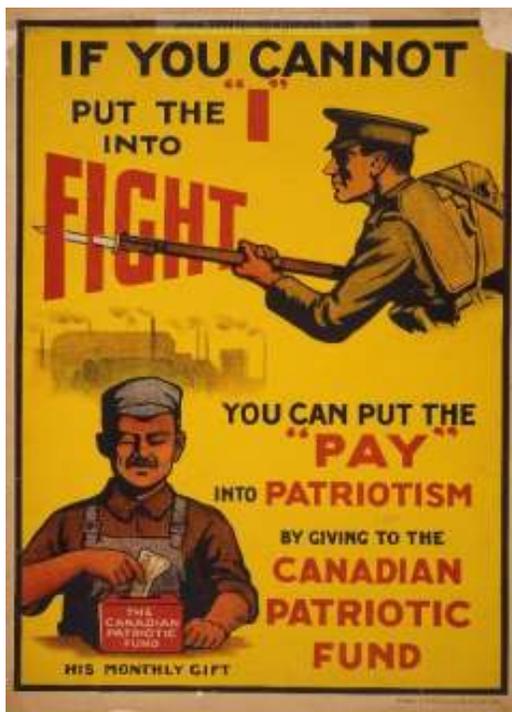
Fig. 6. Courtesy Toronto Public Library   Fig. 7. Courtesy Toronto Public Library

Both of these Canadian WWI propaganda posters offer means for supporting the war outside of direct combat. Again, it is clear that the fighting man is still the "true" hero; however, both posters emphasize that there are ways to help the war effort apart from combat. In buying war bonds, for example, the individual can still demonstrate his or her patriotism. Likewise, as we

see in the poster on the right, in contributing one's labour the individual assists the nation's heroic cause; they are even given a military "battalion" which they can join, and a commanding officer to report to. To reinforce this point, the lumberjack carries his cant hook over his shoulder in a manner similar to a rifle.

Of course, in WWII, the primary homefront demographic was women. The contribution of women in both World Wars is well documented (e.g. Greenwald, 1990; Weatherford, 2008). Indeed, they actively participated in warzones, as nurses, typists, and general staffers. And so, since conventional forms of heroism were not open to women, alternative forms were provided. Once again, valorization is the predominant rhetorical motif. Consider the two posters below, both from the American propaganda campaign:
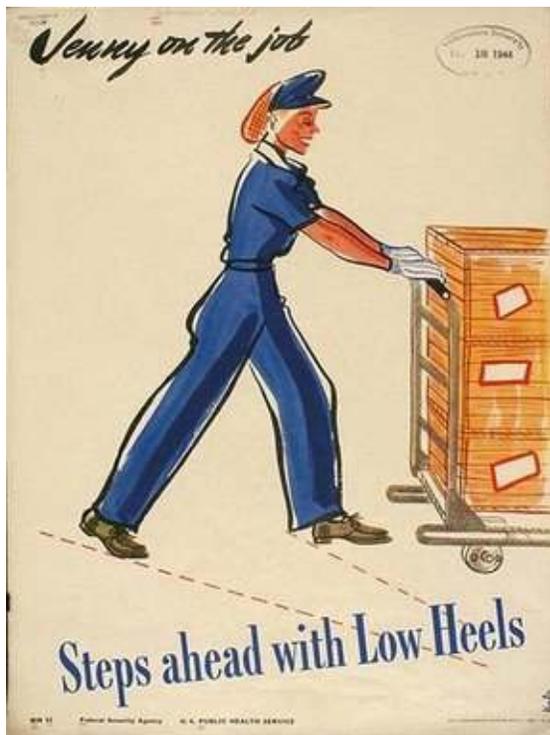
Fig. 8. "Jenny on the Job." Courtesy Univ. of Minnesota   Fig. 9. "SPARS." Courtesy Univ. of Minnesota

Again, the hero figure is used as a rhetorical device: by joining SPARS (*Semper Paratus*, Always Ready), a nickname for the U.S. Coast Guard Women's Reserve, the individual is told she is contributing to the war effort; she is performing her "duty ashore."

The terms of heroism arise out of particular propaganda aims. As many of these posters indicate, the alternate forms of heroism were heavily influenced by patriarchal conceptions of gender; however, since women were receiving the same propaganda as men—namely, that told them their very way of life was at stake—providing them an avenue for contributing to the war effort assisted both the propagandist and propagandee; in short, it provides them with a way to be heroes. Although the warrior was—and perhaps still is—the predominant hero figure, propagandists also used the hero figure to motivate and mobilize non-combat personnel.

4. PSYOPS and Contemporary Propaganda

Although all groups—nations, political parties, subcultures, businesses—willingly and knowingly utilize propaganda, few of them openly call it "propaganda;" for all of the academic emphasis on its inherent neutrality, the term continues to carry negative connotations. Other terms, such as "education" and "indoctrination" are likewise suspect. Thus, new terms will have to supplant the old, and in our current age, the more scientific, the better. The most fashionable contemporary terms for (Western) propaganda are PSYOPS (Psychological Operations) and IO (Information Operations). According to a 2004 Canadian Forces [CF] Joint Doctrine Manual, entitled *Psychological Operations*, PSYOPS is defined as "Planned psychological activities using methods of communications and other means directed to approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military

objectives" (p. i). In short, it is propaganda, but propaganda which relies on a vigorous,

"scientific" approach.[8]

PSYOPS is an aspect of an overarching IO strategy, which, in addition to psychological

operations, also includes diplomacy, electronic warfare (EW) and espionage. In the Canadian

Forces' (2004) *Psychological Operations* manual, IO is defined as

> an integrating strategy which seeks to protect one's own information and influence an adversary's military and civilian decision makers through the use of information by affecting their information base. These decision makers will most likely be the target audience for CF PSYOPS….. PSYOPS is particularly capable to influence decision-makers by means of communication ("non-lethal weapon"), targeting leaders directly and/or indirectly by addressing the public or military forces of an adversary. PSYOPS messages must be closely coordinated with other information activities. (p. i)

PSYOPS and IO are simply contemporary, "scientific" terms for propaganda. PSYOPS operators

are ultimately interested in what they call their "primary targets," (p. 1-4)[9] the "decision makers"

of particular nations and groups. Like the other propagandists discussed in this chapter, we once

again see the familiar martial metaphors at play: PSYOPS is a "non-lethal weapon;" the audience

is a "target audience" (TA), and so on.

Also like many of the propagandists discussed thus far, the authors of the CF PSYOPS

manual stress the importance of persuasion as part of a broader, orchestrated strategy:

> The psychological dimension of conflict is as important as the physical. Conflict is a struggle of wills, which takes place in peoples' minds as well as on the battlefield. Conflict is a struggle for power. The power may be political (ideological), military or economical (material)…. The attitudes and behaviour of people (friend, foe and the undecided or uncommitted) may ultimately determine the outcome of conflict. Therefore it is necessary to understand the motivation of their leaders, forces and populations in order to shape their perceptions, affect their will to continue the conflict and to persuade them to accept the desired outcome…. PSYOPS are a vital part of the broad range of CF diplomatic, military, economic, and informational activities. (p. 1-1)

---

[8] These manuals essentially exploit advances in social psychology and neurobiology for rhetorical purposes.
[9] The pagination for this particular manual uses a paired numbering system.

As this passage illustrates, the PSYOPS manual echoes Creel's (1920) assertion that in WWI, the "trial of strength was not only between massed bodies of armed men, but between opposed ideals, and moral verdicts took on all the value of military decisions" (p. 3). Shaping opinions, influencing decisions, etc., are viewed as important as bullets and bombs.

PSYOPS and IO constitute one aspect of what Joesph Nye calls "Soft Power," a concept which describes how states can influence behaviour or achieve desired results through non-militaristic means. Nye (2004) defines "soft power" as

> the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced. (p. x)

The immense popularity of American culture generally—its movies, television programs and videogames, the "American Dream," etc.—demonstrates the success of American soft power: If people want to *be like* Americans, they should be less likely to attack them.

For Nye (1990) the ability to wield soft power depends more on effective communications than military might, and this signals a broader, global shift away from the material and into the informational:

> Traditionally, the test of a great power was its strength in war. Today, however, the definition of power is losing its emphasis on military force and conquest that marked earlier eras. The factors of technology, education, and economic growth are becoming more significant in international power, while geography, population, and raw materials are becoming somewhat less important…. Proof of power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behaviour of states. (p. 154)

As the PSYOPS manual indicates, soft power must be used *in conjunction with* hard power; the two are not mutually exclusive but interdependent.

The concept of soft power is of course ancient, but what is new is the scope and significance of contemporary information warfare, the *extent* to which it has been addressed and

treated as a science. Ellul's (1973) declaration several decades ago that "science has entered propaganda" (p. 4) sees its apex in the contemporary PSYOPS manual; it is a living testament to Ellul's assertion that propaganda becomes more and more scientific as time goes on: "Step by step, the propagandist builds his techniques on the basis of his knowledge of man, his tendencies, his desires, his needs, his psychic mechanisms…—and as much on social psychology as depth psychology" (p. 4). The more we understand our motives, desires and needs—i.e. through psychology, sociology, and rhetoric—the more data we have to implement in PSYOPS and IO generally. These PSYOPS manuals are incredibly detailed, and often dense;[10] they present hard data on what has or has not been successful in the past, and employ generous amounts of jargon and official acronyms. In short, they very much read like scientific documents.

For example, the section entitled, "Dissemination" in the Canadian Forces' PSYOPS manual looks at the modes and methods of delivery:

> Dissemination is the actual delivery of the PSYOPS message to the target audience. Intelligence is used to determine the most effective way to reach the entire target audience. Audiences vary greatly in their access to a particular medium, whether that medium is radio, television, newspapers, posters or leaflets. In addition, target audiences vary in their ability to understand the message because of language, cultural, or other barriers. Obviously, printed products directed at an illiterate target or written in the wrong language have little effect on the target. Using a symbol with a distinct meaning to an illiterate target may, however, have a significant effect. (2004, p. 5-7)

Again, we see the emphasis on appropriate medium selection: each target responds to each medium differently. The manual then provides a chart which lists the relative strengths and weaknesses of each medium,, and the PSYOP agent is instructed to conduct a "media analysis," designed to ascertain the most appropriate medium to employ for dissemination (p. A-7).

---

[10] The 2004 US PSYOPS manual, for example, is over 500 pages long. The CF manual discussed here "has essentially been based on CF, NATO, and US PSYOPS Doctrine and other relevant publications" (2004, p. ii).

Although they stress the importance of audience context, for all our technological

advancements, when it comes to the most persuasive means of dissemination the authors come to

a rather Platonic conclusion:

> In general, face-to-face communication is the most effective medium. The
> communicator should never underestimate the effect a powerful speaker can have
> on a crowd (for example, Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King, and Winston
> Churchill). Each of these key communicators had an enormously significant
> impact on his audience. (p. E-1 2)

This is not to suggest that an IO campaign should focus *primarily* on oration, "sit-downs," and so

on; rather, it simply illustrates the lasting importance of face to face communication, and that it

should be utilized in concert with other media.

Thus, in conjunction with "meet-and-greets," speeches, and so on, contemporary

PSYOPS often employ visual propaganda in the form of leaflets.
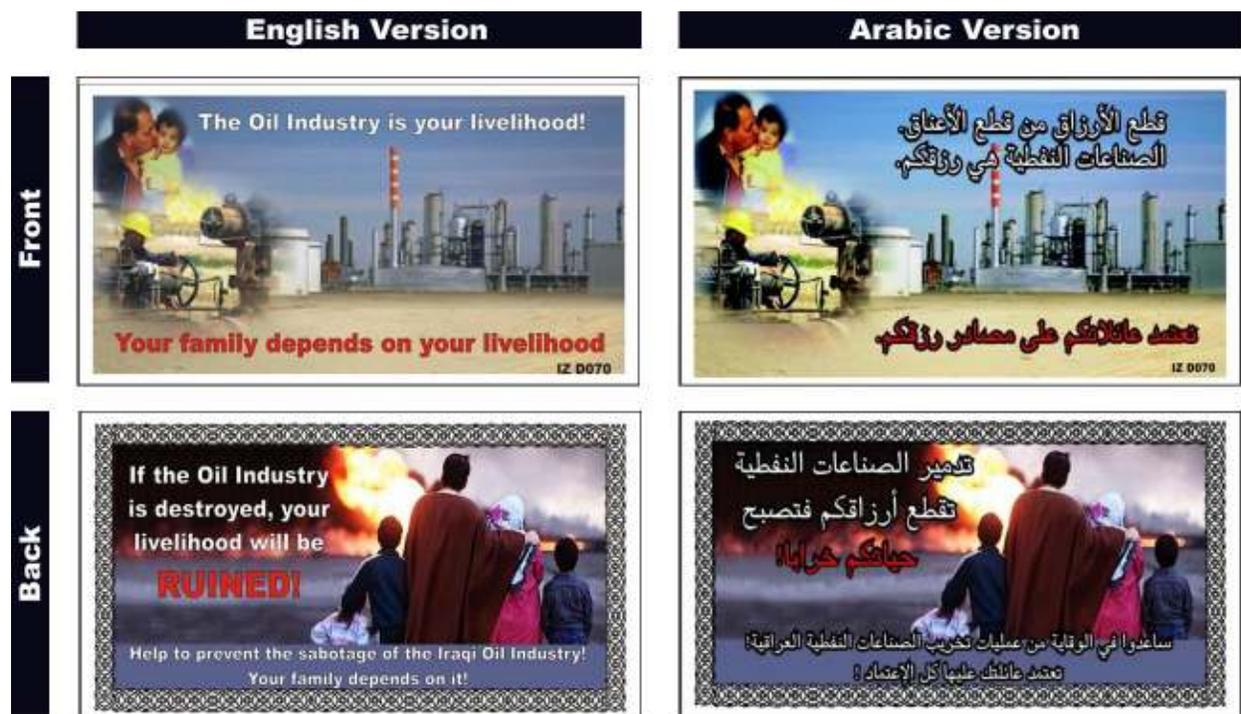
Fig. 10. "The Oil Industry is Your Livelihood!" Source: USCC Information Warfare Site

This is an American leaflet released during "Operation Iraqi Freedom." The similarities between this leaflet and the posters from the second World War are striking. Like the WWII posters, the hero figure is employed as a rhetorical device: The pamphlet is designed to equate the protection of the oil industry with the protection of family/innocence. In this case, heroic action lies in helping "to prevent the sabotage of the Iraqi Oil industry," and although such action helps the *Americans*, the message is framed in terms of helping one's family, and retaining one's "livelihood." Indeed, the only real differences in this leaflet and the conventional WWII posters lie in target audience and representational mode (i.e. photography instead of cartoon).

The following leaflet, however, also dropped during "Operation Iraqi Freedom," is much more dramatic than many WWII posters:

Fig. 11. Operation Iraqi Freedom Leaflet (U.S.). Source: USCC Information Warfare Site

172

On the front of this pamphlet are 5 components—three images and two clusters of text. The images depict a lone, contemplative Iraqi soldier in the forefront on the left, a group of Iraqi soldiers in the forefront on the right, and a young, dead Iraqi dominating the centre of the image in the background. The group of soldiers pictured on the right are clearly the "comrades" referenced in the second text cluster; they are average in appearance and could be any one of the targeted individual's friends. The text, "DO NOT RISK YOUR LIFE" then is aimed at the individual reading the pamphlet, signified visually by the lone soldier on the left. There is no textual reference to the *predominant* image in the leaflet, however, the image of death. And this is because there is no need for it; the unstated "warrant," (Toulmin 1969) in this message—and perhaps in all messages—is personal mortality, a cosmic "OR ELSE." Lay down your weapons, or else…. Comply with our wishes, or else…. Believe in *this*, or else…. There is no need to state "or else" textually, as the image presents a more visceral version than text ever could.[11]

The pamphlet thus utilizes an Aristotelian enthymeme, "the substance of rhetorical persuasion," and "the most effective of the modes of persuasion" (*Rhetoric* 1.1). The enthymeme consists of fewer propositions "than those which make up the normal syllogism" (1.2) and therefore requires the audience to supply premises themselves. As Lloyd Bitzer (1998) writes, the enthymeme is an "incomplete syllogism," in which "the speaker *does not lay down* his premises but lets his audience supply them out of its stock of opinion and knowledge…. What is of great rhetorical importance… is that the premises of the enthymemes be supplied by the audience" (p. 187). The effect of enthymematic argument is that it makes the audience believe it arrived at a particular conclusion itself. The poster is a particularly powerful enthymeme because the premise supplied by the audience is *mortality*; the audience puts the pieces together itself,

---

[11] Admittedly, people respond to different representational modes in different ways; however, in the context of the leaflet, wherein space and time are limited, images are likely more effective.

and in doing so is reminded of its finitude. On the reverse of the pamphlet we see the "flip side" of the equation: Surrender and you can go home to your family, where you will watch them "grow and prosper." This is a classic "Carrot and Stick" device, and together play on our fear of death and thirst for life.

As Becker (1975) observes, images and reminders of death have long played a central role in persuasion and domination: "[A]lthough death is a natural fear, this fear has always been used and exploited by the established powers in order to secure their domination. Death is a 'culture mechanism' that was utilized by societies from primitive times on as a means of social control and repression" (p. 125). Terror Management Theory (TMT), an experimental paradigm within Social Psychology. TMT studies have demonstrated that when reminded of death, people naturally (and subconsciously) look to ways to deny death (e.g. Solomon, Pyzcsinski and Greenberg, 1997). By equating resistance with death and surrender with life, the leaflet constructs a powerful rhetorical argument, which taps into the deep seated psychological need to stay alive. I will discuss TMT in greater detail in chapter six; I only mention TMT here to illustrate one example of social psychology's potential contribution to propaganda production and analysis.

Another increasingly important area of infiltration is entertainment media; television, comic books, and videogames are all potential disseminators; indeed, their designation as "entertainment" makes them particularly useful for propaganda. The Canadian Forces' PSYOPS manual (2004) states,

> in one proportion or other, each message is a combination of entertainment, information, and persuasion. Entertainment in its widest sense includes shock, surprise, and the aesthetic pleasure to be derived from appearance and sound. The function of entertainment in PSYOPS is usually to bait the hook and attract attention and interest for the message itself. (p. E-2)

In other words, the entertainment component of a particular message essentially draws the propagandee in (uncritically), and this allows the propagandist to "embed" the message into the program, game, movie, etcetera.

Again, the concept of heroism plays a significant role. For example, when discussing the role of television, the same manual (2004) states that

> Television is highly effective for persuading… [and] can also reach a vast audience. It gives each viewer a sense of participating in a distant event without ever leaving home. Television programs can be edited and segments added or deleted to appeal to the special needs of the audience. Music in the background can contribute to the emotional impact of the message. (p. E1-3)

This "sense of participating in a distant event" in effect provides an escape from the mundane; it allows the viewer to vicariously take part in something extraordinary. Music is also used to manipulate emotions, as it can provide a cue for how one should respond emotionally to a scene. In this way the viewer can come to identify with the themes the propagandist wants him or her to identify with. Likewise,

> Videos also have an inherent quality of drama and the ability to elicit a high degree of recall…. Movies may present a larger-than-life situation, which has great popular appeal. Background music can add to the emotional impact. The theater presentation can create group cohesiveness and can be enhanced by discussions with the audience afterward. (p. E1-3)

This "larger-than-life situation" is the essence of heroism; by couching the terms of heroism in such situations, the propagandist can utilize the heroic device for particular persuasive purposes.

Although the Canadian manual does not explicitly list videogames, several American PSYOPS manuals do. For example, in September of 2004, the *Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Defense, released a report recommending how to most effectively disseminate propaganda at home and abroad. In a section entitled "Leveraging the Private Sector", the task force recommends the following:

Sub-contract to the commercial and academic sectors for a range of products and programs that communicate strategic themes and messages to appropriate target audiences. Examples of products would be a children's TV series ([for example] Arabic Sesame Street); video and interactive games.... (pp. 67-68)

Entertainment media can be used to "communicate strategic themes and messages," and are. In a report conducted by the same task force 4 years earlier, the authors (2000) note that many

other media types, and means of dissemination, are also widely popular. Video games are perhaps the most popular. They can be disseminated by a number of techniques, ranging from diskettes to web downloads. Internet games allow a number of geographically dispersed players to participate in a large, shared virtual space. (p. 43)

In other words, in their increasing ubiquity and corresponding demographic (primarily the young), videogames have become an ideal medium for information dissemination.

I will discuss the relationship between videogames and propaganda in greater detail in the next chapter; however, for now I will merely outline the videogame's use of propaganda via heroic imagery in the commercial sector. First, if we simply look at the titles of many popular First Person Shooter (FPS) games, we see clear indications of a rhetoric of war heroism at play: *Call of Duty* (Activision)*, Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad* (Tripwire)*, Medal of Honor* (EA), and so on. The popular franchise *Medal of Honor*, of course gets its name from the eponymous American military medal, awarded to individuals who have displayed extraordinary courage under fire; thus, the very name promises a harrowing, heroic experience. These games typically revolve around an elite group of American special operations soldiers (heroes) battling "Terrorists" (villains) in Afghanistan. As I will discuss in the following chapter, an even more explicit instance of videogames as propaganda is the U.S. Army's own self-produced game, *America's Army* (2002). This is an online, tactical FPS whose primary marketing angle was that it is more realistic than other shooters, since it was designed specifically by military personnel, and originally designed for army personnel.

As the videogames illustrate, propaganda campaigns are not restricted to times of "war" alone, and the primary target audience is not always an adversary. According to Paul Virilio, propaganda campaigns never cease, but become normalized, a part of everyday living; indeed, it is precisely this appearance of normalcy upon which all propaganda depends. The intervention of the military into the domestic sphere, or rather, the intervention of the domestic into the military, constitutes a state which Virilio (2004) terms "Pure War:"

> Pure war is neither peace nor war; nor is it, as was believed, 'absolute' or 'total' war. Rather, it is the military procedure itself, in its ordinary durability. The balance of terror, the nuclear coalition, peaceful co-existence—in short, the dissolution of the state of war and the military's infiltration into the movements of daily life. (p. 55).

For Virilio, pure war is the very dissolution of the military/civilian dichotomy all together; it is a state in which the militaristic enters domestic life, and domestic life enters martial life.

Patrick Crogan (2003) identifies videogames like *America's Army* as contemporary examples of the Pure War concept at play in entertainment media:

> The two-way traffic between computer gaming and simulation in the military entertainment complex signposts a significant moment in the pure war tendency, one in which a further stage of the merger between the spheres of the military and domestic activity and concerns is reached. (p. 280)

A state of Pure War arises out of "strategic settlement," the emergence of what Virilio (2004) calls "the Citadel State," which is "nothing more than an army which stops in enemy territory and sets up defensive positions" (p. 47). It is far too costly to continually engage in violent clashes, and so as domination by hegemony is infinitely more efficient and effective.

According to Virilio (2004), even in an era of hyper-militarization and nuclear proliferation, these weapons "obviously aim not toward the multiplication of violent exchanges, but toward their disappearance—*a kind of absolute* colonization" (p. 53). Thus, setting up "societies," which provide individuals with both meaning and distraction—through the economy,

arts, social institutions, etc.—is the most effective form of domination. As Virilio wryly puts it, "Domestication is the logical outcome of prey" (p. 55). In other words, all societies are in their essence militaristic, even when (or especially when) not explicitly "at war;" complex, fragmented, contemporary societies are especially adept at concealing this fact. In the Canadian context, for example, Europeans took territory from our Indigenous peoples, set up "colonies," ghettoized the indigenous population, and in doing so founded a nation. In a much broader context, Virilio suggests that we are always already at war, and that so-called society—the economy, institutions, and so on—is in essence a militaristic entity.

Like the ancient kings who erected statues to both impress their people and intimidate their enemies, contemporary propaganda is always already directed towards a dual audience. More significantly, however, the forms of this dual projection do not really change across geographical and temporal divides: They are almost always similar in structure and in essence, which is ultimately *heroic* in nature. Convincing a dominated population that they are better off is a great achievement; an even better achievement still, however, is convincing them that their leaders are heroic—impressive, superior, and *worthy* of worship. And more to the point, in convincing others (both foreign and domestic) that your *worldview*, or way of life is attractive, and something to be emulated.

Again, what propaganda propagates are distinct hero systems, each one in competition with the other; ideological battles, manifested through propaganda, are in essence battles to define the terms of *heroism*, and just as importantly, *enmity*. In an address to members of the Syrian Army in February of 2012, U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton explicitly draws on the concepts of honour and heroism as rhetorical devices:

> The longer you support the regime's campaign of violence against your brothers and sisters, the more it will stain your honor. If you refuse, however, to prop up

the regime or take part in attacks on your fellow citizens, your countrymen and women will hail you as heroes. (Associated Press, 2012, para. 2)

Clinton is attempting to counter conventional discourses of heroism, which situate combat and valour in battle as their central characteristics; here, it is not killing which is heroic, but the cessation of killing. Pro-government forces label Assad and his regime as heroes, as evidenced in the ubiquitous images of Assad and the pro-Assad rallies; Clinton is attempting to undo this, to *redefine* the terms of heroism according to her own aims, as noble as they may be.

Terrorist or Freedom Fighter, Enemy KIA or Martyr, Traitor or Patriot, these are all contested definitions. Propaganda is the material manifestation of this battle for the heroic, and as we have seen, the heroic serves an immortality-conferring, death-denying function. The propagandist and the propagandee need each other, and form a mutually determining, symbiotic relationship: The propagandee needs meaning and ideals to emulate, and the propagandist needs a population willing to believe or act in accordance with his ideology. In short, the propagandee needs to know how he or she can become a hero, and this hero-knowledge is precisely what the propagandist supplies.

Chapter 4. Videogames: The Heroic Medium

> From the life of childhood right up to the highest achievements of civilization one of the strongest incentives to perfection, both individual and social, is the desire to be praised and honoured for one's excellence.... We want to be honoured for our virtues. We want the satisfaction of having done something well. Doing something well means doing it better than others. In order to excel one must prove one's excellence; in order to merit recognition, merit must be made manifest. Competition serves to give proof of superiority.
>
> - Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

In the previous two chapters, I examined the role of media in extending the individual's sense of self, and propaganda as the material expression of hero systems. In this chapter, I will shift my focus to the death denying properties of games and videogames[1] in particular. This chapter will be divided into four sections, with each section emphasizing a particular death denying characteristic of the videogame. Ultimately, I will argue that videogames convey rhetorics of heroism and immortality through four interrelated units:

- Play;

- Immersion;

- Procedurality; and

- Narrative.[2]

Although each of these "discrete units" (Bogost, 2006) are semi-permeable and mutually reinforce one another, each is distinct enough so that we can identify some key characteristics.

---

[1] There has been much debate over the correct terminology: Video game, videogame, digital game, electronic game, and so on. I choose "videogame" for a couple of reasons. First, a videogame is more than simply a game which has been "video-ized." Neither component, video nor game, is originary nor supplemental to the other; they mutually constitute each other in profound ways. Secondly, the medium simply deserves its own term.

[2] This is a slight variation from Janet Murray's (1997) four part framework: 1) Procedurality; 2) Participation; 3) Spatiality; and 4) Encyclopedic Scope. My particular approach favours certain terms over others. I prefer "Play" over "Participation," for example, because it highlights the videogame's ancient, pre-human origins.

Play in general provides an arena to demonstrate self-worth or divine favour, a place to stand out among others. Immersion allows individuals to escape the limitations of the everyday, and can provide an increased sense of agency in an often fantastic, virtual world. As a procedural medium, videogames are well suited to representing heroic processes, such as combat, death, and resurrection. Finally, narrative can place the game's rules and tasks into heroic contexts, such as "save the world" or "protect the innocent." Again, keeping in mind Bogost's (2006) concept of "unit operations," we should not keep each component in isolation from the rest; understanding how the parts work together will provide a better sense of how videogames produce and negotiate meaning. For my own particular analysis, I will use death denial as an organizing focus, and argue that these four components work together to form cohesive, overarching rhetorics of heroism and immortality. Ultimately, I will present the videogame as a multi-faceted, powerful death denying medium, beginning with "Play," the videogame's most ancient and fundamental component.

1. Play

As Jesper Juul (2005) suggests in *Half-Real*, "if we think of video games as games, they are not successors of cinema, print, literature, or new media, but continuations of a history of games that predate these by millennia" (pp. 3-4). As such, for whatever else videogames are (stories, propaganda engines, commodities, and so on) they are games first and foremost. It is therefore important to discuss play in general before examining its most recent iteration in the videogame. Although it is often thought of as trivial, or childish, play is a deeply profound and formative part of human nature. As Jay Mechling (2000) puts it, "The study of play is about nothing less than human nature, even if that nature is as ambiguous as play itself" (p. 370). However, as with all questions concerning "human nature," *play* is an exceedingly difficult concept to articulate. As

Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) puts it in *The Ambiguity of Play*, "We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness. There is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity" (p. 1). This "silliness" is not restricted to play alone; in one sense all concepts are difficult to pin down; however, play seems particularly elusive.

Indeed, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (1958) speaks of communication as a series of "language games" and uses "game" as his exemplar for discussing the problem of adequate articulation generally:

> [I]n many cases where the question arises, "Is this an appropriate description or not?" The answer is: "Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe." It is as if someone were to say: "A game consists in moving objects about on a surface according to certain rules…"—and we replied: You seem to be thinking of board games, but there are others. You can make your definition correct by expressly restricting it to those games. (p. 3, sec. 3)

We can say that baseball is a "game" which is "played" in some circumstances, but as Wittgenstein suggests, this does not mean that we can come to an all inclusive, "essential" definition of play generally; rather, we can only ever speak of games in terms of "family resemblances" (p. 32, sec. 67). Wittgenstein is speaking in general terms, but his use of the "play" concept here to illustrate the fundamental impossibility of all meaning is no coincidence. Play is especially evasive. As soon as we think we have captured it, exceptions are quickly noted, or just as bad, definitions become all inclusive.

For example, Roger Caillois (1961) defines play as "a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement" (p. 6), adding that "the game's domain is… a restricted, closed, protected universe: a pure space" (p. 7). It is true that play is often enjoyable, and almost always voluntary, but not always. One can "begrudgingly" play a game, for instance, or become

thoroughly bored by playing it. Conceivably, one can also be coerced into playing, and "real life" can bleed into a game, as we see in professional sports (Huizinga, 1936). Thus, Caillois' conception of play is too exclusive. On the other end of the spectrum, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) define play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (p. 305), which is true, but what can we exclude from this definition? Societies function in this way, as does evolution, planets in orbit, and matter itself. Thus, Salen and Zimmerman's definition is too inclusive; there is nothing here which differentiates play from essentially everything else in the known universe. This is not to suggest that either Caillois or Salen and Zimmerman are *incorrect*; it simply highlights some of the conceptual problems which arise when trying to articulate play. So what is it about play which makes it so difficult to conceptualize?

Sutton-Smith (2001) persuasively argues that part of the problem lies in the sheer diversity of play, i.e., the ubiquity of ludic potential. We use the terms "play" and "game" in an almost infinite variety of contexts. Indeed, as Sutton-Smith observes, "The diversity of play is well illustrated by the varied kinds of play that are to be found within the larger menagerie of the 'play' sphere. Almost anything can allow play to occur within its boundaries" (p. 3). As soon as there are boundaries (rules), the possibility of play opens up within them. To complicate matters even further,

> Practically anything can become an agency for some kind of play.... [W]hile some playfulness is momentary, other kinds, with their attendant preparations, can last throughout a season... and, in some cases, over periods of years, as in the World Cup and the Olympics. Play has temporal diversity as well as spatial diversity. (p. 6)

With all its many forms and variations, one is hard pressed to find any activity or concept which does not possess at least the potential for ludicity—i.e., any activity can be made into a game.

For example, war is a very serious matter, but it is often thought of in ludic terms; as Huizinga (1955) observes, "Fighting, as a cultural function, always presupposes limiting rules and it requires, to a certain extent anyway, the recognition of its play-quality" (p. 89). Art is not generally seen as ludic, but Modernist art can be conceptualized as a puzzle, for example. Even without equipment, the body can become a game—children form games such as "Tag," for example, or an individual can attempt to surpass his or her personal best push-up total. The moment we are born we are inundated with ludic possibility.

The other, and perhaps primary confounder for Sutton-Smith (2001) is what essentially amounts to disciplinary bias; how one "approaches" play depends upon one's area of study:

> For example, biologists, psychologists, educators, and sociologists tend to focus on how play is adaptive or contributes to growth, development, and socialization. Communication theorists tell us that play is a form of metacommunication far preceding language in evolution because it is also found in animals.... Anthropologists pursue the relationships between ritual and play as these are found in customs and festivals, while folklorists add an interest in play and game traditions. (p. 7)

It is difficult to construct a coherent, cohesive, and holistic definition of play when play theorists speak in so many different languages simultaneously.

Ultimately, Sutton-Smith (2001) identifies seven general "rhetorics of play," by which he means "a persuasive discourse, or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adopted by members of a particular affiliation to persuade others of the veracity and worthwhileness of their beliefs" (pp. 7-8). The seven rhetorics are:

1) Play as Progress;

2) Play as Fate;

3) Play as Power;

4) Play as Communal Identity;

5) Play as Imaginary;

6) Play as the Self;

7) Play as Frivolous.

Sutton-Smith's meta-analysis is useful because it breaks down play into manageable parts, but also because it reveals play's potential to transform into whatever one wishes it to be.

It is also important because it forces one to acknowledge one's own bias. My own approach to play will utilize most of these rhetorics at once, excepting perhaps number seven, "Play as Frivolous."[3] It will especially focus on the rhetorics of power and identity (both individual and collective). Ultimately, I am interested in how play itself serves a death denying function, long before digital media enter the scene. I will not argue that play arose solely as a coping mechanism for death anxiety; rather, I will attempt to describe some of its functions, i.e. what we use it for, and what it does for us.

a. Play and Culture

In its most general form, play serves an existential function simply because of its close relationship with meaning making: A playful, "imaginary" approach is a prerequisite for symbol systems, culture, and therefore, cultural hero systems, where one thing (a material sign) stands in for another (a thing or concept). The very concept of "symbolic immortality," wherein the name or reputation stands in for the deceased, is predicated on precisely this imaginary substitution. For the historian and Game Studies grandfather, Johan Huizinga (1955), the close relationship between play and meaning is of the utmost importance; indeed, one cannot exist without the other, for

---

[3] I will take it for granted that play is significant, i.e. not trivial. As discussed below, Huizinga (1955) is persuasive that play is a fundamental component of culture, and that it serves an important pedagogical function.

even in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or biological activity. It is a *significant* function—that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something. (p. 1)

In other words, all forms of play—whether human or nonhuman—require signification. As a meaning system, play is both extra- and pre-human. In Huizinga's words, "Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing" (p. 1).

Dogs, for instance, play, and although their games operate according to simple rules, there are rules nevertheless; for example, dogs must "keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother's ear" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 1). Dogs do not necessarily agree beforehand that their bites are meant to be playful in nature; however, the very fact that the bite does not exceed a certain pressure (some calculation of mass, PSI, etc.) to cause injury, indicates the presence of rules which are understood by both parties. Gregory Bateson (1973) therefore calls play a form of "metacommunication," the exchange of "signals which would carry the message 'this is play'" (p. 179). In other words, even if animals lack grammatical language, their ability to play indicates—indeed, rests upon—their ability to use some form of signification: There must be some hermeneutic mechanism to distinguish harmless "playing" from something else, such as "imminent danger."

Although Huizinga (1955) does not go so far as to say that *everything* in the cultural sphere is play, it is true that "we find play as a given magnitude existing before culture itself existed, accompanying it and pervading it from the earliest beginnings right up to the phase of

civilization we are now living in" (p. 4). In other words, human beings have been ludic beings from the start, hence Huizinga's title. As Robert Anchor (1978) observes,

> Although Huizinga was not the first to discover the value of play in explaining human behavior, he was the first to attempt an exact definition of play and of the ways in which it infuses and manifests itself in culture, in all spheres of culture: the arts, intellectual life, politics, and even legal institutions and warfare. (p. x)

As noted, the only pre-requisite for play is the presence of rules, and what is "culture" other than a series of rules and guidelines?

Rituals, laws, customs, even language itself, share a common bond in their employment of human made rules, or guidelines. In Huizinga's (1955) words,

> The great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start. Take language, for instance—that first and supreme instrument which man shapes in order to communicate, to teach, to command. Language allows his to distinguish, to establish, to state things; in short, to name them and by naming them to raise them into the domain of the spirit. (p. 4)

Cultural forms in general, and language in particular, outline how one should "play the game," so to speak; they provide us with demarcations, rules, boundaries, in short, meaning. And meaning is something we can manipulate, or take control of. Play, then serves an important existential function. Both play and culture allow us to "raise" things "into the domain of spirit." They allow us to "shape," "communicate," "teach," and "command." They function heuristically, as keys for decoding and taking control of the world around us.

For Huizinga, framing cultural forms in ludic terms is entirely appropriate, since they both share the ability to grant a sense of agency. In its essence, Huizinga (1936) suggests, culture "means control over nature. Culture exists the moment man discovers that the hand armed with the flint is capable of things which without it would have been beyond his reach. He has bent a

part of nature to his will. He controls nature, his enemy and his benefactor" (p. 43). Becker

(1975) follows this line of argument very closely, arguing that

> As soon as you have symbols you have artificial self-transcendence via culture. Everything cultural is fabricated and given meaning by the mind, a meaning that was not given by physical nature. Culture is in this sense "supernatural," and all systematizations of culture have in the end the same goal: to raise men above nature, to assure them that in some ways their lives count in the universe more than merely physical things count. (p. 4)

Thus, like all cultural forms, games provide us with a means for constructing limits, establishing order, demonstrating self-worth, and therefore for producing something of lasting significance.

Play gives us a sense of agency and control, and it is predicated on limits *we* impose, even if such limits themselves are predicated on ones we did not, such as finite physiology, or gravity. For the truth is, from the moment we are born we are subjugated to rules we did not agree to. We did not get a say in gravity, thermodynamics, or mortality. But we can create meaning systems to help us take hold of our environment, to signify success, victory, and excellence, for instance. Alongside other cultural forms such as myth and ritual, play is simply one of the several tools human beings utilize to manage our environment. Like myth and ritual, games grant us this sense of being something *more* than mere physiology. Like myth and ritual, games provide us with rules and guidelines to must follow if we are to be victorious. For in myth, ritual, and games, certain rules must be followed; the game must be played in a certain way.

Another formal similarity between ritual and play is the necessity for "sanctified ground." A field with grass on it becomes something quite different once people decide to play cricket or football upon it. It would be impolite to walk through the middle of the game for the sake of a shortcut, for example, just as it may be impolite to walk over the sanctified ground of a grave. In

both cases, the field is sacred; it is a self sustained realm, separate and apart. Huizinga (1955)

famously called this discrete play bubble the "magic circle:"

> Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (p. 10)

For Huizinga, what is crucial is that inside the magic circle, possibility is limited, ordered, and

structured; clear tasks are given, and so one knows how to succeed. Everything inside the magic

circle operates according to its own rule set and coding; it informs the player how she[4] can

succeed by operating within the game's hermeneutic framework.

As Jane McGonigal (2011) argues in *Reality is Broken*, clear victories are difficult to

come by in "real life," but games can compensate for this victory deficit. And as Huizinga (1955)

observes, regardless of the particular game played,

> Winning means showing oneself superior in the outcome of a game. Nevertheless, the evidence of this superiority tends to confer upon the winner of semblance of superiority in general: In this respect he has won more than the game as such. He has won esteem, obtained honor; and this honour and esteem at once accrue to the benefit of the group to which the victor belongs. (p. 50)

Not unlike war, games provide individuals with avenues for attaining renown, fame, glory,

honour and symbolic immortality. The storied heroes of particular franchises are immortalized

with statues, such as Babe Ruth in Baltimore, or Mario Lemieux in Pittsburgh. Their glorious

deeds are continually told and retold in bars, in conversation, or on SportsCentre. Like ritual and

myth, games provide us with easily identifiable groups, an us and a them; they provide us with

---

[4] For this chapter I will use the feminine pronoun as universal, and I do so for two reasons. First, when discussing gameplay, it is often awkward to use "one," "he or she," and so on. Secondly, and more importantly, gaming has traditionally been a masculinist, exclusionary field, so I use feminine pronouns as a rhetorical counter-strategy.

groups to cheer for and others to revile. In Huizinga's (1955) words, "Every victory represents, that is, realizes for the victor the triumph of the good powers over the bad, and at the same time the salvation of the group that effects it" (p. 56).

Thus, like Becker's cultural hero systems, games give us a way to win; they provide clear and easy to identify instances of success, community, meaning, and superiority. Sutton-Smith (2001) summarizes the point as follows:

> All creatures, animal and human, live with some degree of existential angst, and most of them spend some portion of their existence attempting to secure themselves from this angst by controlling their circumstances…. We constantly seek to manage the variable contingencies of our lives for success over failure, for life over death. Play itself may be a model of just this everyday existentialism. (p. 228)

One of the functions of play is that it allows us to "secure" ourselves in what is often an uncertain and unstable existence, and so is a remedy of sorts for soothing "existential angst." However, there are different forms of play, and not all games help us negotiate this "everyday existentialism" in the same manner. Fortunately, Roger Caillois' (1961) four "rubrics" or forms of play provide a useful analytical framework for breaking play into its component parts.

b. Caillois' "Rubrics" of Play

It is true that in one sense, all games are alike in that they provide individuals with a chance to quantifiably demonstrate excellence, or mastery over a particular skill. Yet, for sociologist Roger Caillois (1961),[5] not all games are created equal; competition is merely one form of play. Caillois defines four separate but permeable "rubrics" of play:

1) *Agon* (competition);

2) *Alea* (chance);

---

[5] Caillois' book is essentially a response to, and expansion of, Huizinga's treatment of play in *Homo Ludens*.

3) Mimicry (simulation); and

4) *Ilinx* (vertigo).

Caillois does not suggest that these are hard and fast categories, as most games in fact contain several or all of these elements simultaneously; as he puts it, "the different categories of play… presuppose not solitude but company" (p. 40). However, these categories are useful when discussing various game forms, as they acknowledge that there are significant formal differences within the play concept. Moreover, and more importantly for present purposes, each rubric offers its own particular form of death denial.

i. *Agon* (Competition)

Agon, competition, is perhaps the clearest illustration of play's relationship with death denial. The drive to compete is present in all life, and *agon* represents this competitive urge through ludic forms. Caillois defines *agon* as follows:

> *Agon*. A whole group of games would seem to be competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph. It is therefore always a question of a rivalry which hinges on a specific quality... exercised, within defined limits and without outside assistance, in such a way that the winner appears to be better than the loser in a certain category of exploits. (1961, p. 14)

Agonistic games provide a forum for demonstrating one's self-worth, potency, and superiority. The inherent agonism of life is the subject of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Each organism competes[6] for greater resources, according to a certain set of pre-established rules (e.g. "consume calories and protect the body to continue living").

As a result of this default state of competition, over time organisms acquire beneficial traits for helping them navigate their respective environments, traits which allow them to more

---

[6] This is not to discount cooperation, which is equally important; however, at some level competition always occurs, even if this is group rather than individual competition.

successfully ingest life energy and avoid predation. This ingest/avoid mechanism is predicated

on a built-in agonistic characteristic of the natural world: Division, competition, and synthesis

are at the heart of organismic existence. As Becker (1975) notes,

> one of the reasons Darwin so shocked his time—and still bothers ours—is that he
> showed this bone-crushing, blood-drinking drama in all its elementality and
> necessity: Life cannot go on without the mutual devouring of organisms. If at the
> end of each person's life he were to be presented with the living spectacle of all
> that he had organismically incorporated in order to stay alive, he might well feel
> horrified by the living energy he had ingested. (p. 2)

Indeed. Western society is simply very good at keeping this reality at arm's length: We have

monetary systems and grocery stores to distance ourselves from the farms and factories which

produce our food. There is very little "real" opportunity or desire for expressing the agonistic

impulse (in war, for instance), but it has not completely receded.

We play sports and card games to attain "winner" status; we try to see who can

accumulate the most wealth, or attain a high promotion. Regardless of environmental limitations,

we retain this agonistic spirit at the heart of all life, but our ability to manipulate symbols allows

us to in effect *codify* our pre-human ludic drive, to give it form and make it manageable. We can

imbue tasks, obstacles and rewards with "victory criteria," and construct meaning systems to

present a decisive victory. Games allow us to attain a sense of superiority and "mastery over

life's circumstances" (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 54) without resorting to brutal violence or the

subjugation of others (Huizinga, 1936).

Yet as we saw in the first chapter, Becker is clear that this competitive spirit "spills over"

into symbolic or cultural existence as well; the fight for food is accompanied—and in some cases

supplanted—by the fight for recognition and self-esteem. Besting an opponent in a wrestling

match, winning at the roulette table, or "killing" another player's avatar in a virtual battle all

demonstrate the player's skill, competence, and worthiness. As such, materializing abstract

concepts such as "prestige," and "self-worth" can become life-consuming aims. Huizinga (1936)

describes this "spill over" in the context of "striving," a trait life shares with quests and ludicity:

> Life is battle. It is an ancient truth…. Its validity as an essential principle of culture is already implied in our premiss [sic] that all culture includes an element of striving. Striving is always battle—struggle, that is—the exercise of will and strength to overcome resistances which stand in the way of the attainment of an aim. (p. 113)

Indeed, this character of "striving" is an essential component of ritual, myth and play. Just as we

strive and struggle to stay alive, we also strive for a sense of importance and self-worth. All

cultural forms provide this function by providing the criteria for what is important, how one

attains the designation of "worthy." Without these rule sets, without hierarchical systems, no

individual could stand out from the rest.

In this way, agonistic games function much like the Homeric *aristeia*. Indeed, it is not a

coincidence that Caillois often employs the "combat" metaphor to describe agonistic games.

Like the *aristeia,* games of competition provide clear evidence that one is "better" than an

opponent within a particular context. Huizinga also draws on the combat metaphor to describe

agonistic games, noting,

> The single combat serves various purposes; it may be a demonstration of personal *aristei,* or it may be the prelude to a general conflict, or it may go on during the battle as episodes of it. Poets and chroniclers glorify it in the history and literature of all ages, and it is known in all parts of the world. (1955, p. 91)

The *agon*/*aristeia* analogy is appropriate because the *aristeia* is the most extreme and clearest

form of *agon*, as it is a competition with nothing less than life and death at stake. And so martial

metaphors are often used hyperbolically to describe contests generally (e.g. "It was war on the

field today;" "Those are two warriors in the ring;" "We battled for 60 minutes;" etc.). What is

also key here is Huizinga's observation that *agon* provides an opportunity for *kleos*, the symbolic

immortality afforded to winners/heroes through chronicle. But even in the Homeric context, the *aristeia* is not reserved for combat alone.

For example, in the opening of the *Iliad*'s funeral games, Achilles entices the Achaean forces by pronouncing the winners' prizes: "Cauldrons, horse, mules, broad-headed beeves, bright steel and brighter dames" (XXIII, 240). In addition to material gains, however, the funeral games are also an opportunity for *kleos*, as Achilles tells his guests: "You then that trust in chariots, and hope with horse to crown / Your conquering temples, gird yourselves; now fame and prize stretch for, / All that have spirits" (XXIII, 262-264). The funeral games are held in Patroclus' honour, but they are also very much concerned with the participants' honour as well.

Indeed, as Nagy (1999) observes, "As a general principle, the *agôn* was connected with the cult of heroes, and even the Great Panhellenic Games were originally conceived as funeral games for heroes…. The custom of mourning for Achilles at the beginning of the Olympics… is a striking instance of this heritage" (ch. 6, para. 30). Since at least the Greeks, games have been explicitly tied to remembrance and death denial. Although the glory of the games is not on par with the glory of combat, the *Iliad*'s funeral games are undoubtedly an arena for demonstrating one's superiority over others, thereby padding one's *kleos*. As Huizinga (1955) observes, "virtue, honour, nobility and glory fall at the outset within the field of competition, which is that of play. The life of the young warrior of noble birth is a continual exercise in virtue and a continual struggle for the sake of the honour of his rank" (p. 64). And as we see in the contemporary valorization of professional athletes, our reverence for displays of athletic prowess continues to flourish. We like to watch impressive individuals compete with one another, and more to the point, *defeat* one another, and this has always been the case. Games of competition fulfill a vital

psychological function by providing an arena in which to feel powerful and superior, even if only vicariously.[7]

In its extreme form, the exertion of influence takes the form of *domination*, the demonstration of superiority over another. As Becker (1975) observes, any time we assert our dominance over the external world, (objects or people), we express our desire to extend the self and therefore to transcend death:

> Man can expand his self-feeling not only by physical incorporation but by any kind of triumph or demonstration of his own excellence. He expands his organization in complexity by games, puzzles,… taunting and humiliating his adversaries, or torturing and killing them. Anything that *reduces* the other organism and adds to one's own size and importance is a direct way to gain self-feeling. (p. 11)

Videogames offer virtual worlds which not only extend the self, but which allow us to feel powerful, or dominant. In the gaming community, we see this desire to reduce other organisms in the form of "owning" or "*pwning*" other players in popular games like *Call of Duty* (*CoD*), which emphasize human to human competition (O'Gorman, 2010). To "*pwn*" another gamer is to assert dominance and superiority, to humiliate. The term is generally reserved for other human players; it is not used nearly as often in single-player contexts.

In *CoD: Modern Warfare 2* (Activision 2009), for example, the multiplayer combat usually involves opposing players shooting at one another over long distances with rifles or machine guns; however, there are also melee weapons, such as knives and bayonets, which are used at close proximity. In the (often perverse) logic of the *CoD* community, if one player is able to kill another with a melee weapon, the latter has been *pwned*. If one team loses very badly to the opposing team, they have been *pwned*. The very concept of *pwning* revolves around an

---

[7] There is not enough space here, but it is an interesting sociological phenomenon that sports fans take pride in "their" team's accomplishments, sometimes to the point of feeling superior to fans of lesser teams.

unspoken code of insult and honour. If a player is *pwned*, the only way to redeem lost honour is by *pwning* someone else. Of course, we have seen this before.

In the *Iliad*, Achilles *pwns* Hector, along with the rest of the Trojan army. Until he meets Achilles in the field, Hector *pwns* the Achaean forces. The war begins in the first place because Paris *pwned* Menelaus by "taking" Helen. Games, honour, and war have always been entangled with one another, since the earliest instances of civilization (Huizinga, 1955). The ultra-competitive online battles in games like *CoD* can thus be thought of as instances of virtual *aristeia*, an arena in which players "best" one another. And like their Hellenic counterparts, gamers can earn (virtual) *kleos*, by winning a "Deathmatch," decimating other players, by seeing their names atop the *CoD* leaderboards, or by levelling up to the next "Prestige" rank, which grants the player an emblem of gamer honour and little else.

It is no surprise, then, that the scholarly discourses surrounding *agon* usually center around rhetorics of power and progress (Sutton-Smith, 2001), since demonstrating superiority while overcoming obstacles is the essence of heroic potency. Again, agonistic games provide an arena in which we can prove our worth against others; like the *aristeia*, *agon* provides us with an opportunity for glory, a means for demonstrating superiority and excellence. This is important because so-called "victories" in life are hard to come by, and it is not always clear when one is winning or losing (McGonigal, 2011). But all games, and agonistic games in particular, can provide this precise clarity: What must I do? And what must I do to be *victorious* over others?

ii. *Alea* (chance)

Caillois' second category, *alea*, or games of chance, are often described as an expression of our uncertain fate on a smaller, more controllable scale. They can be a means for demonstrating our "luckiness," or in certain contexts, divine favour. Although participants have

little control over the outcome in games of chance, it is nevertheless empowering to feel as if the stars are in alignment for one's success. Caillois (1961) views *alea* as a counterpart to *agon*:

> *Alea*. This is the Latin name for the game of dice. I have borrowed it to designate, in contrast to *agon*, all games that are based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary. More properly, destiny is the sole artisan of victory, and where there is rivalry, what is meant is that the winner has been more favored by fortune than the loser.... *Alea* signifies and reveals the favor of destiny…. *Alea* is total disgrace or absolute favor. (p. 17)

What is important for us here is this idea that games of chance grant a sense of conferred "favor;" by winning games of chance, one feels blessed, cosmically significant, as if the gods themselves have ordained the victory.

This is a different form of victory than the kind *agon* provides. In Caillois' (1961) words, "*Agon* is a vindication of personal responsibility; *alea* is a negation of the will, a surrender to destiny" (p. 18). Unlike agonistic games, which largely depend upon the participants' personal skill, strength, intelligence, and so on, *alea*, or games of chance, rely on the random fluctuations of what is commonly called "luck." However, Caillois is clear that although *agon* and *alea* are different in many respects, they share some underlying similarities. Even though they might

> imply opposite and somewhat complementary attitudes,… they both obey the same law—the creation for the players of conditions of pure equality denied them in real life. For nothing in life is clear, since everything is confused from the very beginning, luck and merit too. Play, whether *agon* or *alea*, is thus an attempt to substitute perfect situations for the normal confusion of contemporary life. In games, the role of merit or chance is clear and indisputable. (p. 19)

Again, these ludic forms offer us opportunities to find quantifiable and easy to recognize instances of winning and losing, which is a rarity in "real" life. They offer players miniature, manageable representations of life in all its chanciness.

While others lose, the "lucky man" may continue to succeed, and although by definition this has little to do with his own skill, he may nevertheless feel intrinsically superior to the losers. Thus, a sense of cosmic significance or "manifest destiny" may be obtained, for, as Huizinga (1955) observes, "Luck may have a sacred significance; the fall of the dice may signify and determine the divine workings…. Indeed, we may go one further and say that for the human mind the idea of happiness, luck and fate seem to lie very close to the realm of the sacred" (p. 56). Games of chance can make us feel as if we have some access to the inner workings of the universe—its logic, its will, and so on. Even if we are at its whims, it is still better to know what its whims are. Like religion, luck is deeply concerned with the world outside of our control, and games of chance grant us, at the very least, the illusion of control.

As Sutton-Smith (2001) observes, games of chance are usually accompanied by rhetorics of fate, and so they are likely

> the oldest of all the rhetorics, resting as it does on the belief that human lives and play are controlled by destiny, by the gods, by atoms or neurons, or by luck, but very little by ourselves, except perhaps through the skillful use of magic or astrology.... [I]t remains popular among lower socioeconomic groups. (p. 304)

By participating in games of chance, the individual can hope to glean his or her own "luckiness," or the degree to which one is favoured by the gods. In the *Rhetoric*, for example, Aristotle associates good luck with happiness, health and a long life, writing that "Happiness in old age… arises both from the excellences of the body and from good luck;" an individual cannot "continue to live a long and painless life unless he has good luck. There is, indeed, a capacity for long life that is quite independent of health or strength; for many people live long who lack the excellences of the body" (2.5).

In one sense, we are always lucky to be alive; at any moment our hearts could stop beating, or we could get hit by lightning. But even outside of such occurrences, mortality is

always outside of our control. Sutton-Smith (2001) explicitly links the sense of luck with existential anxiety:

> There is a sense in which the irrevocability of fate leaves no answers except the most desperate and universal human answers, which is that one might perhaps escape by luck or its personified equivalent, God's favor. Luck is very much fate's last hope. It is the play of the last chance. It is the play of everyman. Though pitiful, it is the only recourse in the mortal situation, unless of course we really do rise by works rather than grace. From a secular point of view... to be mortal is ultimately to be without hope, but in the game model of this predicament, there is a slight lottery like hope…. In this sense it is useful to think of games of chance not only as models of the irrevocability of fate but also as fate fantasied. (p. 53)

Games of chance are in effect representations of the "irrevocability of fate." Our very being is the result of a fluke, an unimaginably complex confluence of factors, coming together at a precise moment. When rolling dice on a felt table, what we are really seeing is the human condition, the being of uncertain anticipation played out in front of us. In games and in life, one always exists within the realm of chance.

When this condition is represented in a game, however, we give ourselves access to the workings of chance, and hope to understand it. The very fact that rolling a six, for example, definitively *means* something, is gratifying to an animal desperately searching for knowledge and meaning. And this brings up another fundamental characteristic of *alea*: Games of chance provide us with a faint hope of agency; we can calculate odds, or play the "safe" bet. Thus, *alea* not only provides representations of chance, but crucially, a way to believe we can exert influence over it as well. We try to adopt strategies in games of chance, to somehow increase our odds. We may flick a wrist in a certain fashion in an attempt to influence how the dice will fall. We may learn to count cards in Blackjack, or stick with one slot machine which is "due." We may even wear a "lucky" article of clothing before playing, or engage in a "superstitious" ritual.

In all cases, we are exhibiting our natural tendency to influence our environment, to harness powerful, invisible forces.

iii. Mimicry (simulation)[8]

In discussing the third rubric, mimicry, Caillois (1961) writes that whenever one plays, "In one way or another, one escapes the real world and creates another. One can also escape himself and become another. This is *mimicry*" (p. 19). For Caillois, mimicry (simulation) is an important part of human development in general, and although he grants mimicry its own rubric, it pervades all play forms:

> All play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not an illusion (indeed this last word means nothing less than beginning a game: *in-lusio*), then at least of a closed, conventional, and, in certain respects, imaginary universe. Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting to one's fate in an imaginary *millieu*, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving. One is thus confronted with a diverse series of manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another. (p. 19)

For example, when a child plays "Cops and Robbers," she is temporarily and metaphorically "becoming" another character.

In this sense, mimicry provides a way for individuals to experience a sense of being other than their own. If a child is bored, she can imagine her life as an astronaut or heroic knight. Mimicry allows us to leave our present circumstances, or, in Sutton-Smith's (2001) words, "can be an area where the despairs of life are mocked, where there is precarious but safe retreat, and yet where there are also only shadows of the other world" (p. 139). For children, oftentimes this imaginary, "precarious but safe retreat" takes on a heroic context. To return to the example of

---

[8] Caillois (1961) adopts the English word, "mimicry," because of its emphasis on "mimetism, notably of insects, so that the fundamental, elementary, and quasi-organic nature of the impulse that stimulates it can be stressed" (p. 20).

"Cops and Robbers," the play activities usually involve chases and gun battles; it is far less often that they involve paper work or community outreach programs, a significant portion of most police activity. Likewise, there are far more imaginary adventures which involve dragons and swords than accounting and calculators.

In all cases, the imaginary adventures are often heroic to some degree, and as Becker (1973) observes, this "illusion" serves a death denying function:

> Man needs a 'second' world, a world of humanly created meaning, a new reality that he can live, dramatize, nourish himself in. 'Illusion' means creative play at its highest level. Cultural illusion is a necessary ideology of self-justification, a heroic dimension that is life itself to the symbolic animal. (p.189)

I may be just a lowly graduate student in "real life," but in the "second world" of the play environment (physical or virtual), I can be a warrior, magician, star athlete, or hero (McGonigal, 2011). Thus, whether we are talking about the imaginary adventures of childhood, or the daydreaming and play of adults, in all cases mimicry serves a death denying function because it allows us to conceive of alternate being. If I can exist as a character in a play, then I can imagine a form (instance) of being other than my own.

This possibility of "otherness" can be extended to forms of being which are not subject to death and decay, such as the eternal soul, spirit, essence, and so on. Through mimicry, the individual is not limited to the one (finite) body nature provided her with; she can exist as a hero, outside of her own body and therefore outside of mortal limitation. Indeed, as Caillois (1961) puts it, in play which emphasizes mimicry, "The pleasure lies in being or passing for another" (p. 21), but mimicry usually has a certain element of the extraordinary to it.

To return to the example of "Cops and Robbers," here children are playing out a heroic scenario. Both sides are exciting, dangerous, and significant. Even playing as a parent or caregiver lifts the child into a position of importance he or she does not possess in "real" life.

The concept of role-play is of course relevant in contemporary videogames. With their immersive environments and fluid interfaces, videogames may be especially well suited for providing this alternate, heroic sense of being: The worlds are often fantastical, extraordinary, and heroic, the antithesis to the everyday. For example, in a *New York Times* review for the popular action game, *Batman, Arkham City* (Rocksteady, 2011), Seth Schiesel (2011) writes,

> Fantasizing about being a superhero or a villain in my own town was never as interesting as the chance to explore an entirely different world that, at least superficially, had little to do with reality. To me that sense of discovering and mastering a coherent new universe has always been the most captivating element of video games. (para. 12)

The videogame's magic circle may be more visually and phenomenologically immersive than conventional role-playing, but it is simply a contemporary iteration of a fundamental drive to play as another. Videogames provide extraordinary, phenomenologically immersive realms in which one not only acts as another, but heroically so. Thus, in both its general (experiencing otherness) and particular (heroic) forms, mimicry serves a strong existential function.

iv. *Ilinx* (Vertigo) [9]

Ilinx (vertigo) is perhaps the oddest and most difficult rubric to articulate. Unlike the others, *ilinx* does not represent an urge to order and predictability amidst the chaos; it is not even concerned with winning. On the contrary, *ilinx* represents the urge *towards* unpredictability and chaos, the destabilization of "ordinary" life. Caillois (1961) describes *ilinx* as the joy which arises from disruption and instability:

> *Ilinx.* The last kind of game includes those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In

---

[9] Callois (1961) writes that in order to emphasize this rubric's "organic or psychological form, I propose using the term *ilinx*, the Greek term for whirlpool, from which is also derived the Greek word for vertigo (*ilingos*)" (p. 24).

all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness. (p. 23)

While the other rubrics may grant the individual a sense of control, agency, and self-worth, *ilinx* does the complete opposite: It allows the individual to surrender control, if only momentarily.

For Caillois (1961), *ilinx* provides the opportunity for "ecstasy," "[p]anic and hypnosis" (p. 23). It is the thrill found in "Various physical activities… such as the tightrope, falling or being projected into space, rapid rotation, sliding, speeding, and acceleration of vertilinear movement, separately or in combination with gyrating movement" (p. 24). It is exhilarating to travel at very high speeds, to feel close to danger, to lose one's sense of "ordinary" limitation. Carlisle (2009) describes *ilinx* as follows:

> *Ilinx* includes games that involve a desire to be seized by a sense of disorder, intimating a partial loss of control and balance, an alteration of perception. Whereas feelings of vertigo can be produced by the most mundane activities, such as spinning around,... they are also part of specific cultural arenas devoted to vertigo. One of these is the amusement park, where one can experience the visceral effect of being powerlessly thrown around or momentarily transported to staggering heights in a rollercoaster or another contraption. (pp. 108-109)

What is key here is that "games" in this category allow for a voluntary, temporary, and "partial loss of control." A three minute, voluntary ride on a safely operated rollercoaster is exhilarating; an involuntary, never-ending sensation of vertigo, however, is not.

Games under *ilinx* do not require anything or anyone else: One need only spin around enough times to attain a sense of vertigo. However, it is incorrect to suggest that *ilinx* is a form without rules. The "rules" in this category are built into our central nervous system (equilibrium) and the very forces of nature itself (e.g. gravity). Technology grants new and more exhilarating forms of *ilinx*—rollercoasters or videogames, for example—and people often make games out of

it—making oneself dizzy before running a race, for example—but these external elements are not necessary.

Also like the other rubrics, *ilinx* is not confined to games alone, but manifests itself in other cultural forms, as Carlisle (2009) explains: "For example, the magical rituals and festivals in traditional Australian, African, and American cultures would regularly gather people to turn their daily lives into a collective vertigo through dancing and donning terrifying masks to emphasize their possession by mysterious forces" (p. 109). Of course, we need not go back in time for such rituals, as all religion seeks submission to a higher will in some form or another.[10] And much like Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the "carnivalesque," the up-endedness of *ilinx* is not confined to a physiological sense of vertigo; rather, "In parallel fashion, there is a vertigo of a moral order, a transport that suddenly seizes the individual. This vertigo is readily linked to the desire for disorder and destruction, a drive which is normally repressed" (Caillois, 1961, p. 24). In the realm of *ilinx*, the goal is to make up mean down, and vice versa. Like mimicry, *ilinx* depends upon some altered/alternate form of being. As Caillois puts it, *ilinx* "is a pure state of transport" (p. 31), not unlike the transport experienced by the ecstatic religious participant.[11]

This double sense of *ilinx*—as both transport and sensory alterity—is perhaps uniquely combined in the videogame. Within videogames, the player must feel as if she is "transported" into the game (its environment must be engaging), but many games are designed precisely around the pursuit of vertigo. For example, racing games, flight simulators, air-to-air combat games, etc., all explicitly exploit players' desire to experience a sense of vertigo (e.g. travelling

---

[10] "Speaking in tongues" is one contemporary example of this phenomenon among many. Instances of "spiritual ecstasy" are not uncommon, especially within a "holy" context.

[11] Caillois couples mimicry and *ilinx* in an unfortunate manner. Essentially, he views the two as representative of "primitive" tribalism; societies eventually evolve out of these dominant ludic forms until *agon* and *alea* take over: "The reign of mimicry and *ilinx* as recognized, honored, and dominant cultural trends is indeed condemned as soon as the mind arrives at the concept of cosmos, i.e. a stable and orderly universe without miracles or transformations" (p. 107). Yet, it is possible to ignore Caillois' ethnographic bias without diminishing his central thesis.

at very high speeds). Typically, these games grant the sense of vertigo through visual and aural

cues, such as the sound of an engine accelerating, and a landscape passing by at a blistering

pace.[12] Furthermore, there are also many games which incorporate *ilinx* into central design

mechanics, even if the games themselves are not centered around vertigo. For example, the game

Assassin's Creed (Ubisoft, 2007) often allows the player to jump from great heights into

haystacks. Many gamers, myself included, have reported feeling their stomachs "drop"— not

unlike when riding a rollercoaster—during these jumps.

Caillois' rubrics should not be viewed in isolation, but as parts of an interconnected

whole. Indeed, contemporary videogames often utilize all four simultaneously. For example, the

racing game, *Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit* (EA, 2010) 1) Allows players to compete against

artificial intelligence (A.I.) as well as other players across the globe; 2) Provides a sense of luck

by including random power-ups, boosts, etc.; 3) Allows players to inhabit an alternate, exciting

universe; and 4) Requires them to ostensibly travel at very high speeds. Each component works

in concert with the others, and each serves its own death denying function. With a general

discussion of play's multi-faceted death denying function, I will now move away from play in its

general form, and into the videogame, which combines the death denying function of play

generally with its own particular death denying properties. I will argue that the videogame

components of Immersion, Procedurality, and Narrative can be combined to form multi-faceted

and convincing rhetorics of heroism and immortality.

2. Immersion

Like other media, videogames can increase the user's sense of agency, since they allow

us to exert influence in way we would not be able to otherwise. However, videogames are

---

[12] Indeed, videogames are very good at giving a sensation of travelling at high speeds.

perhaps uniquely suited to giving player's a sense of being "inside" a virtual world.[13] As any gamer can attest to, when playing a game we know it is not a "real" place, but there is an uncanny sense of feeling "inside" the game world as well. We may jump in our chairs when a bullet narrowly misses us in *CoD*, for example. As discussed in chapter two, virtual worlds allow us to extend our selves, to become *immersed* and exert influence in a world supplementary to, and seemingly less material than, the physical world. Indeed, videogames allow us to transcend physical boundaries in a number of ways. We can play with other individuals halfway across the globe, we can manipulate on-screen objects through a remote controller, or we can feel as if we are inhabiting an in-game character. In all cases, we are extending our influence and agency. When they are at their best, videogames immerse us in an environment which lets us feel powerful (such as saving the world), to feel as if we are more than worm food, as Becker (1973) might say. They allow us to deny our creaturliness, to be *more than* physiology.

Although it is true videogames do not offer the complete suppression of materiality, they do offer transcendence in the form of *extension*, a sense of being that is supplemental to biology. This is extension in the McLuhanian sense. As McLuhan (1964) famously asserted five decades ago, television, is "the most recent and spectacular electric extension of our central nervous system" (p. 317). Were he alive today, McLuhan would undoubtedly update this to include the videogame, which gives us a sense of control older media cannot provide. Admittedly, the sense of control we have in the videogame is largely illusory: Ultimately, we only have as much control as the game allows (Juul, 2005). However, the very fact that an infinitesimal flick of the finger can manipulate objects in the world of *Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1983), or "kill" another player across the world in *CoD* signifies the extension of influence, of *life power*. To paraphrase

---

[13] Immersion occurs outside of videogames: I get immersed when reading a good book or watching a good movie.

Stiegler (1998), the videogame is humanity's latest attempt to extend itself "beyond the reach of the hand" (p. 116).

The sense of extension, or of feeling as if one is "in" a game, is often referred to as "immersion," or the related phenomenon, "telepresence." These are two tricky and controversial terms. When trying to separate the "real" world from the "virtual" world, we get into dicey ontological territory, and quickly devolve into metaphysics (Bogost, 2011). [14] Another conceptual problem is that immersion and telepresence are more closely related to a "feeling" or phenomenological "state" than something easily quantifiable. Gregersen and Grodal (2009) describe the sensation of "inhabiting" an in-game character as "embodied awareness:"

> [I]nteracting with video games may lead to a sense of extended embodiment and sense of agency…—it is *an embodied awareness in the moment of action,* a kind of *body image in action*—where one experiences both agency and ownership of virtual entities. This process is a fusion of player's intentions, perceptions, and actions. (p. 67)

It is important to note that Gregersen and Grodal do not discount the body in their account of immersion. On the contrary, Gregersen and Grodal describe immersion as a "fusion," an "extended embodiment," something which heightens, alters, and extends the central nervous system, as McLuhan might say.

Indeed, part of the videogame's allure and immersive capabilities lies precisely in their ability to stimulate the central nervous system via the senses. As Myers (2009) puts it,

> video game play [is] an experience in which the liminal—determined by a particular formal relationship among video game objects and values—is given a bodily component and cause that, in that process, viscerally confirms the play experience. *What seems to be* becomes, in the video game, *what is*; and the psychophysical is therein asserted and confirmed as the physical. (p. 59).

---

[14] What does it mean, for example, to say that something does not actually exist, or that a game is only "half-real," in Juul's (2005) terminology?

Ideally, the player should know she is playing, but on the other hand, she should interact with the sensory phenomena of the game as if it is meaningful.

When a player is immersed, she experiences the game world phenomenologically, and may feel as if she is "inside" the game, even if it is perhaps more accurate to say that the game is inside her. This sense of being in another place is often referred to as "telepresence." According to Jonathan Steur (1992),

> when perception is mediated by a communication technology, one is forced to perceive *two* separate environments simultaneously: the physical environment in which one is actually present, and the environment presented by the medium…. Telepresence is the extent to which one feels present in the mediated environment, rather than in the immediate physical environment. (qtd. in McMahan, 2003, p. 72).

Lombard and Ditton (1997) define telepresence as "the perceptual illusion of nonmediation," (p. 9) a complex phenomenological state in which a technological interface "fades" from primary perception. The International Society for Presence Research [ISPR] defines immersion as "a psychological state or subjective perception in which even though part or all of an individual's current experience is generated by and/or filtered through human-made technology, part or all of the individual's perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of technology in the experience" (qtd. in Bracken and Skalski, 2009, p. 103). Again, the key point is that the participant is so engrossed in the activity that the tools utilized are forgotten.

It is precisely this "forgetting" that is responsible for the messiness of both telepresence and immersion, and as a result they remain very difficult concepts to articulate. We can only ever ask players about their immersion experiences *post hoc*, or how they remember their experience, and so methodological challenges arise. That being said, brain imaging technology has provide us with a useful tool for understanding the neuro-mechanics of immersion. As Gregersen and Grodal (2009) note, "Neuroscientists have identified specific structures that are plausibly

responsible for [the] flexibility of the body schema to incorporate tools and other objects, including those virtually represented" (p. 68). Whether in a "real" or mediated environment, certain parts of the brain light up when an individual interacts with external objects.

Furthermore, most researchers agree that immersion and telepresence can be induced in some fairly consistent, predictable ways, including sensory fidelity and a sense that one's in-game actions matter (Lombard and Ditton, 1997). Describing the neural mechanics or immersion, Gregersen and Grodal (2009) note that "Interactive interfaces and game systems may selectively target and activate the auditory, visual, somatosensory [touch], and proprioceptive [body position] systems. The extent to which an embodied sense of agency, ownership, and personal efficacy is fostered by games is very much a question of overall design" (p. 67). These characteristics of agency, ownership, and personal efficacy work well with the videogame due to its interactive nature. Videogames provide a task to complete, and a means for completing it. This is important because individuals are typically more engaged phenomenologically and psychologically when they are concentrating on completing a task than when they are watching someone else complete one, for example (Bracken and Skalski, 2009).

Videogames are also particularly adept at inducing a sense of immersion or telepresence because they can very accurately reproduce the sights and sounds of everyday experience: Photorealistic graphics, authentic sounds and jargon, accurate physics models, and so on, all contribute to the player's sense that she is operating in an actual (phenomenologically real) environment. Furthermore, Bracken and Skalski (2009) examined the effect of high definition graphics on immersion, and found that "participants who played the video game in HD report[ed] higher levels of immersion" (p. 109) when compared to participants who played the same game in standard definition. Thus, videogames can induce immersion and telepresence

through producing real seeming environments in which players must focus their attention. They

depend upon the user's sense of agency and extension, two techniques by which we mitigate

death anxiety (Becker, 1973).

In addition to this general sense of agency and extension, however, many videogames

also offer a heroic context in which to be immersed. Players can feel as if they are not just

playing *as* a hero, but that they *are* a hero. Seth Schiesel (2011) describes this distinction in his

discussion of the first and second *Batman* (Rocksteady) games*:*

> In the earlier game [*Arkham Asylum*] I felt I was playing a well-realized Batman
> character as he traversed an interesting, if fairly linear series of missions and
> challenges. In *Arkham City* I simply felt like Batman. *Arkham City* now joins the
> likes of the likes of the *Grand Theft Auto* and *Assassin's Creed* series among the
> pantheon of great single-player open-world games. (para. 4)

Schiesel is clear that the more recent release provided a better experience because it was more

immersive; he did not feel as if he was controlling a character (Batman) on-screen, but that he

"simply felt like Batman." Schiesel continues: "You come to inhabit Batman and make him your

own because you, the player, are deciding whether stopping the Joker's master plan is more or

less important than, say, stopping a gang fight or a robbery at this exact moment" (para. 7). In

looking at Scheisel's immersive experience, we find Gregersen and Grodal's (2009) pre-

requisites of "embodied sense of agency, ownership, and personal efficacy" noted above.

Scheisel comes to "inhabit" the Batman avatar; he makes the avatar his "own," and he feels as if

his in-game choices count.

However, there are different forms of immersion. Game designer Ernest Adams (2004)

identifies three distinct types of immersion: Tactical, Strategic, and Narrative. This is a useful

approach because it draws attention to the fact that there are different forms, causes, and degrees

of immersion. The first, Tactical Immersion, is produced

in the moment-by-moment act of playing the game…. It's what people call being 'in the zone' or 'in the groove.' It's physical and immediate. When you're tactically immersed in a game, your higher brain functions are largely shut down and you become a pair of eyes directly communicating with your fingers. It's an almost meditation like state…. (para. 9).

This form of immersion is perhaps the "deepest" of the three. Tactical immersion is fully engrossing; every ounce of the individual's concentration is directed at a single task or object. Stimuli external to the game or activity may go unnoticed.

Tactical immersion closely resembles Mikhail Csikszentmihlayi's concept of "flow," which occurs when we attain "optimal experience:"

The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something we *make* happen.... Getting control of life is never easy, and sometimes it can be definitely painful. But in the long run optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery—or perhaps better, a sense of *participation* in determining the content of life—that comes as close o what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine. (2008, pp. 3-4)

Csikszentmihlayi's flow[15] concept also brings up an important point: Tactical immersion can contribute to an increased sense of "taking control," or agency. When a player is in "the zone," completing challenging (but not too challenging) tasks, it produces a pleasant feeling. As Adams (2004) notes, in order "to create tactical immersion, you must offer your players a flawless user interface, one that responds rapidly, intuitively, and above all reliably…. Tactical immersion is usually destroyed by abrupt changes in the nature of gameplay, a shift in the user interface," and so on (para. 11).

The second type of immersion, "Strategic Immersion," has less to do with the immediacy and presence of Tactical Immersion, and more to do with planning ahead, or, in Adams' words, in "seeking a path to victory" (para. 12). This form of immersion is "a cerebral

---

[15] Both flow and tactical immersion are not confined to videogames, but can occur in virtually any activity.

kind of involvement with the game…. When you're strategically immersed, you're observing, calculating, deducing" (para. 12). Adams' exemplar for this type of immersion is the chess-master, who is focused "on finding the right move among a vast number of possibilities" (para. 12). In one form or another, most videogames produce this type of immersion. Even high-paced action games such as *CoD*, which might be more clearly associated with tactical immersion, require some form of planning ahead. For example, when confronted with several enemies, the player must choose which to shoot first, or ascertain if it might be more prudent to retreat.

Narrative Immersion is Adams' third type. In this case, "A player gets immersed in a narrative when he or she starts to care about the characters enough to want to know how the story is going to end," or what will come next (para. 16). Narrative immersion of course is not restricted to videogames. Many readers and movie-goers, for instance, can likely relate to "losing oneself" in an engrossing story. As I will discuss in greater detail below, narrative has been a controversial issue in game studies. Typically, videogames produce generic, un-interesting narratives which are only peripheral to the gameplay itself (e.g. Murray, 1997; Aarseth, 2004). However, this is not to suggest that videogames are not capable of producing compelling stories; rather, this form of immersion simply requires a certain skill set many game makers do not possess. In Adams' words, "The skills needed to create narrative immersion are quite different from those needed to create tactical and strategic immersion, which is why smart studios hire professional writers to create their storylines" (2004, para. 17). Game studios such as Bethesda (e.g. *Fallout 3*), BioWare (e.g. *Mass Effect*), and Rockstar (e.g. *Grand Theft Auto IV*) are known for creating compelling storylines. These games are incredibly immersive, and at least part of that is due to their engaging narratives. Players care what happens in the game world (plot) and what happens to their character and companions.

None of Adams' categories are unique to the videogame in isolation, but where the videogame is perhaps unique is in its ability to combine all three forms of immersion simultaneously, and moreover, on demand. In essence, videogames have the potential to engage the player in an engrossing activity (tactical), which tests his or her decision making skills (strategic), all the while participating in an engrossing and often heroic context (narrative). When all three forms are combined within a phenomenologically compelling environment, players can get a more total sense of extension, agency, enjoyment, and ultimately, heroic death denial.

One of the psychological benefits of immersion is that it has the potential to provide an escape from the mundane nature of the everyday world (McGonigal, 2011). Moreover, the in-game self, though certainly not divorced from the physical constraints of embodiment, is often able to performs incredible feats—flying, winning decisive battles, hitting a grand slam, and so on. In the game-world, the player achieves a degree of greatness and significance with a certainty often unachievable in "real" life. All of these characteristics demonstrate a potential for death denial via immersion.

3. Procedural Rhetorics of Heroism and Immortality

Procedural representation is the essence of the videogame, and indeed any computer-based medium. "Procedurality," explains Ian Bogost (2007) "refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems" (pp. 2-3). A procedure is a series of steps undertaken to fulfill a particular goal. In Bogost's words, "Procedural systems generate behaviors based on rule-based models; they are machines capable of producing many outcomes, each conforming to the same overall guidelines" (p. 4). As a procedural (computer) medium, videogames are particularly well suited to representing or "simulating" procedures, and after all,

a game is very much procedural in nature: Complete Task A by overcoming obstacle B; receive

reward C for completion; move on to next Task (Tosca, 2003). As Bogost (2007) observes,

> Procedural representation is significantly different from textual, visual, and plastic
> representation. Even though other inscription techniques may be partly or wholly
> driven by a desire to represent human or material processes, only procedural
> systems like computer software actually represent process with process. This is
> where the particular power of procedural authorship lies, in its native ability to
> depict processes. (p. 14)

Although videogames utilize other representative modes, procedural representation is where they

are most at home.

Bogost takes this concept of procedurality one step further by examining how rule

systems can be used for persuasive purposes. Bogost calls this *procedural rhetoric*, and defines it

as "a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking

computational arguments others have created" (p. 3). Procedural rhetoric can be thought of as the

means by which the game's rules and parameters guide action in the game world. For example, if

a player follows (or excels in) a game's procedures, she is rewarded; if she violates the rules, she

is reprimanded and might have to begin a level again. Procedural rhetoric can thus be expressed

as a series of questions: Which actions do the game's rules require or allow? Which do they

forbid? Which do they reward or punish? And so on. We can thus identify the procedural

rhetoric of a given game by examining its rules, parameters, and reward/punishment structures.

Procedural rhetoric is a particularly useful approach for present purposes because hero

systems are procedural in nature. They are constrained by certain rules; they provide a reward

and punishment structure, and they act as guidelines for success, so to speak. Bogost (2007)

draws a parallel between procedurality and ideology, a close relative of the hero system: "Hidden

procedural systems that drive social, political, or cultural behavior are often called *ideology*" (p.

72). Since both videogames and ideologies are procedural in nature, "Videogames are particularly useful tools for visualizing the logics that make up a worldview" (p. 74). Thus, "By playing… games and unpacking the claims their procedural rhetorics make about political situations, we can gain an unusually detached perspective on the ideologies that drive them" (p. 75). In other words, by understanding a game's procedures, we can understand the underlying logics which inform them.

To illustrate the value of procedural rhetoric in identifying and exposing ideologies, Bogost (2007) gives the example of *America's Army* (U.S. Army, 2002), or *AA*, a free to download game which was famously designed by the U.S. Army for recruitment purposes. Ultimately, Bogost argues, the procedural rhetoric of *AA* "supports a moral code that corresponds with the U.S. Army's focus on duty and honor" (p. 284). As Bogost explains, the reward structures in *AA* explicitly utilize rhetorics of honour and heroism:

> As in many similar games, when players compete they earn points that persist on web-based global statistics boards. At specified point targets, a player's character's 'honor' statistic increases. Since honor indicates commitment and expertise, disincentives to violate the ROE [rules of engagement] and chain of command become especially strong…. The correlation of honor with the performance of arbitrary and politically decontextualized missions offers particular insight into the social reality of the U.S. Army. While the use of abstract honor points may seem contrived at first, the system bears much in common with the actual practice of military decoration… [in the form of] [r]ibbons, medals, and other designations. (pp. 76-77)

In granting ribbons and medals, *AA* effectively represents the procedure of recognition for military prowess—demonstrate courage or excellence, and receive renown.

As Bogost observes, "*America's Army* enforces the U.S. Army's strict rules of engagement (ROE)" (p. 76). For example, a trainee will be sent to a prison cell if she fires at a commanding officer. According to Bogost, "The direct mapping of in-game behavior to the very

ability to continue playing [e.g. killing a comrade or civilian ends your mission] serves as a convincing procedural rhetoric for the chain of command" (p. 76). Furthermore, in *AA*

> Honor, service, and courage are represented through the completion of military objectives under the constraints of ROE and the chain of command. Army success entails the selfless execution of tasks that have been handed down from a higher authority, completed without question or reservation. (p. 77)

But Bogost is also clear that such procedural rhetoric may in fact be beneficial in helping us understand ideology and propaganda, for "we can also take some comfort in the fact that [*AA*] necessarily exposes the ideology of the U.S. Army in the operating rules of the videogame. Here we see ideology take a new material form" (p. 79). This is important because it means that a critical analysis of a game's procedural rhetoric can reveal insights into the broader ideological discourses which inform it.

Furthermore, videogames are well suited for propagating particular hero systems because like hero systems, they work best in clean, antithetical, and clearly demarcated environments; both hero systems and procedures fare far worse when messiness, ambiguity, and unclear victory conditions enter the mix. As soon as a hero system is challenged, it is threatened, and so the strongest hero systems are univocal, monoglottic, and clearly identify whom one can conquer (Becker, 1973). *AA* is an example of a monoglottic system. For example, the game never addresses the enemy's motivations (Bogost, 2007); it is simply assumed that the enemies are irrational, or "hate freedom." The messy realities are difficult to program, much less make into a compelling ludic experience.

From a procedural perspective, videogames are good at representing combat in the idealized vein of WWII, wherein everyone wears distinctive uniforms, rules (supposedly) govern conflict, and victory conditions are clearly laid out: Kill the enemy, (re)take land, and ultimately force the other side to surrender. In the case of WWII, combat is clearly and cleanly procedural

in nature—the player identifies a target, takes aim, pulls the trigger, etc…—and so videogames are very good at representing this "pure" form of combat. Procedurality does not work as well when "messiness" enters the mix, such as unmarked "targets," interfering civilians, friendly fire, and so on. If a player cannot distinguish friend from foe, then how can she expect to successfully play the game? Whom does she shoot? And more to the point, how does she assert her heroism? Messiness rarely works in ludic contexts, as it can cause frustration, or a sense of "unfairness" which is anathema to the *ethos* of gaming.

Yet it is precisely this radical messiness which characterizes contemporary conflicts. It is not always clear who is friend and who is foe, or whether one can ever "win" the game. The "War on Terror" is difficult to proceduralize, because "Terror" is a vague and essentially meaningless term, and because it is not always clear who is and is not a "Terrorist." After all, how does one signify, fight, or "win" against *terror*? One is essentially always chasing after ghosts. Acts of "Terror," on the other hand, (or more accurately, stopping them), are not difficult to proceduralize. For example, taking a hostage entails a certain set of procedures, and so does rescuing a hostage. Planting a bomb entails a certain set of procedures, and so does defusing one. There seems to be little room for the radical messiness which characterizes contemporary conflicts.[16] As a result, videogame developers must necessarily exert some artistic license.

Thus, contemporary games like *AA* which may be set in Iraq, Afghanistan, or even Vietnam, often ignore the broader political context and instead focus on the "action" of individual combat experiences (Stahl, 2006). The victory conditions are usually local—e.g. a specific objective or battle—and clearly identifiable. Good guys and bad guys are clearly demarcated, and there is little moral ambiguity. In this sense, we can say that there is a

---

[16] Granted, messiness characterizes all combat to a degree, but the absence of clearly identifiable enemies and victory conditions in contemporary conflicts makes them a poor fit for ludicity (i.e. they have low ludic potential).

disconnect between *AA*'s procedurality and its narrative, or that it is "ludo-narratively dissonant" (Hocking, 2007): Although the narrative may set a game in Afghanistan, the combat itself is proceduralized after the archaic WWII model. This provides an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of contemporary conflict, which is not clean, but messy.

In an article written for the popular gaming blog Medium Difficulty, "W.," (2012) a veteran of both Afghanistan and Iraq, proposed the following alternative to conventional, "clean" depictions of contemporary conflict:

> Here is a real scenario that should be put into a game: A friend of mine came under fire inside a compound. He followed up the shooter, who disappeared into an escape tunnel. My friend followed standard procedure and threw a grenade into the tunnel entrance before following up. When entering the tunnel, he found only the bodies of a woman and a small child, whom the terrorist had used to cover his escape. (paras. 25-26)

Scenarios such as this occur all too frequently in contemporary conflicts; however, they are almost never presented in mainstream videogames. There are several reasons why such a scenario would likely never end up in a videogame, at least according to current paradigms.

First, from a strictly commercial perspective, it is unlikely any major game studio would take on such controversial material. Recent examples such as *Medal of Honor* (EA, 2011) and *Six Days in Fallujah* (Unreleased, Atomic Games)[17] have demonstrated that deviations from conventional depictions of good guy/bad guy are incredibly risky. Secondly, there is nothing really ludic about this scenario. The opponent is never clearly identified, and the player is never given a chance to battle him. Although this scenario is very common in contemporary warfare, it

---

[17] *Six Days* was never released, primarily because of the outrage which surrounded it. Essentially, the battle for Fallujah is largely seen as a massacre in Iraq.

does not make for good videogame material.[18] As a binary medium, it is much easier to program clear-cut, binary relationships than complex, ambiguous ones. Finally, another difficulty lies in the fact that the scenario undermines the soldier-as-hero rhetoric so predominant in contemporary war games. If gamers do use videogames as a way to play out their various hero fantasies, then depicting their actions in a decidedly un-heroic light may turn them off. The scenario described above does not accomplish any goal. It is an accidental killing—a mistake, a failure—which serves no greater function. There will be no songs sung, nor videogames made, to celebrate such an action.

To use another recent example, a growing problem in Afghanistan are so called "Green on Blue" incidents, in which "friendly" members of the Afghan National Army shoot their NATO colleagues, with whom they are ostensibly allied (Saunders, 2012). From the typical soldier's perspective, there is nothing really ludic nor heroic about this scenario. One moment he is training a recruit, the next moment he is shot in the back of the head. There is no chance to "win," because the victory conditions have not been set out beforehand; indeed, the victim does not even know that the game is afoot in the first place, and so has no chance to play. There is no clearly demarcated "opponent," and so this structure does not fit into the binary, clearly defined rules of the medium. Of course, we could gamify this scenario. For instance, we could provide a "discover and stop the infiltrator" frame, and form a detective game. But in itself, a Green on Blue incident resists all ludicity. Perhaps game designers will one day take the bold steps to include scenarios such as this, or perhaps more importantly, figure out a way to make an engaging game out of it, but there are very few if any as of now. And perhaps more to the point, such scenarios undermine the (procedural) heroism associated with combat: These ambiguous

---

[18] Gonzalo Frasca's (2003) game *September 12th*, addresses this issue explicitly. In this game, the player can bomb a Middle Eastern village; however, each time one "terrorist" dies, several more pop up in his place. The procedural rhetoric of the game is that fighting "terrorism" via bombs is not only unethical but counterproductive.

scenarios offer no clear, quantifiable instances of heroism. Nobody wants to play as a "baby killer," especially not within a sensitive political context.

Although contemporary conflicts are incredibly fluid, and the "enemy" is rarely defined in a clear, unambiguous way, videogames remove this ambiguity, and clearly demarcate good guy from bad guy. As Bogost (2007) notes in his discussion of *AA*, "Our perspective is not only right, but there is no explanation for the opposition's behavior save wickedness…. The possibility of legitimate grievance on the part of the enemy—or even a coherent historical circumstance that underwrites opposing action—is ruled out of army conflicts" (p. 78). In many military themed videogames, good guys are easy to identify, and our side is always right.

Thus, whether intentionally or not, as games, videogames tend to present a sanitized and inaccurate depiction of the combat experience. As Stahl (2006) observes, the sanitized representations of war serve an ideological, propagandistic function: "The virtual citizen-soldier's integration into a sanitized fantasy of war is a seduction whose pleasures are felt at the expense of the capacity for critical engagement in matters of military might" (p. 126). In other words, by emphasizing the exhilarating and heroic aspects of the combat experience while omitting the horrifying, messy, and *bodily* elements, the war themed videogame has the potential to act as a powerful recruitment tool, as demonstrated by *AA*.

Since almost all games are based on the logic of success and progression, and players want to succeed, procedural rhetoric can be a very powerful persuasive device; when the processes represented are thanatological in nature—living, dying, killing, and surviving—this persuasiveness is even more potent. Killing and dying have been a fundamental component to the videogame since its emergence in 1962 with *Spacewar!*. But what does it mean to "kill" or "die" in a videogame at all? The fact is no one is killed and no one actually dies. How, then, did

this language come to be? And, perhaps more importantly, why did the *thanatological metaphor*, as I will call it, become the predominant representation of success and failure in the videogame?

The thanatological metaphor simply refers to any metaphor which employs the symbols of death or dying. Put another way, the thanatological metaphor is a metaphor which uses death as its *vehicle*. It is an instance of what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call an "ontological metaphor," which is used "to comprehend events, actions, activities, and states" (p. 30). Ontological metaphors help us conceptualize the world we experience. They give it form and meaning, for defining a thing or concept "as an entity allows us to refer to it, quantify it, identify a particular aspect of it, see it as a cause, act with respect to it, and perhaps even believe that we can understand it" (p. 26). Death is perhaps the essence of this concept, a "state" we try to grasp, and therefore control.

Although its subject matter is grim, we employ the thanatological metaphor in common usage all the time. "I'm dying to see Bob Dylan" is an example of the thanatological metaphor; so too when a contrite gambler tells us he "got killed at the track." As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sam Keen (2004) examines the many uses of the thanatological metaphor in global propaganda. As Keen illustrates, depicting the enemy as Death himself is a common device employed in virtually all wars. This metaphor is so common, of course, because death is one of the few truly panhuman experiences. As Burke (1969) observes, "the selective nature of existence favors some images above others—and high among them, naturally, is the imagery of Life and Death, with its variants of being born, being reborn, dying, killing and being killed" (p. 12). And since death can be viewed as an organism's ultimate failing, the thanatological metaphor is well suited to the pass/fail logic of the videogame.

The thanatological metaphor can be expressed not only verbally or visually, but *procedurally* as well. In *Spacewar!* (1962), two players attempt to shoot the other's spaceship until one is destroyed. In *Pac-Man* (Namco Games, 1980), the player must avoid ghosts intent on destroying Pac-Man, until he eats a magical pellet and predator becomes prey. In *CoD: World at War* (Activision, 2008), an American soldier must avoid dying whilst killing hundreds of enemies. In all cases, success and failure are situated within a rhetoric of life and death: Kill and live to succeed, or be killed and fail. It makes sense that videogames utilize the thanatological metaphor, for death is both universal *and* procedural in nature: Cells deteriorate and organs shut down. Someone is alive, and then *x* happens, and then someone is no longer alive. Procedure complete; feedback loop closed. Except that in most videogames, the feedback loop does not close, at least not entirely.[19]

When an in-game character "dies," it does not really die, for its "death" is only temporary and revocable. In the videogame world, the finality which comes from real life procedurality is supplanted by a procedural rhetoric of rebirth, second chances, and, in short, immortality. Almost all videogames which employ the thanatological metaphor allow us to "try again," or "load checkpoint" after failing/dying. The final, physiological process of life-then-death, inevitable and inescapable, is thus transmuted into the regenerative process of life-then death-then life again. In this model, line is switched to circle, and there is always a next time; death is not an inevitability, but becomes optional. This perpetual resurrection if referred to in game jargon as "respawning," and is a mechanic found in most videogames which utilize thanatological metaphors.

Respawning is a procedural iteration of the thanatological metaphor, a representation of death and rebirth, or resurrection. It is almost never justified through narratological means—i.e., games do not often use an explicit conceit for this miraculous occurrence—but is so deeply

---

[19] The exception to this is the concept of "permadeath," discussed in the conclusion.

ingrained in our understanding of videogame worlds that we have come to expect it. When Mario

falls down a pit in *Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1983), for example, we expect him to resurrect almost

immediately; there is no "back-story" which explains how or why Mario is able to come back

from the dead so casually. And the price of this miracle is remarkably cheap: The player must

simply endure the frustration of replaying a portion of the level. If Mario happens to use up all

three lives he begins with, we can simply begin the stage or game again.

In many online modes of *CoD: MW 2* (Activision, 2009), the player's death is likewise

negated almost immediately. Upon dying, the player simply resurrects at a "respawn point,"

usually behind friendly lines. Apart from registering another death in the player's statistics, there

is no real consequence for dying; the player is simply allowed to return to the battle within

seconds. In the single player mode, resurrection is similarly quick and painless. Once a player is

killed, rebirth usually requires no more than loading a previously saved checkpoint. The

procedural experience of death in a videogame is thus similar to the experience of death

described in theological doctrine: Death is only a temporary state; after a brief waiting period,

the self will be resurrected, and being continues (O'Gorman, 2010).

Just as theology enters gaming, so too does gaming enter theology. In *Halos and Avatars:*

Playing Videogames With God (2010), Craig Detweiler appropriates the rhetoric of procedural

immortality to explain the death of Jesus, who was

> fragged during a deathmatch on an unexpected field of battle…. After three days,
> Jesus respawned, took his place as Administrator, and redefined the way the game
> is played…. As followers of Jesus, we can reset and respawn, having learned new
> ways to navigate. (p. 196)

This passage speaks to the structural similarities in both gaming and religion. Indeed, although a

player may die hundreds of times while playing *CoD*, the fact there is more than one death at all

signifies a rhetoric of immortality; death is represented as something one returns from. The

continual resurrection experienced in the videogame may thus offer a psychological buffer against the terror inherent in the mysterious inevitability of death, thereby mimicking a primary function of religious discourse.

The thanatological metaphor is particularly powerful in the videogame because as an interactive medium, it provides gamers with an avenue for facing and defeating death. Games allow us to confront representations of death in the form of images, sounds, and procedures, but allow us to overcome them through our prowess and dexterity. This metaphorical defeat over death can be very exhilarating. As Becker (1975) observes, "For man, maximum excitement is the confrontation of death and the skilful defiance of it by watching others fed to it as he survives transfixed with rapture" (p. 111). Players can often resurrect at the click of a button; phenomenologically, it is only others who die.

One of the primary functions of the thanatological metaphor in videogames is thus to provide the exhilarating experience of facing death without succumbing to it, which is the essence of heroism. As Becker (1973) reminds us,

> We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration; it moves us deeply in our hearts because we have doubts about how brave we ourselves would be. When we see a man bravely facing his own extinction we rehearse the greatest victory we can imagine. (p. 11)

Videogames, particularly those which employ the thanatological metaphor and emphasize simulated combat, allow us to play out this "greatest victory" ourselves; they allow us to confront death as a symbol—terrorist, Nazi, alien, etc.—and defeat it. This metaphor provides gamers with the attractive prospect that they can control death, if only temporarily. Thus, much like Hellenic poetry, videogames may provide a "*cultural* negation of a *natural* process," (Nagy, 1999, ch. 10, para. 13).

224

In addition to respawning, videogames also let us feel less vulnerable than we do in the real world. Videogames cannot (and should not) make players "feel" as if they have been shot, or suffer from radiation sickness; instead, these events must be signified procedurally and arithmetically. In the videogame, life or "health" must be quantified. Physical wellness is often represented in the form of a Health or Life Metre, for example. "Hit Points" or "Health Points" (HP), for example, are often used to indicate the amount of life remaining. The counterpart to HP are "damage points" (DAM), which subtract from the player's existing HP. For example, if I begin a game with 100 HP, but am shot by an arrow dealing 20 DAM , then I am left with 80HP. Life is thus expressed in easy to identify, whole numbers.

Many games also allow the player to replenish HP. In the RPG/FPS hybrid *Fallout 3*, (Bethesda Softworks, 2008) for example, I can replenish HP with "Stimpaks," virtual first-aid kits which are relatively easy to acquire. Likewise, if I find myself low on health after a battle in the ARPG *Fable III*, (Lionhead, 2010) I can simply ingest a health potion to heal my wounds. In both cases, healing is represented as something which requires nothing more than the press of a button, and this mechanism drastically affects gameplay: If a game allows a player to take damage without the ability to replenish health, for example, the player might be more cautious than if healing is quick and easy. Another common healing trope is simply *regeneration*. For example, if a player's avatar is "shot" in a non-vital area, or takes damage without dying, then the player regenerates lost health automatically as long as she does not take any more damage for a short period of time. Quite often (e.g. as in the *CoD* series), this is not explained through narrative at all; wounding is simply omitted from the combat equation entirely.

In addition to confronting players with representations of death in a safe environment, videogames also convey rhetorics of immortality through what we might call a *procedural*

rhetoric of heroism, the way in which a game's rules or parameters guide heroic action.

Generally speaking, games have always been a means for attaining honour and renown,

(Huizinga, 1955; Becker, 1973). Like all games, the videogame emphasizes completing tasks,

overcoming obstacles and earning rewards. This mimics the quest structure of the hero's journey

generally, which I will discuss in greater detail below. The typical hero's journey (Campbell

1968) can be expressed procedurally: 1) Receive task A; 2) Overcome obstacles X, Y, and Z; 3)

Complete task A; 4) Receive reward; 5) Progress to task B; 6) Repeat until no tasks remain

(Tosca, 2003). The tasks and obstacles vary according to the narrative frame (stop the terrorists,

slay the dragon, etc.); however, this structure usually remains intact.

Indeed, as Jeff Howard (2008) observes, the quest structure at the heart of the monomyth

works well within a procedural medium like the videogame:

> Many game designers embrace the hero's journey as a potential structure for games because it is effective in creating a compelling storyline that will motivate on-going play. Authors of books on game design who are also practicing game designers have praised Campbell's structure in detail as a model for constructing games. (p.5)

For example, game designer Troy Dunniway (2000) explains the usefulness of Campbell's

hero's journey as an over arching framework: "In a game... most stories will take the form of a

more classic or traditional hero's journey since those are the kind that offer the most conflict,

action and suspense. In the most basic sense, a hero's journey is a trip that a central character

goes on in order to resolve a problem" (p. 2). The concepts of conflict, resolution, and problem

solving are all procedural in nature, and therefore well suited to the videogame.

The procedural rhetoric of heroism is also evident in the range of actions available to the

player. As Bogost (2007) remarks, "meaning in video games is constructed not through a re-

creation of the world, but through selectively modeling appropriate models of that world" (p.

46). Thus, those aspects which are included or omitted constitute a series of rhetorical choices. With very few exceptions within the FPS and ARPG genres, progressing through the game requires the player to engage in significant, or heroic actions—clearing a machine gun nest, slaying a dragon, casting a spell, and so on. In the FPS, for example, the player is almost never given the option to "talk it out" or reason with the enemies; there is no attempt to understand their motivations; hostilities do not end until one side has been destroyed. With its emphasis on fast-paced, action packed gameplay, the FPS has little room for the time-consuming, nuanced and unpredictable nature of diplomacy; killing, the act of aiming a weapon and pulling the trigger, is much easier to proceduralize. Accurately simulating the infinite complexity of diplomatic negotiation is another matter entirely.

Moreover, the combat metaphor is well suited to an entertainment medium like the videogame, which offers exhilaration and "fun." Combat is situated within a discourse of fun from a very early age, as soon as a child learns to form a gun with his thumb and forefinger. The mutually determining relationship between fun and heroism is far too complex to address here, but we can say that combat is viewed as both fun and heroic across cultures and epochs. Therefore, as an entertainment medium, it is no surprise that simulated combat is so prevalent in the videogame.

Another example of the procedural rhetoric of heroism is seen in the videogame's insistence on user agency. For example, games within the FPS genre almost invariably require the player to "lead the charge," particularly during the campaign or "story" mode. As Dunniway (2000) suggests in his discussion of game design, "Usually you want one character in the group to be the leader" (p. 2). Thus, in many popular FPS games, the player cannot sit back and let the friendly artificial intelligence clear a machine gun nest, for instance. Although there are a few

notable exceptions (e.g. *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon*, Ubisoft, 2001), it is generally up to the player to extinguish the threat, to do the killing; in other words, the player must act heroically if she wants to progress in the game. In certain stages of *CoD: Black Ops* (2010), the single player campaign will not progress if the player remains static, or "camps" in one position; no matter how many enemies the player kills, they will continually appear until she moves forward to a certain position on the game grid. Similarly, in many online multiplayer modes, the player will not move up in the global rankings or earn many experience points (XP) if she does not actively put herself at risk.

From a strictly ludic point of view, this makes sense: If the game could be completed without user agency, then it would no longer be a game, but a movie; the player would simply become a viewer. By providing a simulated and interactive combat experience, however, the videogame provides users with a sense of power and agency they cannot get from other media. In both the campaign and online multiplayer modes, *CoD*'s procedures provide players with the opportunity to single-handedly turn the tide of a virtual battle, to become a modern day Achilles. And in doing so, it grants the (American) soldier the *kleos* of the videogame, which is simply the latest technique for propagating the ancient image of the warrior-hero. Recalling Nagy, *kleos* is something "you too can have" if you only follow the rules, or live up to the benchmark set by those designated "hero." This is a powerful rhetorical tool indeed. When the procedural rhetoric of immortality is supplemented by the immortality afforded through culturally sanctioned hero narratives, its message becomes even more forceful.

4. Narrative and the Heroic Motif

As mentioned earlier, narrative is a thorny issue in game studies. As an interactive medium, the videogame does not fit neatly into conventional conceptions of narrative;

videogames do not tell stories in the same way novels, films or television shows do. They often depend upon the narratological techniques of other media for telling stories, such as the filmic "cut-scene," or, in the early days, game manuals. As a result, some have questioned whether or not videogames are capable of constructing compelling narratives, or if narrative *matters* to gamers (e.g. Eskelinen, 2001; Frasca, 2003; Tosca 2003; Aarseth, 2004), while on the other hand, "narratologists" championed the videogame as a powerful narratological tool, capable of crafting compelling narratives in radically new ways (e.g. Murray, 1997; Jenkins, 2004). The scope of this chapter does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of the "narratology / ludology" debate, as it came to be called, and although the field has moved on from it somewhat, I do not suggest it has been wholly resolved. However, as the videogame has evolved as a medium and developers begin to understand its representational eccentricities, it seems clear that narrative frames do affect audience reception, and that narrative does indeed matter.

When discussing the debate, it is important to first note that the "ludologists" were never anti-narrative *per se*, at least not all of them. For the most part, they simply held that games and narrative are two very different ontological objects (Frasca, 2003). For example, Adams (1999), argues that "Interactivity," the essence of play, "is almost the opposite of narrative; narrative flows under the direction of the author, while interactivity depends on the player for motive power" (qtd. in Jenkins, 2004, p. 118). In this view, play is *active*, and reading is purely *passive*; the reader simply "goes along" with whatever is on the page, and cannot alter the plot or influence a character's choices. As Greg Costikyan (2007) phrases it, "A story is linear. The events of a story occur in the same order, and in the same way, each time you read (or watch or listen to). A story is a controlled experience.... A game is nonlinear" (para. 14). Marku Eskelinen (2001) famously derided narratological approaches, writing, "If I throw a ball at you I don't

229

expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories" (para. 1). Espen Aarseth (2004), perhaps the most vocal and polemical of the ludologists, likewise adopted a dismissive tone, asserting that when there is story in a game, it "is superficial, like a bored taxi driver whose only function is to take us on to the next ludic event.... They are completely superfluous, like illustrations in a storybook, and ignoring them will not affect the gameplay at all" (p. 52). Most of the ludologists did not ignore narrative entirely, but essentially just argued that the ludic form of a game should attract primary attention.

On the other side of the argument, "narratologists" such as Janet Murray (1997) argued that the videogame is a "truly revolutionary invention humankind is just on the verge of putting to use as a spellbinding storyteller" (p. 2). [20] Murray's ideal form of ludic narrative would look something like the "holodeck" from the TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a virtual reality machine in which individuals pre-program interactive story environments that respond to their various inputs (actions, conversations, etc.). The holodeck "is an illusory world that can be stopped, started, or turned off at will but that looks and behaves like the actual world" (p. 15). A "holonovel," Murray suggests, a novel "read" through the interface of the holodeck, "offers a model of an art form that is based on the most powerful technology of sensory illusion imaginable but is nevertheless continuous with the larger human tradition of storytelling, stretching from the heroic bards through the nineteenth-century novelists" (p. 26).

Like the ludologists, the "narratologists" never discounted ludicity, or ever argued that games were somehow *not* different from narratives; rather, they simply argued that game and story can complement each other in some potentially engaging ways. Indeed, most narratologists (and ludologists) adopt a "middle ground" position, acknowledging the importance of both the

---

[20] Murray is quick to note throughout her text that most games ignore narrative, and as a result, they tend to be quite poor in quality. She is speaking more in terms of potential than actuality.

ludological (procedures, rules) and narratological (setting, character, plot) components of a

game. For example, Jenkins (2004) suggests,

> there is a tremendous amount that game designers and critics could learn through making meaningful comparisons with other storytelling media. One gets rid of narrative as a framework for thinking about games only at one's own risk…. I hope to offer a middle ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists, one that respects the particularity of this emerging medium—examining games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility. (p. 119)

Greg Costikyan (2007) asserts that although "there's a direct, immediate conflict between the

demands of story and the demands of a game," one can "get a good story out of a game, [but]

you have to constrain gameplay in a way that ensures a story is told through play" (p. 6). In this

middle ground model, narrative can be produced and conveyed through playing the game. Many

games have proven that this marriage works, (e.g. *Fable, BioShock*, etc.) and often allow the

player's choices to influence plot development. These games create a narrative which at least

feels interactive.

It is wise to avoid extremes, and so this "middle ground" approach seems best. I do not

suggest videogames are a primarily narratological medium, or that people play games for their

narrative content first and foremost. Rather, as a multimodal medium, we must understand how

each representational mode fits into the overall user experience (Bogost, 2006). For example,

how might narrative frame a game's procedures? Where do they intersect, and what effect does

this produce? In short, narrative may not be all that matters, but it does matter, and therefore

warrants critical analysis. We need not and should not look at these components in isolation, but

rather, try to understand how they work together and complement or contradict each other.

The predominant narrative trend in both the FPS and ARPG genres is simplistic, ancient, and generally follows the heroic motif, or "monomyth" as outlined by Joseph Campbell (1968) and discussed in chapter one. To refresh, the monomyth goes as follows:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (p. 28)

Although Campbell's work largely focuses on the heroic motif in archaic civilizations, it not only continues to survive, but thrives. We see manifestations of it in movies, recruitment ads, news media and perhaps most clearly, in videogames. Since the heroic motif is already situated within a game logic of winning and losing, it is well suited to the interactive, competitive nature of the videogame.

It is no coincidence that the hero's in-game actions are often thanatological in nature. As Becker (1975) reminds us, the hero "is the one who gambles with his very life and successfully defies death…. [H]e embodies the triumph over what [we] fear most, extinction and death. He becomes the focus of the peculiarly human passion play of the victory over death" (p. 43). By providing a means for symbolically confronting death and defeating it, the videogame offers a much sought after taste of heroism. It is an interactive version of the heroic motif, a contest about contests. Winning in a game means winning in the game world, yes, but it also quite literally means winning in the real world as well.

This is the heart of Jesper Juul's (2005) concept of "half real," in which the games may depict fictional worlds, but their materiality as games and as rules is very much real. When these two are combined, powerful rhetorical messages can be constructed. The self esteem gained from winning as in any game, is supplemented by the self esteem gained from saving the world in the diegetic realm. In the game world, the player not only attains an "actual" victory over the

computer or other players, but attains a narratological victory as well, usually in the form of saving the world. Again, the hero is the one who protects the good and innocent by killing the evil and guilty. In the FPS *Halo 3* (Microsoft, 2007) for example, the protagonist must kill and defeat an evil alien race known as the "Covenant," intent on destroying humanity. In the ARPG *Fable III*, (Lionhead, 2010) the hero must save the realm from an evil king, killing hundreds of enemies along the way.

As Troy Dunniway (2000) explains,

> Since many games involve playing as a specific character... during the game, it makes a lot of sense to play as the central character of the story. Usually the point of view of the story is also written from the player's character's point of view, so a hero's journey works well. The character in the game would also be very boring if they weren't somewhat heroic in their deeds and efforts. (p. 2)

Moreover, it is a familiar narratological structure which most people will recognize. "One of the best reasons to utilize the classic hero's journey," Dunniway suggests, "is its simplicity. Everyone grows up listening to, reading about or watching stories about heroes. As a game designer it allows us to utilize a known mechanism or formula within our games that people will understand and associate with easily" (p. 2).

Furthermore, it is significant that the hero must leave the "common" realm in order to earn hero status: The common realm is the realm of the everyday, the mundane, and therefore the antithesis of heroic action. In the broadest sense, the videogame itself represents an "uncommon" realm, a digital environment distinct from everyday experience. More specifically, however, the worlds depicted in the FPS and ARPG are typically uncommon as well. They often take place in exotic locations, or other time periods—the battlefields of Europe in WWII, the mountains of post 9/11 Afghanistan, the deepest reaches of outer space. In many instances the game world is not meant to represent the "real" world at all; instead, it is fantastic, vibrant, and populated with

otherworldly characters. ARPGs such as *Dragon Age* (BioWare, 2009) are exemplary in their ability to create fantastic yet believable game worlds. However, whether the videogame world represents a "real" place or not, it is always uncommon in any sense of the word.

Once the hero finds herself inside the uncommon realm, she must confront a threat *already there* in order to enact the "decisive victory." The "fabulous forces" the hero faces are often foreign, alien, aggressive, wholly Other; indeed, the greater the threat, the greater the rewards bestowed upon the hero. It is important to recognize the Other is threatening not only to the individual, but to the individual's group as well: Since the "hero" designation cannot come from within, but must be bestowed from without, defeating the villain is not only a personal victory for the hero, but more importantly, an assurance of the perpetuation of the group upon which the hero's symbolic immortality depends.

Thus, the villain represents a truly existential threat. The manifestation of this threat varies from game to game, but almost invariably it is "evil;" its only function is to bring death. These include aliens attempting to destroy the earth or universe (e.g. *Halo, Mass Effect*); terrorists obtaining and deploying weapons of mass destruction (e.g. *CoD4: Modern Warfare*); Nazis (e.g. *Wolfenstein 3-D, Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*); zombies (e.g. *Resident Evil, Dead Rising*); and in an example of evil piled upon evil, Nazi Zombies (*CoD: World at War*). In all cases, the hero must travel to other-worldly realms and defeat other-worldly, death-dealing creatures in order to restore order to her community. The interactive heroic motif offered by the FPS and ARPG, therefore, offers us an opportunity to defeat death, if only in virtual worlds.

It takes a truly great hero to defeat such monstrous threats and so the diegesis of the FPS and ARPG genres almost invariably revolves around an exceptional protagonist who is singular in his or her ability to save the day. Indeed, the heroic motif is in fact so deeply ingrained in our

understanding of the videogame that like the Heideggerian hammer, we only see it for what it is when it breaks, when it stops working as it should. If a game allows us to play as a criminal, for example, it is said to be bad for the children. Similarly, if the role of the hero is not populated by "our" heroes, it causes anxiety and controversy. For example, when Canadian Defence Minister Peter McKay heard that gamers would be allowed to play as the "Taliban" in the latest *Medal of Honor* (EA, 2011) game, he expressed outrage: "Canadian forces, our allies, aid workers and innocent Afghans are being shot at and sometimes killed by the Taliban. This is reality. I find it wrong to have anyone, children in particular, playing the role of the Taliban" (Grainger, 2010, para. 3). We worry that allowing gamers to play as criminals or terrorists may be harmful. This is most clearly evident in an emerging phenomenon known as *Islamogaming*.

The term, "Islamogaming," was originally coined by Ed Halter (2006) to refer to games produced in the Middle East, or to games which offer an Islamic perspective on politics, religion, or education. "Islamogaming," Halter explains, is "a diverse field, ranging from amateur projects by students, unabashed anti-Zionist propaganda produced by [Hezbollah], religious games produced to teach Islam to kids, and a set of more sober games designed to explore the complex realities of Middle Eastern history" (para. 4). Much like their Western counterparts, games produced in the Middle East often adopt the structure of the heroic motif, but populate the roles much differently than we are perhaps used to. Instead of an American soldier saving the world from Islamic terrorists, for example, an Islamic game might depict a Palestinian youth resisting the Zionist occupation, or an Iraqi freedom fighter battling the Americans in Iraq. As Halter observes, this re-characterization constitutes an attempt "to subvert the typical gaming stereotype of Arabs as bad guys by replacing the typical American or European action hero with a

recognizably Muslim protagonist" (para. 4). In other words, these games are often procedurally

very similar to their Western counterparts, but employ different narratological frames.

Appropriating Becker's terminology, we could say that the differences in narrative

frames are actually manifestations of competing *cultural hero systems*, signified by each

culture's conception of the hero. In both cases, the enemies are aggressive, evil, and represent

death, while the heroes who kill them are invariably on the side of righteousness, freedom, and

life. In both cases, it is not just the hero's life at stake, but the hero's *way of life* at stake. Given

that the concept of heroism arose out of a need to deny death (Becker 1973), these similarities

are not unexpected. However, as Machin and Suleiman (2006) point out, the manner in which the

combatants are depicted varies according to region, and these variations reveal broader cultural

insights. In the Western FPS, for example, the emphasis often falls on "the skill of the soldiers

and the superiority of their weapons; the individuality and camaraderie of the soldiers" (p. 7).

Consider the cover description for *CoD4:MW* (Activision, 2007):

> *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* arms gamers with an arsenal of advanced and
> powerful modern day firepower and transports them to the most treacherous
> hotspots around the globe to take on a rogue enemy group threatening the world.
> As both a U.S. Marine and British S.A.S. soldier… players use sophisticated
> technology, superior firepower and coordinated land and air strikes…

There is a clear binary opposition at play here: Sophisticated, U.S. and British soldiers against a

"rogue enemy group threatening the world." In the game's narrative, an Eastern European and

Middle Eastern terrorist group has obtained a nuclear bomb and the player's overarching mission

is to prevent its detonation, utilizing all the latest surveillance and weapon technologies.

However, this emphasis on technological superiority and individualism is not as strong in

Middle Eastern Games such as the FPS *Special Force* (Hezbollah, 2003); these games typically

do not "humanize and individualize the soldiers, or stress superior skill and technology. Unlike

American ideology, Hezbollah ideology foregrounds sacrifice as part of the Islamic struggle. Strength comes not from technology but from God, as represented by heavenly light" (Machin and Suleiman, 2006, pp. 7-8). In *Special Force* (*SF*), Lebanese heroes must resist "Zionist" aggressors with the help of God. Unlike the Western FPS, which propagates the rhetorics of technological progress and hyper-individualism so characteristic of Western liberal democracy, the Islamic FPS promotes collectivism and religious devotion. The structures are very similar; where these games differ is in their depictions of the innocent and guilty, those worthy of salvation and those suitable for sacrifice.

When layered on top of the structural form of the heroic motif, the narratives in both *CoD4* and *SF* offer players a powerful rhetoric of heroism and therefore immortality. These games offer players the opportunity to participate in culturally sanctioned hero narratives, to become a part of their culture's *kleos*. They provide a means for gaining self-esteem, to feel as if "our cause" is the just cause. At the same time, they provide a benchmark for would-be heroes to aspire to, much like the *Iliad* provided a benchmark for the Hellenic citizen so many millennia ago. As Vit Sisler (2009) observes, "videogames provide gamers with a convenient source of cultural symbols, myths and rituals as they produce their identities…. When you play a game, you tend to identify yourself not only with its main character, but with the whole system—with its rules and underlying logic" (para. 10). And since the main character is usually a culturally prescribed hero, games offer a way to situate ourselves within cultural hero systems.

It is important to reiterate that the four components discussed here—Play, Immersion, Procedurality, and Narrative—must not be viewed in isolation, but as parts of a complex and dynamic network of mutually determined meaning. Each component works with and/or against the others. I have attempted to demonstrate that videogames can combine these four components

237

and thereby convey a multi-faceted but cohesive rhetoric of heroism and immortality, since they 1) Provide an arena in which participants can demonstrate self-worth; 2) Allow participants to extend the self, grant agency, and inhabit another character; 3) Can proceduralize "heroic" actions like fighting a war, or allow the player to rise from the dead; and 4) Set all of this within a context according to culturally defined conceptions of the heroic. Not all games utilize all components equally at all times, and so it is necessary for the critic to identify which components or configurations are most relevant to the specific critical aim. In the following chapter, I will apply this multi-tiered model in a series of close readings, and will examine how these components work together in perpetuating the rhetoric of war-heroism in two popular genres, the FPS and ARPG.

Chapter 5: "A Savior Through Blood:" The Rhetoric of War Heroism

> In a blunt sense, *Doom* is about a brutal mastery over flesh.... [T]his highly addictive game was not just about killing time; it also felt like it killed death, at least momentarily. It was about stopping the flow of time, shutting out the rest of the world, in order to become enmeshed in the eternal, adrenaline-pumping Now of constant warfare. The death of enemies affirms one's own continued existence; even if defeated, the game can always start again.
>
> - Ed Halter, *From Sun-Tzu to Xbox: War and VideoGames*

> Men spill blood because it makes their hearts glad and fills out their organisms with a sense of vital power; ceremoniously killing captives is a way of affirming power over life, and therefore over death.
>
> - Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil*

This chapter will consist of several "close readings" which apply the theoretical frameworks covered in the previous chapters to two popular videogame genres. Although my methodology can be applied to all videogames, I will pay particular attention to the First Person Shooter (FPS) and the Action Role-Playing Game (ARPG). Like any genres, these are permeable and their classification should only be seen as a heuristic device. Indeed, the fact is that most games incorporate several genres simultaneously and fall outside of a single genre, such as the FPS/RPG hybrid, *Fallout 3* (Bethesda, 2008), or the Real-Time Strategy/FPS hybrid *Toy Soldiers* (Signal Studios, 2010). To use a well-known example, *Super Mario Bros. 3* (Nintendo, 1988) included casino like "mini-games" in addition to the regular, platform-scrolling gameplay most players associate with *Mario* games.

I have chosen the FPS and ARPG genres in particular because they are perhaps the clearest examples of the videogame's potential as a heroic medium. As discussed in the previous chapter, videogames are a heroic, death denying medium simply by virtue of their game-ness; however, as a digital medium, they also possess their own particular characteristics that make them especially well suited for conveying rhetorics of heroism. The stories, structures, and gameplay of the FPS and ARPG each add additional layers of heroic content, and with very few exceptions, provide a heroic environment to act powerfully within. The player's physical actions may consist of a flick of the fingers, or a slight movement of the wrist, but these actions may produce spectacular effects in the game environment (e.g. firing a powerful weapon), granting the player an increased sense of significance.

Moreover, these games often utilize the symbols of death and dying, both at the individual and collective levels. Not only is the player's success and failure couched within terms of death, and resurrections become routine, but the narratological context of the game often implies that failure will result in the extinction of a "way of life." As I will demonstrate, videogames in general, and these "heroic genres" in particular, propagate powerful rhetorics of war heroism; whether saving America from terrorists, or the realm from an evil dragon, the videogame warrior is almost always a hero fighting in an epic battle of cosmic significance. Examining these games may offer us an important insight into how we view heroism in the contemporary context, as well as the means by which war heroism is portrayed in digital media.

It is true that the idea of the soldier as hero has been complicated since Hector and Achilles;[1] however, the lure of war heroism continues to motivate individuals into action. For example, on Veterans' Day in the U.S., CNN's *Erin Burnett Show* (2013) interviewed a young

---

[1] One can read the *Iliad* as an anti-war poem; however, even if that is the case, the critique of war is more political than ideological. Achilles' military exploits make him a hero, even if they are enacted in a foolish war.

man about to enlist in the U.S. Army. He was asked why he was joining, to which he responded, "I see a lot of heroes out there and I want to be one of them. I want to be known as a hero. I want to get my name out there, to be big out there" (CNN, 2013). Not every would-be hero voices his or her intentions so explicitly; however, the young man's candour suggests that people still look to the military for "glory" and its equivalents. In order for the young man to see the military as a viable option for attaining hero-status, he must first be exposed to messages which paint soldiering in a heroic light.

In the twenty-first century, these messages typically come from television, film, and now videogames. The persistence of the rhetoric of war heroism reminds us that a society values its security above all else. With all our technological advancement, the underlying fear of material insecurity lies at the heart of our motivations. Recalling Becker (1975), hunters and warriors were the first heroes, since "in these activities certain individuals could single themselves out as adept at defying death; the tokens and trophies that they displayed were indications of immortality power or durability power, which is the same thing" (p. 43). Videogames simply allow gamers to participate in such heroic pursuits interactively, in real time within a safe environment. Thus, even if individuals reject particular instances of militarism, the individual warrior is still valorized, as evidenced by the many "support the troops" campaigns.

The FPS and ARPG genres are particularly well suited for conveying rhetorics of war heroism because the soldier's heroism is easily proceduralized: Kill target X to save Y, and in doing so receive Z. Whether Navy SEAL or Level 20 Mage, this fundamental structure remains the same. However, it is not accurate to say that both the FPS and ARPG warriors are identical, for they are not. Each has its own history, conventions, and death denying properties. There are

of course many other types of videogame heroes: Sports heroes, Guitar heroes, Detective heroes, and so on, but games which feature combat mechanics seem to be especially pervasive.

The vast majority of scholarship examining the relationship between videogames and war has focused almost entirely on the Shooter genres.[2] However, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the militaristic undertones of other genres, including the ARPG. Although the narratological particulars are very different, we can see a heroic, pro-military interventionist structure underlying both genres. Thus, after outlining the relationship between the military and entertainment industries and discussing the popular *Call of Duty* (Activision) series, I will analyze the rhetoric of war heroism which underlines the popular ARPG *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011). Ultimately, I will demonstrate that these games produce a multi-modal, dynamic rhetoric of war heroism through their simultaneous use of narratological, procedural, and ludological rhetoric.

1. The Military Entertainment Complex

The collusion between the military and gaming in general has received considerable critical attention. Since the late 1990s, dozens of articles, books, and anthologies have explicitly addressed the relationship between war and gaming (e.g. Herz, 1997; Lenoir, 2000; Nieborg, 2003; Halter, 2006; Stahl, 2009; Huntemann and Payne, 2009). It is little wonder that this relationship has garnered so much attention; after all, games have been used for militaristic purposes since at least the fifth century B.C.E (Halter, 2006), and the FPS genre continues to grow in cultural significance. Although the concept of battle "rehearsal" is probably as old as warfare—indeed, "training" is certainly a form of play—the first wargame is believed to be *Go!*, an ancient Chinese board game (Halter, 2006). It is only a "wargame" in a very abstract sense

---

[2] Strategy games in general have also received significant attention, but the majority of war videogame scholarship skews towards the FPS in particular.

(there are no explicit soldiers), but its rule system, characterized by "encircling" the opposing player's pieces, is reminiscent of battle tactics. *Go!* never caught on in the West, and so wargame scholars have pointed to a much more recent parent of today's military themed videogames. As Deterding (2009) observes, "Western military wargames originated from amended versions of *Chess* in… 19th century Germany and quickly spread as an integral tool for strategic planning and training through military academies around the globe" (p. 21).

In particular, Georg von Reisswitz's *Kriegspiel* (1812), designed for the Prussian military, is typically considered to signal the beginning of "The war college tradition of modern war games" (Lenoir and Lowood, 2003, p. 2). *Kriegspeil* was

> Used as early as the 1820s for officer training in the Prussian military, [and] it was imported to the United States in the early 1880s for training purposes….As it developed through many variants over the course of the 19th century, *Kriegspiel* established conventions of war gaming such as identifying the opponents as red and blue, the use of maps and umpires, and fundamental rules for movement and combat resolution. (p. 2)

The idea behind *Kriegspiel,* and wargaming in general, is that commanders can learn important tactical and strategic lessons in a safe environment, i.e. before hitting the actual battlefield. As discussed in the previous chapter, games work well with war because they are both, in essence, procedural feedback loops: One participant makes a strategic move within a defined set of parameters, which in turn influences the other participant's strategic move, and so on. This adds an additional layer of procedural verisimilitude to battle planning.

However, *Kriegspiel* and its successors were only really played by military officers; there was no "home version" until almost a century later. According to Deterding (2009), "The passing from military to civil or 'hobby' wargaming is most often dated to 1913, when H.G. Wells published the rule booklet *Little Wars* for playing battles with tin soldiers and a spring loaded rubber cannon" (p. 24). *Little Wars* was essentially a guide for playing with toy soldiers,

outlining the roles of infantry, cavalry, and artillery. It is a crude "game;" however, it is significant because it moved the wargame out of the military college and into the living room. The home wargame went through a boom and bust cycle in between the World Wars, and was not rejuvenated again until after WWII, when computers became more and more accessible, and industries became more interdependent (Deterding, 2009). Military organizations such as DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency), founded in the late 1950s to ensure American technological superiority, pushed the frontier of computing technology in the post-war period, and are widely credited with inventing the internet as we know it today (Herz, 1997).

Apart from this general, perhaps indirect intersection between games and the military, Lenoir and Lowood (2003) observe that videogames have shared a more direct and mutually beneficial connection with the U.S. military since the end of the second World War:

> The U.S. Department of Defense... has been the primary proponent of war game design since the 1950s. Yet, commercial game designers produced many of the ideas shaping the design of military simulations, both before and after the advent of computer-based-games. By the 1980s, the seeds of a deeper collaboration among military, commercial designers, the entertainment industry, and academic researchers in the development of high-end computer simulations for military training had been planted. (p. 1)

J.C. Herz (1997) coined the term "military entertainment complex" (MEC) to describe this complex relationship between the post-Cold War defense and entertainment industries. The term is a play on Eisenhower's "military-industrial complex;" however, as Huntemann and Payne (2009) write in their introduction to *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics and Play in Military Video Games*, the MEC is perhaps more difficult to describe because "unlike the military-industrial-complex… the military-entertainment complex is a post-Cold War phenomenon that enjoys considerably more opaque linkages between its numerous constituents, and generates texts that blur the line between entertainment and militarism" (p. 5).

Part of the problem simply lies in the complex traffic of innovation which characterizes the post-Cold War period. As both the commercial and defence sectors attempt to improve their technological capabilities, and former military personnel become "consultants," the two-way traffic is difficult to untangle. Indeed, not only do game designers borrow from the military sphere, but the military borrows from the commercial sector as well; as a result, there is a "mutually beneficial synergy between the military and the entertainment industries" (Lenoir and Lowood, 2003, p. 22). In Lenoir and Lowood's words, "The military-industrial complex has become the military-entertainment complex. The entertainment industry is both a major source of innovative ideas and technology, and the training ground for what might be called post-human warfare" (2003, p. 37).

Videogames in particular have little difficulty crossing the military/civilian line since computer simulations are an inexpensive but effective means for training soldiers, pilots, and tank operators. Moreover, they are much better than conventional boardgames at simulating certain aspects of a battle. For example, as Deterding (2009) points out, "Real-time video wargames afforded the experience of realistic tactical battle under time pressure" (p. 34). This real time pressure is an essential component of the contemporary battlefield, which is highly dynamic, complex, and fluid. In the 1980s, SIMNET, a child of DARPA, began utilizing vehicle simulators to train recruits, and indeed, "SIMNET has been an incubator for the ideas and technology behind many current video games" (p. 24). These simulators were then mimicked in the driving simulators found in so many arcades in the 1990s.

On the other side of the equation, most wargame theorists point to the first Gulf War as the first time that videogame simulations entered the "real" war theatre. Quoting Lenoir and Lowood (2003) once again,

> The value of using computer-based war games as predictive models for combat was demonstrated convincingly before the Gulf War in the summer of 1990. General Normal Schwartzkopf and his staff prepared at the U.S. Central Military Command in Florida for a potential conflict in this region by playing scenarios of the war game *Operation Internal Look* designed by Gary Ware. (pp. 7-8)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the battle scenarios simulated in Ware's game were replicated almost identically in the actual battles. The computer's ability to represent procedural operations and to process large quantities of data mean that war simulations are relatively easy to produce, both commercially and in the military. As Crogan (2003) observes, this fluid back-and-forth between the military and the commercial sector has ideological implications: "The two-way traffic between computer gaming and simulation in the military entertainment complex signposts a significant moment in the pure war tendency, one in which a further stage of the merger between the spheres of the military and domestic activity and concerns is reached" (p. 280).

As discussed in the previous chapter, perhaps the clearest example of the military reaching into the domestic sphere is found in *America's Army* (U.S. Army, 2002). As Nichols (2009) notes, "*America's Army* is an advergame [advertising game], making it a specific type of serious game. Serious games are used to teach skills and responses to situations; advergames focus these gaming responses to create a positive view of the brand" (p. 45). *AA* functions as little more than a recruiting and propaganda tool, and nobody disputes that. Thus, I will not comment on this game in much more detail, as for one, it has been studied quite extensively already, and two, I am more interested in "less apparent" forms of propaganda.

Suffice it to say, however, the production and promotion of such a game is indicative of the importance the MEC grants to utilizing video games as purveyors of propaganda. Indeed, according to Colonel Casey Wardynski, who worked on *AA*: "You see, with this game our purpose was not to entertain but to inform using entertainment…. We wanted to virtually put

kids in the boots of a young soldier, much like they would be if they entered the Army"

(Huntemann, 2009, p. 180). As discussed in the previous chapter, these boots are carefully

crafted. The negative aspects of war—boredom, pain, and death—are either omitted or severely

mitigated. In contrast, the "fun" aspects of war are emphasized. As a result, the U.S. Army is

able to reach an audience of mostly young males looking for both meaning and adventure.

One iteration of the game, *America's Army: True Soldiers* (U.S. Army/Ubisoft, 2007), is

particularly salient for my purposes. This version depicts "actual" soldiers and their stories from

the frontlines of Afghanistan and Iraq, unlike most FPSs, which feature fictional characters and

fictional scenarios. On the back of the cover for the Xbox 360 version, bold, capitalized letters

read, "CREATED BY SOLDIERS. DEVELOPED BY GAMERS. TESTED BY HEROES"

(U.S. Army/Ubisoft, 2007). In this case, the heroes refer to the actual soldiers featured in the

game. The description implies that the game is both authentic, and fun, since both "heroes" and

"gamers" helped design the game, and this once again reinforces the myth that combat is

entertaining and heroic. One hero featured in the game, Sgt. Tommy Rieman, a highly decorated

U.S. Army veteran had the following to say about his inclusion in the game: "It's a great way to

tell our stories. It's an honor and it's pretty cool. This is all very authentic, even down to the face

paint, the goggles" (qtd. in Nichols, 2009, pp. 42-43).

It is "cool" and "an honor" because Sgt. Rieman is here granted a contemporary form of

kleos by virtue of his inclusion in the game. Where past cultures immortalized their heroes by

erecting statues and composing epic poetry, contemporary heroes are increasingly celebrated

through videogames and other digital media. On a very basic level, the *True Soldiers* series is no

different from Beowulf regaling the mead hall with tales of prowess and valour. The same

mechanism is at play: In both cases the hero's military victories are immortalized (heard, told,

and re-heard) through the medium of the day. Nothing has changed except for the delivery method. Sgt. Rieman explicitly uses the term "honor," which as discussed in the first chapter, is a prime motivator in an existentially anxious animal. However, why is it an honour to be immortalized in this way? One reason is that gamers emulate videogame protagonists. Rieman's job has him engage in activities which other people want to do in their spare time. It is fun, exciting, cool, and heroic. In this way, Rieman and the values he represents are celebrated in the present, but perhaps even more importantly, they are ludically immortalized; his memory is forever inscribed in the game's coding and texture models.

Sgt. Rieman's inclusion in *True Soldiers* is a fairly clear example of the "virtual *kleos*" described in the previous chapter. But as Nichols (2009) points out, the fact is that "Currently, the military provides only a small portion of industry revenues" (p. 46). The *AA* series is important from a theoretical perspective, but it is far less popular/pervasive than the military themed games produced by commercial game companies. In short, the real soldier worship comes largely from the private sector. Thus, I will now turn my attention to the tremendously popular *Call of Duty* series, published by Activision.

2. Answering the Call in the Good War

Activision's *Call of Duty* (*CoD*) series has transcended the gaming world and become a cultural entity unto itself. The latest instalment, *CoD: Black Ops II* (Activision, 2012) set multiple sales records, grossing over $500 million (USD) in sales in the first twenty-four hours, and over $1 billion after only fifteen days (2012, joystiq.com). No other entertainment product has reached that mark so quickly. To provide some perspective, James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2009) took a sluggish seventeen days to reach the $1B mark, and in more general terms, gaming has consistently outperformed the American film industry (total annual revenues) since 2007

(NPD, 2009). The past few *CoD* releases have been heavily promoted by high production

television campaigns, complete with celebrity endorsements. In one famous campaign, entitled

"There's a soldier in all of us" (Activision, 2010), "average" individuals in their work clothes

(business suits, hard hats, chef's aprons) fire assault rifles and high explosives at one another in

and around an abandoned building; as the commercial goes on, it is revealed that celebrities like

Kobe Bryant and Jimmy Kimmel are also in the fight. The central conceit is that anyone and

everyone can become a "badass" soldier, and that no matter how lowly one might be in the "real"

world, in *CoD*, everyone is equal. Unlike the mundane, everyday world, the commercial

promises the player an exhilarating war experience, an opportunity to assert her power.

From a Beckerian perspective, the rhetoric inherent in games like *CoD* may buffer

existential anxiety for a number of reasons. First, they place players into heroic contexts

(narratological rhetoric); secondly, they offer procedural metaphors for heroic action, such as

combat (procedural rhetoric); and finally, they provide exhilarating, competitive arenas for

quantifiably demonstrating excellence and superiority (ludological rhetoric). When employed in

concert with one another, these discrete units form a powerful rhetoric of war heroism, and

therefore serve a death denying function. Although there are many games in the series, in all

cases, *CoD* sets up an in-group (us) as victor over an outgroup (them), and inevitably, it is "our"

side who is successful. The bad guys cannot win here; even when the player "dies" she is

instantly resurrected to continue the fight. Games or simulations which allow the player to

defend their way of life against the threat of "evildoers" may be excellent means for mitigating

death anxiety as they affirm a worldview which sets the player up as an indisputable and un-

killable good guy. The threats come in many different forms (terrorists, Nazis, communists,

zombies, etc.), but they all have in common mutually exclusive, ultra-aggressive ideologies which seem to have nothing at their centers other than blind malice.

Like many FPS series, *CoD* started out in the WWII subgenre. Traditionally, the FPS used WWII as a predominant narrative frame. These games use the images, sounds, and stories of WWII, the twentieth century's paradigmatic hero conflict. Even today, WWII continues to serve as the paradigmatic case of an Augustinian "just war." As discussed in the first chapter, the desire to become a "maker of history" is deeply rooted in our urge to deny mortality; participating in the D-Day invasions is akin to a Hellenic citizen participating in the Trojan War.

As Joel Penney (2009) notes, this nostalgic glorification serves an ideological function:

> More than six decades after the end of World War II, the conflict continues to hold a central place in the popular imaginary. In contemporary politics, World War II had frequently been employed as a favored metaphor of conservatives, symbolizing the necessity of aggressive military policy against "evil…." [T]hese World War II metaphors nearly always function ideologically, fostering the rhetoric of patriotism in the United States and in other former Allied nations so as to bolster support for current military interventions. (p. 191)

Except for rare cases, public discourses surrounding the war tend to emphasize our victories (e.g. D-Day) and the enemy's atrocities (e.g. POW treatment), while simultaneously downplaying our defeats (e.g. Dieppe) and our atrocities (e.g. Dresden). The hero system at play here is nostalgic in nature, further cementing the moral justness and heroism of combat in the second World War.

WWII was the default setting for many shooters not only because it has an easy enemy in Nazis, but also because it was the last war to be represented as changing the course of the world for good. In this view, Hitler was an evil who had to be stopped, and we are all in a relatively safe democracy with a great standard of living because of it. Without the actions of WWII we would be living in an Aryan North Korea or Soviet Russia. This way of thinking serves several functions. First, perpetually valorizing the past actions of a nation cements patriotism in the

present. It is something to be drawn upon when necessary. When making the push for war in

both Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush and others used the rhetoric of WWII to bolster their case (e.g.

Bush's 2002 State of the Union speech). Furthermore, it perpetuates the myth of the American

saviour, the view that Americans are divinely chosen to do good in the world (Jewett and Shelton

Lawrence, 1977). Finally, in a more abstract sense, valorizing WWII simply reinforces the

rhetoric of war heroism, i.e., the path to heroism and glory is through (mortal) combat.

The WWII subgenre really began with *Wolfenstein 3-D* (Apogee, 1992), and after

achieving tremendous commercial success many game companies followed its use of the WWII

frame. In these games, the player usually views the WWII-themed environment (e.g. D-Day, Iwo

Jima, etc.) from a first person perspective, and must use the mouse or controller to aim a virtual

weapon (usually a gun) at WWII-themed enemies trying to "kill" the player. Typically, a

cutscene or introductory text will tell players that they are about to partake in a mission which

will finally end the war, and the accompanying threat of tyranny. Although the prevalence of the

WWII subgenre has undoubtedly faded in recent years, many FPS franchises began by making

WWII themed games.

The *Medal of Honor* (EA) franchise, for example, has released sixteen games since the

original in 1999, and only the last two—*Medal of Honor* (2010), and *Medal of Honor:*

Warfighter (2012)—take place outside of WWII.[3] Similarly, the *CoD* franchise originally

centered around WWII battles. The first three instalments—in 2003, 2005, and 2006,

respectively—took place in the European theatre. The *CoD* series differed somewhat

narratologically because although it did focus on American soldiers, it also included British,

Soviet, and even Polish and Canadian missions. It is not often that the Polish or Canadian hero

myths surrounding WWII are depicted in videogames.

---

[3] Coincidentally or not, the "contemporary" *MoH* games were unsuccessful both commercially and critically.

From a Beckerian perspective, the popularity of the WWII subgenre, especially in North America,[4] can perhaps be explained. WWII is the nostalgic reservoir of collective glory *par excellence* for allied nations, and so may mitigate death anxiety. For the "Allies," these games offer reservoirs of self-esteem; they are reminders of past glory and nostalgia, which has been shown to mitigate death anxiety in previous Terror Management Theory research.[5] By feeling as if we can take part in one of our culture's most strongly held hero narratives, we in turn get a dose of the heroic, if only temporarily and virtually. But how does the *CoD* series actually construct rhetorics of war heroism in the first place? What are the mechanics at play?

a. Narratological Rhetoric

The first device I will examine is narratological rhetoric. This is the way that the game's story elements—setting, characters, plot—serve to promote rhetorics of war heroism. In the series' first instalment, *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003), there are three main campaigns, American, British, and Russian. This is significant because most games prior to *CoD* stayed with the American story alone. So although there is a specific American hero rhetoric at play here, there is also a bit of heroic heterogeneity as well. The American and British campaigns both begin on the night before D-Day, wherein the player must try to disable German defences before the invasion. As the player progresses through the game she will participate in some of the major battles of the post invasion Western front, up until VE-Day.

The Russian campaign is a little different, at least in terms of its narrative, and takes place on the Eastern Front. The Russians are certainly the good guys when compared to the Nazis, but

---

[4] For example, for the last WWII themed *CoD* instalment, *World at War* (2008), 64.9% (4.48m) of global sales came from North America, while 25.6% (1.77m) came from Europe, and only 9.5% (0.66m) came from the rest of the world (vgchartz.com). It is difficult to make causal connections, but this may suggest a difference in cultural attitudes towards the war, or perhaps towards war heroism in general.

[5] E.g. Routledge, Clay et al. (2006) "A Blast from the Past: The Terror Management Function of Nostalgia."

they are also depicted as more ruthless than the Americans or British. For example, in one scene the Russians are seen killing German POWs, and the soldiers are only provided with one rifle for every two men; in this depiction, Russians appear fierce in battle, but also barbaric. Still, the battle of Stalingrad and other major engagements on the Eastern front are undoubtedly given the hero's treatment. In all cases, the narrative provides a sense that the player is participating in a grand, historically significant event. Here the player participates in the *mythos* of WWII, and in doing so becomes a part of it. Again, a big part of that *mythos* is the battle between good and evil. We know that the Axis was bad, and the Allies were good.

Another clear example of this can be seen in a later WWII *CoD* game, 2008's *World at War* (Activision), which takes place in the Pacific theatre. The game opens with a black screen, with white text providing mission context:

> 'Semper *Fi'* [mission title]
> Makin Atoll, South Pacific [mission location]
> August 17th, 1942
> Pvt. Miller (M.I.A.)
> 2nd Marine Raider Battalion (Carlson's Raiders)

As the black screen fades away, the player realizes that she is the missing Pvt. Miller and is being held as a POW by Japanese forces. Miller is being kept in a hut, fastened to a post. The first thing the player sees is a Japanese officer up close, blowing cigarette smoke into Miller's face. The Japanese officer's facial features are highly exaggerated; indeed, he bears a close resemble to the apish depictions of the enemy seen in the propaganda posters discussed in chapter three. In the background, another American POW, Pvt. Pyle, is being beaten, screaming in pain. Outside the hut, there are several dead Americans tied to posts, clearly tortured before execution. Unlike a cutscene, which would show the scene from a voyeuristic, third person perspective, the game utilizes a first person perspective, and the player is able to move Miller's

253

head. Moreover, the first person perspective heightens tension, since the player is faced with the prospect of torture and death, getting the sense that "I might be next."

The Japanese officer then mocks Miller: "You think because you say nothing… You are strong?" and walks towards Pvt. Pyle. Pyle exhorts the player not to "tell them a fucking thing!" and then spits in the Japanese officer's face. In response to this act of defiance, the Japanese officer plunges a lit cigarette into Pyle's eye, and then instructs his adjutant to "kill them both." Pyle tells the adjutant to "go to hell," right before his throat is slit, splattering blood all over the hut's walls. Just as the adjutant is about to kill Miller, a stealthy Marine, Sgt. Roebuck (voiced by Kiefer Sutherland), kills the Japanese soldier at the last moment. Roebuck checks on Miller, and assures him that, "We're gonna make them pay for what they've done!" At this point the player gains control of Miller's movements, and the high paced combat which typifies the series begins. Here the narrative sets up the loyal, tough, morally strong, all-American Marines against the treacherous Japanese, who resort to brutal, inhumane tactics.

In his discussion of *WaW*, Jamie Baron (2010) observes that "the visceral indexical images of violence in the game and its highly simplified conception of World War II serve primarily to legitimate the violence the user is meant to commit against the iconic Nazis and the Japanese during the gameplay" (p. 308). Indeed, once free, the remainder of the level consists of Miller killing hundreds of Japanese. After the opening torture scene, there is no moral ambiguity in killing so many of them; they deserve it. The torture scene reinforces the common sense rhetoric that the Japanese were cruel, and that killing them was justified. The Japanese are not honourable. They are beasts, and should be exterminated as such.

Even the mission title contributes to the heroic frame. *Semper Fi*, short for *semper fidelis*, or "always faithful," is the motto of the United States Marine Corps (USMC). This adds to the

game's historical realism, and reinforces the idea that the player is a part of a unit and a tradition much older than himself. Indeed, the Marine Corps predates American independence, tracing its origins to 1775. The Marines have been honoured and immortalized in virtually every medium since then, and *CoD: WaW* simply continues the immortalization process in its own way. Like we saw in the *AA:True Soldiers* series, games like *CoD: WaW* constitute a heroic feedback loop: The Marine is in the game because he is a hero, but he is also a hero because he is in the game. Thus, simply by virtue of being in the game, the Marines are metonymically linked with action, excitement, exhilaration, glory, and heroism.

To add another layer of heroism, the player-Marine is then placed into perhaps the most heroic context imaginable, namely, liberating American POWs from torturous, semi-human Japanese soldiers (who also, by the way, were responsible for Pearl Harbor). In participating in WWII, the player enacts one of the West's greatest hero narratives; indeed, the storied Marine exploits of Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, and Makin Atoll are second in American WWII folklore only to the D-Day invasions. However, unlike a movie, for example, the player not only acts as a voyeur to the action, but actively participates in it. As Baron (2010) puts it,

> Such games have the potential to transform the "reader" of history into the active "user" or even "maker" of history. Indeed, the very concept of historical videogames implies that the user may play an active part in the construction of historical narratives and, thereby, in the implications of these historical events for the present. (p. 303)

Of course, the player does not actually have any influence on the game's narrative; the Allied victory is never in doubt. Thus, the "narrative established in the cutscenes and the structures of the missions never change…. As a result, *CoD* offers an historical narrative of inevitability, a teleological version of the events of World War II" (p. 306). It is as if there could be no other outcome, that the Allies were pre-destined to win, since they were on the side of good.

With that in mind, I will now turn my attention to the *Modern Warfare* series, which marked a shift away from the WWII motif and into contemporary times. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Activision, 2007) was a juggernaut. It has had a tremendous impact not only within the genre, but within the medium as a whole. It should be noted that *MW*'s popularity had much more to do with its online multiplayer, which I'll discuss in greater detail below; however, there is a fairly robust (if clichéd) and politically charged narrative which cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the characters, locations, and weapons used in multiplayer come from the single player campaign (story mode), and so warrant attention.

MW's plot is told, or experienced, from several points of view, including a member of the British Special Air Service (SAS), Sgt. John "Soap" MacTavish, and a US Marine, Sgt. Paul Jackson. The game takes place in several locations in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the UK. Essentially, Russia has fallen into civil war, and an ultra-nationalist/terrorist group has seized nuclear weapons. This group believes Western foreign policy has destroyed their way of life, and so the West (epitomized by America) must be destroyed. Indeed, before even getting to the main menu, the game opens with a cutscene, in which a thick Eastern European accent narrates over scenes of summary executions, intense combat, and a nuclear launch:

> Our so-called leaders prostituted us to the West. Destroyed our culture, our economies, our honour. Just as they lay waste to our country, we shall lay waste to theirs. [In Russian, as a nuclear missile is launched on screen]: You're all going to die soon anyway. (Activision, 2007)

The voice turns out to be the principal antagonist of the game, Imran Zakhaev, leader of "The Four Horsemen" terrorist group. The makers of *CoD* deserve some credit for at least laying out the "other side's" position, and avoiding the "because evil" justification so prominent in contemporary political discourse. However, groups such as Al Qaeda do have an ideological and theological rationale for their actions, and perhaps the presence of a perverted rationale is more

terrifying than a beast's blind instinct. The Cold War is recent enough that Russians still make an

easy bad guy, but *CoD 4* also introduces a contemporary enemy as well.

In addition to the Russian ultra-nationalist, another terrorist group, led by Khaled Al-

Asad is also interested in destroying America. Asad's group is not ideologically aligned with

Makhaev's group *per se*; however, both feel that America has ruined their nations, and so they

assist one another. In this storyline, Asad overthrows the government of an unnamed Middle

Eastern country. He televises the public execution of the current leader, Yasir Al-Fulani, and

effectively takes control of the country. Immediately before shooting Al-Fulani in the head, Asad

gives the following speech, outlining the root of the conflict:

> Today we rise again as one nation, in the face of betrayal and corruption! We all
> trusted this man to deliver our great nation into a new era of prosperity. But like
> our monarchy before the Revolution, he has been colluding with the West with
> only self-interest at heart! Collusion breeds slavery! And we shall not be
> enslaved! The time has come to show our true strength. They underestimate our
> resolve. Let us show that we do not fear them. As one people we shall free our
> brethren from the yoke of foreign oppression! Our armies are strong and our
> cause is just…. Our noble crusade has begun. Just as they lay waste to our
> country, we shall lay waste to theirs. This is how it begins. (Activision, 2007)

Again, we see Beckerian rhetorics of honour and revenge found in Zakhaev's speech, and it is

once again terrifying because of its perverse rationality. When Asad's coup is successful, the

Americans invade the unnamed nation, hoping to overthrow him. However, Asad escapes, and in

a demonstration of his unequivocal evil, detonates an atomic bomb, killing thousands of people.

CoD4 thus not only raises the spectre of a nuclear attack, but shows one. The devastation

is truly horrific. This scenario plays on the common (and perhaps justified) fear that terrorist

organizations will obtain nuclear weapons from failed states. Josh Smicker (2009) calls this a

"proleptic history," a "what-if" scenario which promises

> the gamer an opportunity to play a realistic version of the future before it arrives.
> Although particular plot lines may be unlikely or even far-fetched, the guarantor

of authenticity lies in the way the military and warfare are presented around them, emphasize that they are a preview of the actual future of the military. (p. 107)

The *Modern Warfare* trilogy as a whole exists as precisely the sort of proleptic history described by Smicker. In this series, we see what *could* happen if we are not vigilant against terror.

In very simple terms, this is at once a perverse yet powerful persuasive tool for propagating the rhetoric of war heroism: Scary men are trying to kill us, and only our heroic soldiers stand in their way; if not for the brave men and women of the armed forces, a nuclear holocaust is undoubtedly imminent. Elmer and Opel (2006) describe such fear-mongering proleptic histories as "a shift in reasoning from 'what-if' simulation models—where surveillance intelligence fuels forecasting models, to 'when, then' thinking where the future is deemed inevitable (i.e. not if, but when, terrorists attack)" (qtd. in Smicker, 2009, p. 113). This echoes the post 9/11 rhetoric of the Bush administration, which broadcast terror alert threat levels and continually reminded citizens that the next attack is always just around the corner.

Although the contexts are vastly different there is a narratological parallel between the WWII games and the *MW* series. Instead of battling Nazis intent on world domination, the player battles ultra-nationalist terrorists intent on world domination. Instead of stopping Nazi or Japanese atrocities, the player stops terrorist atrocities. In both cases, an evil entity wants to destroy "our" way of life, and the player must stop it against seemingly insurmountable odds. Success means saving the world; failure means death. Unfortunately, the player is not able to successfully neutralize the terrorist threat by the end of the first *MW* instalment; the bad guy is killed, but the ultra-nationalist threat remains and WWIII looks imminent.

In the second and third *MW* instalments, the overall narrative arc does not change much. There are plot twists, new characters, new bad guys, and new set pieces, including Afghanistan, Moscow, and New York, but ultimately, it is still heroic soldiers battling evil bad guys who want

to obtain WMDs and destroy the West. In *CoD: MW 2* (Activision, 2009), the player again takes

the role of American and British soldiers fighting Russian Ultra-Nationalists, who have seized

control of Russia and ultimately invade the United States. During one pre-mission briefing, the

commander, General Shepherd, offers the following words of encouragement:

> We are the most powerful military force in the history of man. Every fight is our
> fight…. We don't get to sit one out. Learning to use the tools of modern warfare is
> the difference between the prospering of your people, and utter destruction.... This
> is a time for heroes. A time for legends. History is written by the victors. Let's get
> to work. (Activision, 2009)

General Shepherd's rhetoric is clearly reminiscent of the heroic motif. Players are told their

actions are of cosmic significance, that they are participating in something bigger than

themselves. And this is typical of the genre. In this case, British and American *soldiers* populate

the hero role, while Russian and Middle Eastern *militants* play the villain, or fabulous forces of

Campbell's monomyth. The battlefields constitute the uncommon realm, and the ultimate goal is

to enact a decisive victory over evil, thereby ensuring "the prospering of [our] people."

The game's narrative also has some interesting, controversial features. First, it turns out

that General Shepherd is actually working for the bad guys, and at one point he executes the

player's character, which is viewed from a first person perspective. At first glance, this might be

seen as an attempt to complicate the rhetoric of the American war hero; however, Shepherd is

simply depicted as a traitor, who is no more "American" than the Russians or Arabs. Moreover,

the player gets a cathartic revenge and eventually stabs Shepherd in the eye, killing him. The

second, and more interesting feature of the narrative can be found in the infamous "No Russian"

stage, in which the player witnesses and is allowed to participate in a terrorist attack on a

Moscow airport. This is an optional stage; when the game begins, the player is given a

"DISTURBING CONTENT NOTICE" in bold, red letters. It reads: "Some players may find one

of the missions disturbing or offensive. Would you like to have the option to skip this mission? You will not be penalized in terms of Achievements or game completion" (Activision, 2009). This is unusual for a videogame, and the novelty itself is enough to spur the player's curiosity.

Once the player actually gets to the "No Russian" stage, it is immediately clear that it is not a normal mission. The pre-mission briefing informs the player that she will be travelling to a Moscow airport, where she will go undercover to infiltrate the ultra-nationalist group. The mission opens with the player's character in an elevator with armed men. The leader tells the group in a thick, Russian accent, "remember: no Russian." When the elevator opens, the player sees dozens of civilians waiting in a security line. Without saying a word, the armed group opens fire on the crowd with automatic weapons. Panic ensues, and the rest of the stage consists of the group going through the airport, killing panicked civilians on sight. It is later revealed that the attack was carried out in an attempt to frame an opposing political faction, and ultimately, to build support for WWIII against the West.

However, "No Russian" acts more like a cutscene than an actual, playable mission. For starters, the player does not have to participate; she can simply walk alongside the terrorists while they kill the civilians. Secondly, none of the civilians fire back, and the few police officers are dispatched very easily; thus, there is no real challenge here. Finally, the player's options are very limited: If the player tries to kill the terrorists and save the civilians, she will be instantly killed. The player cannot kill the terrorists, no matter how many bullets she fires. All player agency is essentially stripped away, and the massacre happens whether the player wants it to or not.[6]

---

[6] Speaking from my own experience, I found the scene disturbing, but only at first. Eventually, the lack of a challenge simply gets boring.

It is not surprising that this was a very controversial stage, and led to a fairly sizeable

backlash. When a video of the scene leaked before the game launch, a spokesperson for Infinity

Ward, the developer, released the following statement to the Associated Press:

> Infinity Ward's *Modern Warfare 2* features a deep and gripping storyline in which
> players face off against a terrorist threat dedicated to bringing the world to the
> brink of collapse. The game includes a plot involving a mission carried out by a
> Russian villain who wants to trigger a global war. In order to defeat him, the
> player infiltrates his inner circle. The scene is designed to evoke the atrocities of
> terrorism. (qtd. in Thorsen, 2009)

Infinity Ward's statement is important because it tells us that 1) The scene furthers the

overarching narrative—i.e., it is necessary for defeating the villain; and 2) It is meant to "evoke

the atrocities of terrorism." In other words, the scene is meant to really drive home how evil

these specific villains can be, but moreover, that terrorists generally are truly remorseless,

soulless killers who can only be dealt with through violence.

One other aspect the "No Russian" scene reinforces is that killing can provide a sense of

power over others. As Becker writes in *Escape From Evil,* "We feel we are masters over life and

death when we hold the fate of others in our hands. As long as we can continue shooting, we

think more of killing than of being killed" (1975, p. 114). Thus, the "No Russian" mission, and

the FPS in general, gives us an opportunity to simply continue shooting, watching others die as

we carry on. And in doing so, they allow us to forget our own mortality, if only for a short while.

That said, another odd narratological feature is that the player's character dies after completing

this mission. Indeed, on several occasions, *CoD: MW2* provides the player with a first person

perspective of her death. Each time the character dies, it plays out in a non-playable scene. The

player cannot attempt to prevent the death from occurring; she is powerless to stop it. After

finishing the "No Russian" stage, the playable character is shot in the face as she attempts to get

into a van with the other terrorists. The cover has been blown, and there is no way to influence

this outcome. In a later mission, the character is shot in the head, and then set on fire, again from a first person perspective.

In this way, the game reminds players of mortality in a way which is more direct and perhaps convincing than the many deaths the player experiences through gameplay. Of course, the player does not actually die, and from a ludic perspective, it does not matter if one character dies, as the player quickly inhabits another. Since the viewpoint changes fairly frequently anyway (every mission or two), it does not make much of a ludic difference. Nevertheless, as I will discuss in greater detail in my next chapter, these un-playable death scenes point to the medium's potential for inducing "mortality salience," the awareness of personal mortality (e.g. Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S., 1997). And if this is the case, and mortality salience leads to increased worldview defence, then it seems logical to conclude that *CoD: MW2* increases its propagandistic potential through coupling mortality salience with favourable depictions of the American soldier-as-hero.

Moving on to the final instalment of the series, *MW3* (Activision, 2011) ultimately resolves the narrative and America is victorious over the forces of evil. Again, there is not much new here in terms of overarching narrative, but like *MW2*, there are a couple of interesting narratological features. First, in another example of a terrifying proleptic history, a key battle in *MW3* takes place in New York City. WWIII has begun, and the Russians have successfully invaded the U.S.; the player must battle through the streets of Manhattan and ultimately drive out enemy forces. *MW3* takes place in the near future against a fictional enemy; however, the images of New York City under attack and on fire cannot help but evoke the spectre of 9/11. The player of course ultimately wins the battle, and the U.S. is victorious once again, but placing a battle in a nearly photorealistic New York City is a bit of a narratological anomaly for the genre. Unlike

the WWII subgenre, which reinforces the heroic narratives surrounding that conflict, the *MW*

series shows what life could be like, that the world is a scary place, and that the only thing

separating America from invasion is a powerful military force. Thus, by "saving" New York

City, the player perhaps redeems the city as well, rewriting its narrative from "victim" to

"victor." In this way, *MW3* reinforces the idea that New York City—and all it represents—will

not be defeated by acts of aggression.

Similarly, in a non-playable cutscene named "Davis Family Vacation," the player/viewer

holds a video camera, and is recording his family trip in London with his wife and young

daughter. The mother and daughter engage in some cute conversation about their trip, and the

daughter playfully runs after some birds, shouting, "Look, mommy, there's birds!" The mother

playfully teases the father: "That's your daughter; you know she gets that from you." It is a

typical "happy family" scene. However, just as the daughter goes after the birds, a box truck

pulls up and stops on a nearby corner. As the mother goes over to the daughter, the truck erupts

in a massive explosion, killing all three members of the Davis family.[7] The camera continues to

record, showing a burning, chaotic London street. Like "No Russian" in *MW2*, "Davis Family

Vacation" caused quite an uproar.

In a medium that kills everything without reflection, children are almost universally off

limits. Even open-world, "kill anything" games like *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar, 2007) and

Fallout 3 (Bethesda, 2008) do not allow the player to kill virtual children. This limitation is

indicative of a broader cultural belief system which views children, especially young children, as

paragons of innocence, goodness, and purity. Thus, those individuals or groups that kill children

are especially evil, and deserve the slaughter that awaits them. In terms of the game itself, the

scene is clearly meant to reinforce the idea that the bad guys are *really* bad. From an extra-ludic,

---

[7] It should also be noted that the truck was packed with chemical agents, further reinforcing the enemy's threat.

propagandistic perspective, the scene plays on the fear that we are at any given time just a step away from car bombs in the streets killing families; indeed, this scene is simply a contemporary version of the WWII posters depicting rapacious Nazis coming after American women. But unlike the posters, the interactive nature of the videogame gives the illusion that the player can actually *do something* to stop this threat. It is only the player's prowess and skill which can prevent such horrific events from occurring. This provides a sense of agency and control players do not possess in the "real world," where they are, typically, just the guy holding the camera.

In Beckerian terms, these two scenes—the battle for New York city and "Davis Family Vacation"—at once provoke and assuage existential anxiety. They provide the stories, sounds and images of terrorism and thus play on the fears of a post 9/11 world. However, by allowing the player to actively participate in defending New York city, or in "getting back" at the London attackers, the player neutralizes an evil threat, and restores a state of equilibrium. Thus, *MW3* may also soothe the very anxiety its proleptic history provokes. It is the psychological equivalent of creating an itch for the pleasure of the scratch. The fact that all this is framed in thanatological terms only makes that itch even greater.

b. Procedural Rhetoric

In concert with its heroic, death denying narrative, the *CoD* series also constructs a robust procedural rhetoric of war heroism. As discussed in the previous chapter, the procedural rhetoric of FPSs such as *CoD* is both agonistic and heroic; that is, the game is inherently competitive, and the rule systems portray combat as exhilarating, deadly, and consequence free. There is no opportunity for diplomacy, and the player has little choice but to kill all enemies encountered. Moreover, killing, dying, and resurrecting do not hold much consequence, as all occur so

frequently and with such ease that they become routine. Thus, the game's procedural metaphors[8] depict combat as an empowering experience in which the player succeeds in the face of death and destruction. This is the general rhetoric of the genre, and certainly applies to *CoD*; however, the series also promotes a procedural rhetoric of war heroism and American interventionism in its own particular fashion.

For example, the mission "Takedown" in *MW2* takes place in a residential neighbourhood in Rio, where heavy fighting erupts. As panicked civilians run around trying to flee the fighting, enemies begin shooting at the player. The player must return fire and kill the enemies; however, if the player kills an unacceptable number of civilians, then the mission automatically fails. Thus, in order to progress through the level, the player cannot fire indiscriminately, but must choose her targets carefully, and fire deliberate, well-placed shots. This mission comes closer to proceduralizing contemporary combat, which often takes place in built-up areas with both combatants and non-combatants intermingled, and this is in fact a step away from the conventional, "clean" heroism which usually typifies military videogames. However, this same scene also valorizes NATO's Rules of Engagement policy, and thus reinforces the moral righteousness of NATO soldiers.

Employing civilian casualties as a fail condition proceduralizes the rhetoric that "we" only kill the bad guys, not civilians, and if we do, then there are consequences. This goes against the reality of contemporary warfare, in which "collateral damage" occurs all too frequently and without much attention in the news media. By including a penalty for killing non-combatants, and rewarding players for killing terrorists, *MW2* valorizes the American soldier, American values, and American military interventionism. The visual and narratological rhetoric which

---

[8] E.g. the ludic process for operating a weapon is a metaphor for "actually" operating a weapon.

designates the Western soldier hero status is reinforced by the moral righteousness imbued in "Takedown"'s treatment of civilians in combat zones.

The procedural rhetoric of *CoD* also attempts to get the player to identify as a saviour, without whom the entire war would be lost. At various times throughout the series, the player is told it is "up to you" to take out the machine gun nest, for instance. If the player remains static, or "camps," enemies will infinitely respawn; if, however, the player acts aggressively and moves forward, the enemies will stop respawning. For example, in the final battle of *WaW*, the player participates in the battle for Berlin as a Russian infantryman. It is an epic battle involving hundreds of soldiers, tanks, and pieces of artillery. The player must dodge withering, sustained fire, and must kill countless German soldiers along the way. At the climactic point of the stage, the player must advance up some stairs in order to reach the capital building. This is a difficult section, as there are multiple machine gun nests, snipers, and infantry the player must advance against. If the player stays put and picks off the enemies one by one, they will continually respawn, and the player will not be able to advance. However, if the player advances past a certain point in the game-grid, the enemies will stop respawning, and progress is continued.

Procedurally, then, the game forces the player to lead the charge, giving the sense that the player has been transformed into an essential, active agent in an inevitable, epic victory. This transformation from passive to active is at the essence of the heroic motif, and videogames serve as the catalyst for this transformation. Things are ordinary, and then they are extraordinary; they are passive, and then they are active. Action is required, and it is up to the player to decide the fate of a fate already decided. The player is assured of the outcome; regardless of the dangers, the player will always succeed. The final scene in *WaW* procedurally represents the prototypical

image of the war hero, who charges forward under withering gunfire, with no regard for his own safety, killing the enemy while his beloved yet inferior comrades die all around him.

On the flip side of the equation, just as the heroes are designated as such through procedural rhetoric, so too are the enemies. For example, throughout the series, each American soldier, no matter how small a role in the game, is given a name, visible when placing the cursor over their figures. However, none of the enemies are given names; they all look, sound, and behave the same—essentially like brutes. It is clear that they do not care whether they live or die; unlike the American soldiers who fire behind cover, enemies will routinely run out from cover and charge blindly at the player, screaming. Even worse, if the player shoots and wounds an enemy, the downed soldier will continue to fight until killed; again, there is no opportunity for surrender, or mercy, because these are concepts the enemy does not understand.

Granted, this has more to do with current limitations in artificial intelligence than any intentional ideological propagation; simply from a technical perspective, it is very difficult to create convincing artificial intelligence. However, the text is the text, regardless of intention. Thus, whether intentionally or not, the enemy's behaviour thus recalls characterizations of the Japanese, for example, in other media forms. The crazed, bloodthirsty Japanese soldier is consistently found in WWII propaganda posters, newsreels, and even contemporary media such as *The Thin Red Line* (Mallick, 1998) and television series like *The Pacific* (HBO, 2010). Games like *WaW* are simply the latest medium to propagate this narrative, and thus reinforce the heroism of the Allied forces.

Furthermore, the enemy's life is portrayed as less valuable than the player's; there are hordes of enemy whose sheer numbers make them utterly disposable. They attack and die so often that their deaths (and lives) are worthless. The game is set up so that when an enemy goes

267

down, he stays down. Yet, the same does not hold true for the player's avatar. The player will likely die many times, but invariably resurrects. The Japanese soldiers are nothing more than extras in the player's combat fantasy, and exist solely to kill the player's character and die at her hands.

As Ed Halter (2006) observes in his discussion of the early FPS *Doom* (Id, 1993): "Like the terrorists, Nazis, and KGB agents of other games and films, the alien enemies of *Doom* are incontrovertibly extermination worthy, freeing the trigger pull from any moral compunction" (p. 162). Regardless of the conflict or media form, this idea that some groups are "extermination worthy" forms the basis of all propaganda, and indeed, of all cultural hero systems. If human beings need to step on the heads of others to assert their heroism, then it is best if those heads are as unlike ours as possible; videogames utilize the dehumanizing techniques of other media, but also contribute additional layers in procedurality and active participation.

c. Ludological Rhetoric

The last element of the single player mode I will discuss is *CoD*'s use of "achievement" systems, which have become a standard component of most gaming platforms. I am most familiar with Microsoft's Xbox 360 platform and so will use it as my reference; however, other platforms, such as the Playstation 3 (i.e. "Trophies"), Steam, and even iOS have their own versions. When a player first purchases the console and turns it on—or opens a Steam account— she must first create a profile, listing a username, demographic information, and in Microsoft's case, a customizable cartoon avatar. The profile keeps track of the player's gaming statistics, which includes games played, and a "Gamerscore" (G).

At first, it is not entirely clear what this score does, if anything. However, after the individual begins playing and progressing through a game, periodic achievement notifiers will

pop up (both visual and aural), displaying the name of the achievement and its corresponding gamerscore. For example, in *CoD4:MW* (Activision, 2007), the player gets the achievement "Dancing in the Dark" for shutting off the power in one of the missions, earning the player 20G. The achievement "No Rest for the Weary" is awarded for stabbing an injured enemy, netting the player 10G. This last achievement potentially complicates the American soldier's moral righteousness; however, in these games, the enemy never relents, and will invariably fire when wounded. Completing these two achievements earns the player 30G, and this is visible to anyone as long as the player is online. Getting an achievement or earning a high gamerscore has no pragmatic or ludic function; they cannot be used to buy anything from the Xbox Live store, they do not make the player any stronger, nor do they grant any new weapons or abilities. Yet, it is an extremely popular system, and gamers have proven they will go to great lengths for increasing their gamerscore. Indeed, there is even an Xbox Live black market for it.[9]

On Microsoft's Xbox 360 console, several achievements explicitly employ the rhetoric of heroism. In the first *MW*, "Win the War" (40G) is awarded for completing the single player campaign. In *WaW* there is a "Gunslinger" achievement (15 G) for assassinating an enemy general with a pistol, "War Hero" (40 G) for completing the game on any difficulty level, and "Hardened War Hero" for completing the game on Hardened or Veteran difficulty level. These achievements satisfy the ludic drive by upping the player's gamerscore, and in more general terms, by providing quantifiable feedback of success. These achievements clearly employ a quite literal, explicit rhetoric of heroism through their naming practices. The achievement system grants the player rewards for completing missions and killing terrorists, and thus reinforces the procedural rhetoric of heroism which values combat, and which depicts it as empowering, fun and consequence free.

---

[9] It is very common to receive messages in Xbox Live regarding "Achievements for money" offers.

The campaign mode is worth examining because it provides insight into the game's general *ethos*, and at some level story does matter. However, *CoD* is not popular because of its riveting stories, but because of its online multiplayer. All of the visual markers found in the single-player campaign mode remain in the multiplayer modes—the weapons, character skins, voice actors, etc., all appear in both. Thus, *CoD* also possesses its own "mini" version of the achievement system through the online multiplayer modes. Again, the player must create an online *CoD* profile, which keeps track of kills, deaths, the all-important Kill:Death ratio, time played, "clan" insignia, and so on. It also keeps track of "accolades" and medals, which can be earned for completing various actions. These are much more common than system achievements and the player will usually earn at least a couple each match. Some of them are quite trivial, and others are noteworthy. For example, in *MW2*, the player can earn "Longest Distance Traveled" simply for running the furthest in a match (this discourages "camping"), and "Survivor," which is awarded for killing an enemy while wounded.

Other accolades and medals are much more rare and more difficult to accomplish, and therefore "mean" more on the player's profile. Staying with *MW2*, "Unstoppable" is awarded for attaining a "killstreak" of 30 (30 kills without dying), and "Clutch Player" is awarded for getting the match-winning kill. "MVP" is awarded for most kills combined with fewest deaths, and one of the most rare achievements, "Decimator," is awarded for killing the entire opposing team without dying. In addition to earning the player experience points, these accolades also contribute to the player's virtual *kleos*; they signify skilfulness, importance, and potency, both to the player and to the other players. So here we have a ludic system which rewards acts of war heroism. Like we see in the *Iliad*, the calibre of the deed is commensurate with the amount of glory and honour bestowed upon the hero; *CoD*'s achievement system reinforces this concept,

much in the same way that there are medal hierarchies for military service (e.g. the U.S. Medal of Honor or Commonwealth Victoria Cross).

Perhaps the clearest and most explicit example of Beckerian concepts in *CoD*'s online multiplayer is found in the "levelling" or ranking system, which is a game mechanic borrowed from the RPG genre. Like all levelling systems, the player begins at Level One—here "Private— which in this case is signified by a single chevron, indicating the American ranking system (likewise, Sergeant is signified by three chevrons, Colonel by an eagle, Generals by stars, and so on). The player advances up the ranks by earning Experience Points, or XP. XP are gained in a variety of ways, including simple participation, getting kills and accolades, completing an objective, and so on. After reaching a certain amount of aggregate XP (displayed on the player's profile), the player will level up to the next rank, which usually "unlocks," or makes available, new weapons, attachments (e.g. a grenade launcher), or "perks," such as increased resistance to enemy fire ("Juggernaut"). Since better weapons and character attributes are available to higher level players, there is a ludic imperative to catch up and get on to an even playing field with those of a higher rank. Moreover, playing with the same weapon sets can get repetitive or boring after a while, and so new items add a degree of freshness to the gameplay.

With each increase in rank, it takes more and more XP to level up. Thus, the player may advance from Private (1) to Private I (2) after only 500XP, but advancing from Lt. Col. II (58) to Lt. Col. III (59) may take tens of thousands of XP. In *MW3*, the maximum level is "Commander" (80), and it is a grind getting there; by the time the player reaches "Commander," she will almost certainly have access to the best weapons (including the deadly RPG-7), items, and character boosts in the game. Her bullets will be more damaging, and her weapons will be more accurate than many of the lower ranked players. In short, there are many ludic benefits to reaching Level

80. However, once the player reaches this final level, *CoD* gives the player an option: She can either choose to forego further levelling up and stay at Commander, or, she can enter "Prestige Mode." If the player chooses Prestige Mode, then she will go back to Private (1), and will be stripped of all ludic benefits accrued to that point—unlocked weapons, attachments, perks, and so on. All ludic advantages, so arduously gained, are voluntarily forfeited.

From a purely pragmatic perspective, the Prestige system should not exist. It can take dozens and even hundreds of hours to unlock all the weapons, and speaking from my own play experiences, one gets used to succeeding more than failing, killing more than dying. Once the player Prestiges, success is not impossible, but it is much more difficult to obtain. So why do this? Why Prestige at all? Ostensibly, all this sacrifice is just for a "mere" emblem placed beside the player's name and displayed on the player's profile. There are in fact several Prestige ranks, but they are ultimately finite. In the first and second instalments of *MW*, there are ten Prestige ranks; in *Black Ops* (Activision, 2010), there are fifteen. As another example of the rhetoric of American war heroism, in the first instalment of *MW* the Prestige icons match particular US service medals, ending with the Navy Cross Medal (10th Prestige). Although the American medals are later replaced by more generic ones in later games, in all cases they signify not only that the player has moved up a level, but that she is experienced and thus commands respect.

The question then moves from "Why bother Prestiging?" to "Why does the emblem matter?" And the answer to that can be found in Becker (1975), who reminds us that outward tokens of prowess in battle have always served as a means for demonstrating one's potency, significance, and self-worth: "In war they [men] took back proof that they had killed an enemy, in the form of his scalp or even his whole head or whole body skin. These could be worn as badges of bravery which gave prestige and social honor and inspired fear and respect" (p. 107).

The Prestige emblem is a digital scalp, earned through killing, indicative of heroism. Even though *CoD* is the result of cutting edge technological advancement, unfathomable to us even a few decades ago, it still plays upon the ancient human impulse to bring back trophies in war. It is no surprise that so many of the accolades discussed above have to do with killing the opposing side and securing victory for one's own group; heroism is, and always has been about taking the life of the outgroup for the propagation of the in-group. There is a strong rhetoric of progress at play in the Prestige system, for at a very basic level, it is satisfying to see one's character increase in power. Like the heroes of the *Iliad*, the player-hero progresses, or moves up the ranks, by completing heroic deeds.

Thus, even without the visual and narratological markers which paint American soldiers fighting a righteous battle against ethnic and ideological Others, *CoD* serves a death denying function by its continual bombardment of self-esteem. Even when the player does not do very well, there are just constant reminders of how good she is in the form of XP, accolades, team victories, and so on; all of these have to do with feeling heroic. Each time the player gets a kill, +100 (for example) will flash on the center of the screen, confirming the kill and providing a shot of instant self-esteem. The multiplayer mode combines the riveting, exhilarating action of a high intensity FPS, with the ludic compulsion to demonstrate progress and prowess. It also seems likely that the multiplayer mode is popular because the opponents are other human beings. On the one hand, humans are more dynamic and therefore challenging opponents, but on the other hand, there is a certain sense of triumph which accompanies "besting" another human being. But in either case, defeating both human and computer opponents potentially serves a death denying function, especially when framed in terms of combat and killing. As Ed Halter (2006) writes, in the FPS "one may live through the fantasy of one's own death over and over again" (p. 160), and

this death fantasy occurs while the player is in the midst of the constant self-esteem boost which accompanies play.

However, this confluence of death, self-esteem, and reward which characterises the rhetoric of war heroism is not limited to the Shooter genre alone. Indeed, although the FPS receives the bulk of the scholarly attention, another combat based genre, the ARPG also conveys a multi-modal rhetoric of war heroism. In this genre, the mortal combat and heroic quests are not depicted in terms of guns, grenades, and terrorists, but in swords, spells, and dragons. ARPGs borrow most heavily from Campbell's monomyth, and even more directly from Tolkein's high-fantasy tropes. As Ian Bogost (2011) observes, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy established "the genre of high fantasy fiction, a style founded on great military campaigns that pitted good against evil" (p. xii). In these games, the player does not read about Gilgamesh, Achilles, or Frodo; she *is* Gilgamesh, Achilles, or Frodo. I will turn my attention to one game in particular, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011), which can be viewed as a synecdochic representative of the genre as a whole.

3. *Skyrim* and *The Elder Scrolls* Series

The Elder Scrolls (Bethesda Softworks) is one of the most popular and influential series in the Western Role Playing Game (WRPG) genre. In many ways, it is not an "original" game. The fantasy series borrows heavily from Tolkein, and so there are fantastic landscapes, epic battles between good and evil, and plenty of elves, wizards and dwarves. The narrative arc also borrows from Tolkein: The player must embark on an epic quest fraught with danger, so that she can stop a malevolent force from enslaving the realm. Although *TES* games allow the player to alter portions of the narrative through in-game choices, the "main" story arc never really changes. In terms of gameplay, the series was not the first to implement now standard

components such as character customization, "free" quest chronology, sandbox gameplay, and expansive, "open worlds;" however, it is an excellent exemplar of these components in action.

The first instalment, *Arena* (Bethesda, 1994) was only "modestly successful," plagued with bugs, and notoriously difficult, but it nevertheless continues to hold "a venerable place in the CRPG [Computer Role Playing Game] canon" (Barton, 2007, p. 5). *Arena*'s vast openness and number of locations (towns, villages, dungeons, etc.) meant that the player had a virtually unprecedented level of in-game freedom; the player could put off the main quest and embark on side quests if she chose, or simply explore the vast, exotic realm of Tamriel. *Arena* is an important game because it demonstrated the potential for open world, "free" games, where there are very few rigid guidelines and time constraints. Each subsequent game in the series has been extremely popular, enjoying both critical and commercial acclaim, and all have won numerous "Game of the Year" Awards.

The series has certainly evolved, but all games share the vast, open world concept which characterises *Arena*. Indeed, the *Elder Scrolls* series is renowned for its construction of massive game spaces. As Joe Blancato (2007) writes about the second instalment, *Daggerfall* (Bethesda, 1996), "Of the four games in the series, *Daggerfall* (1996) was by far the most ambitious. They took the notion of 'open-ended' to an extreme; the landmass was twice the size of Great Britain and contained over 15,000 towns with a total population of 750,000" (p. 2, para. 1). *Morrowind* (2002) and *Oblivion* (2006) scaled back on *Daggerfall*'s gargantuan size, but they nevertheless provide very large, expansive game environments for the player to explore and conquer.

The fifth and latest instalment, *Skyrim* (2011), maintains this tradition of open world, fantasy role playing. On the back cover of the physical copy, *Skyrim* promises players an "Epic Fantasy," which brings "to life a complete virtual world open for you to explore any way you

choose" (Bethesda, 2011). There are dozens of locations, including bustling cities like Whiterun,

mid-sized towns like Riverwood, and small villages, such as Kynesgrove. Each location usually

contains an inn, a blacksmith, and other NPCs which may or may not provide quests. The

locations are usually separated by forests, streams, and mountains, and connected by roads. All

of this gives a sense of an "actual world," open for the player to explore and conquer.

On popular aggregate site Metacritic, *Skyrim* holds a 96% average among 89 reviewers,

including 32 perfect scores. The average user score is 8.4 (/10), which is quite high considering

the large number of user reviews (metacritic.com).[10] When looking at the reviews, it is clear that

Skyrim succeeds in large part because it allows the player to exert tremendous influence in a

fantastic, immersive world. In short, it provides an opportunity for heroic action in a decidedly

heroic setting. For example, Gamespot's review references both heroic action and immersion:

"Whether you're slashing a dragon's wings, raising the dead back to life, or experimenting at the

alchemy table, Skyrim performs the most spectacular of enchantments: the one that causes huge

chunks of time to vanish before you know it" (VanOrd, 2011).

Wired magazine's Jason Schreier (2011) offers a similar assessment, emphasizing the

sense of immersion in particular:

> The game's greatest accomplishment is that it is a paradise of escapism, a lavish
> love letter to immersion. Diving into Skyrim's world feels both thrilling and
> comforting, like riding a rollercoaster or swimming in the ocean. There is very
> little padding. There are very few scripted quests that aren't worth experiencing.
> (para. 10)

Justin McElroy (2011) from Joystiq references the game's immersive qualities, as well as its

ability to tap into the human urge to explore and grow:

> This is the deepest, lovliest [sic] world ever created for a single player to explore,
> and one that no one should deny themselves. This is a game about following

---

[10] To offer some perspective, as of March 10, 2013 *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (Activision, 2012), holds an
impressive 83% aggregate critic score (73 reviews), but only a paltry 4.4 user score (1399 ratings).

Emerson's advice, leaving the trail and finding that the most powerful force on Earth or Tamriel isn't fire or sword, but the ever-insistent desire to know what lies beyond. (para. 22)

In each of these reviews, the game's epic scope and fantastic, expansive environment take center stage. Exploration and progress are essential components of *Skyrim*, as players will likely spend much more time exploring the countryside or dungeons and looking for loot than completing the main quest. Above all, *Skyrim* is designed to give players a sense that they can act in any manner they choose, and this is reinforced by the powerful, heroic actions available to the player.

From a Beckerian perspective, it is not difficult to understand the popularity of these games. In giving players a high degree of freedom, these games provide a sense of agency and more specifically, provide a multi-modal metaphor for enacting Campbell's monomyth. Although the player starts out weak at Level 1, as she progresses through the game, the character grows stronger, "levelling up," increasing in potency, wealth, and combat capability. I will now examine *Skyrim*'s use of narratological, procedural, and ludological techniques for conveying a powerful and multi-modal rhetoric of heroism. And more specifically, how *Skyrim* reinforces the rhetoric of heroism surrounding the warrior figure.

a. Narratological Rhetoric

Skyrim's narrative elements are fantastic in nature. The environment itself is lush, expansive, and populated with odd creatures, including dragons; there is an orchestral, ethereal musical score to enhance the fantasy atmosphere, and the supernatural—magic, spirits, gods, etc.—are all fairly commonplace. Moreover, *Skyrim* utilizes a "branching" narrative system: Although there is a fairly static "main" quest, there are also hundreds of "side" quests for the player to complete at her leisure. To give some idea of scale, Bethesda states that most players can complete the main quest in 20-30 hours; however, the side quests can take over 100 hours to

complete, and this does not include the infinite, randomized miscellaneous quests (e.g. "save my daughter from the bandit camp") which pop up throughout the game. Both main and side quests depend upon heroic narratives, and borrow heavily from the monomyth.

The main storyline in *Skyrim* is virtually identical to Campbell's monomyth, as evidenced by the description on Bethesda's official *Skyrim* website:

> The Empire of Tamriel is on the edge. The High King of Skyrim has been murdered. Alliances form as claims to the throne are made. In the midst of this conflict, a far more dangerous, ancient evil is awakened. Dragons, long lost to the passages of the Elder Scrolls, have returned to Tamriel. The future of Skyrim, even the Empire itself, hangs in the balance as they wait for the prophesized Dragonborn to come; a hero born with the power of The Voice, and the only one who can stand amongst the dragons. (elderscrolls.com)

Even without the explicit use of the term "hero," we can recognize a strong rhetoric of heroism at play here. The stakes are high and there is disruption in the realm. The Empire is undergoing political upheaval, and an ancient evil has returned, threatening the Empire's very existence. Tamriel's only hope against certain destruction is the Dragonborn, controlled by the player, whose coming was foretold by an ancient prophesy. The player is thus a part of something cosmically significant; her actions will resound throughout history. Like the countless heroes outlined in Campbell's seminal text, the Dragonborn's birth is special and she has been chosen by the gods to save the realm. Thus, the player must exert influence in two heroic arenas: Politics and Warfare. In both cases, the player is a part of something epic, grand, and her actions will ring throughout history. Indeed, after completing a series of tasks for the "Bard's College," musicians will write glory songs retelling the player's deeds, very much in the vein of Achaean *kleos*.

However, this rhetoric of heroism also pervades the narratological frames outside of the main quest. Indeed, although a standard "fetch quest" is not as epic (or heroic) in scope as the main quest, the player is still completing a task of some significance (e.g. clearing out a cave).

Moreover, many of the "side-quests" can be seen as microcosms of the overarching narrative frame of the main quest and likewise convey a rhetoric of freedom and independence. In the main quest, the player must defend all of humanity from an oppressive force (dragons); in the primary side quests, the player must often defend individuals or communities from an oppressive, human force (such as the Imperial Legion). Indeed, the player encounters many diverse factions who are competing with one another throughout the game. There is rarely a "middle ground," as the competing factions often have antithetical aims, and so the player must typically choose one side over the other.

For example one of the major storylines apart from the main quest requires the player to pick a side in a conflict between the Imperial Legion, the military/judicial arm of "The Empire," and the Stormcloaks, natives of Skyrim seeking to overthrow Imperial dominance of their land. The Imperial Legion justifies its conquest and control of Skyrim because it consolidates their position against the Thalmor, a race of elves who recently defeated the Empire in a bloody war. Like any ruling class, the Imperial Legion does not see itself so much as brutal conquerors, but as warriors protecting their people and way of life from an alien force; their occupation of Skyrim is merely a necessary component to that defence. The Stormcloaks, on the other hand, view the occupation as an injustice, and seek to regain their freedom and political autonomy. At times they commit what appear to be atrocities, but like the Imperial Legion, they justify their actions by emphasizing their cause and context. In Burkean terms, *Skyrim* demonstrates how typically immoral behaviour can be justified through the Dramatistic scene-act ratio, which focuses on the way that context affects a given course of action (Burke, 1969).

Thus, although each side has antithetical political aims, in both cases their actions are motivated by a sense of retaining their security, freedom, and ultimately, their way of life. Any

act of violence is deemed necessary and valid. In this way, *Skyrim*'s narrative reveals the simple but often forgotten fact that people are essentially motivated by the same set of basic principles, even when they seem to be coming from entirely antithetical positions. The narrative sets up a scenario in which killing is not only allowed, but encouraged and necessary; the Imperial Legion does not believe it can negotiate with the Stormcloaks, and vice versa. However, this heroic structure is not only found in the main and secondary storylines, but in most of the seemingly endless side quests as well. There are different types of sidequests in *Skyrim*. "Faction" quests involve advancing in an organization, such as the Thieves' Guild or The Companions. "Daedric" quests involve visiting cult shrines and completing tasks for gods (Daedra). "Civil War" quests require the player to choose sides in a war between the Empire and the Stormcloaks. And finally, "Miscellaneous" quests, which do not generally influence the environment very much, and which do not typically offer high rewards.

For my purposes, these sidequests can be seen as falling along a spectrum of significance. "Trivial" sidequests are largely randomly generated, and are generally low risk/low reward missions. An example of a trivial sidequest would be coming across a random NPC standing outside a cave, who asks the player to locate his missing friend. He will generally say that his friend went in to explore the cave, but has not been heard from since. He then asks if the player will go into the dangerous cave and see what happened, and assures the player of a reward. The player then enters the cave, kills some enemies, loots some treasure chests, and finally finds the lost friend either dead or alive. The player must then return to the quest giver outside of the cave, and collect the reward. Apart from the loot and XP gained, completing these quests do not significantly affect the narrative nor gameplay.

"Middling" sidequests fall somewhere in the middle of the significance spectrum, and also follow the monomyth structure. They are generally more difficult than trivial sidequests, and completing them usually results in an advancement in the narrative or gameplay. An example of a "middling" sidequest, is "Trouble in Skyrim." The player receives this quest from Farkas, a member of the werewolf clan "The Companions." Farkas tells the player that some Warlocks are causing trouble for the people of a region known as the Rift, and asks the player to kill their leader, who is hiding in a cave. The player must travel to the cave, battle dozens of enemies, loot dozens of treasure chests, avoid various booby traps, and then finally kill the Warlock leader before returning to Farkas for a reward (in this case 300 gold). Here we see the monomythic structure at play, but on a less "epic" scale than the main storyline: After the player receives the quest, the player must 1) Save innocents; 2) Travel to a dangerous location; 3) Battle dangerous obstacles; 4) Engage in mortal combat; 5) Succeed; and 6) Receive a reward. However, the heroic structure is muted somewhat, as the stakes are local and the dangers fairly remote; as a result, the rewards are muted as well. The player will earn XP during the quest, and there is a chance that a valuable item will turn up, but 300 gold is not very significant. And more to the point, the player's actions will not significantly alter the virtual environment.

In contrast, completing a quest from the main storyline will often resonate across *Skyrim* (for example, a city may fall to dragons and become inaccessible), and will add to the player's fame, or infamy. Moreover, depending upon which faction the player joins, NPCs will respond to the player in various ways, ranging from reverence to hostility. In all cases, and at all levels, we still see Campbell's monomythic structure here. Unlike games such as *CoD*, which force a single narrative upon the player from the top-down, *Skyrim*'s rhizomatic narrative structure increases player choice, and therefore player agency. Moreover, like many games in the genre, *Skyrim*

boasts a particular form of narratological agency, in which the player's in-game actions and decisions shape the various storylines.

For example, joining a "Faction" will open up further storylines, and even influence the way NPCs approach the player's character. Joining the Stormcloaks in their *resistance* against the Imperial Legion, will open up certain narrative possibilities, and the player's character will be cheered by those NPCs sympathetic to the cause. On the other hand, if the player joins the Imperial Legion in their crusade to crush the Stormcloak *rebellion*, then other narrative possibilities will open up, and the player's character will be cheered by pro-Imperial inhabitants. In both the main quest and major side quests, combat and war take center stage, and this reinforces the myth of the warrior as hero.

It should be noted that *Skyrim* delivers its narrative in a somewhat unorthodox manner. Unlike many games, which utilize filmic cutscenes to convey narrative in between bouts of play, *Skyrim* attempts to combine the narrative *with* the gameplay. As such, *Skyrim* does not use cutscenes at all, except for at the very beginning. Instead, the narrative is delivered in a way which emphasizes player participation, primarily through dialogue with the many NPCs encountered in the game world. Typically, the player will encounter an NPC, who tells the player that such and such has happened (e.g. "Dragons have returned to Tamriel"), and that the player must do X, Y, and Z (e.g. "travel to Hrothgar, speak with the leader of the Greybeards, and retrieve an ancient elder scroll"). In other words, the narrative is usually conveyed in the form of quest giving, where completing quests also moves the narrative along.

Another, less direct way that the game conveys narrative is through hundreds of readable documents the player encounters in the game world. These are books which provide the narrative frame of not just the game, but the entire history of the game world as well. The books' intricacy

and detail are astounding; indeed, it must have taken countless hours to write them all. For example, one book which can be found in multiple locations is *Fjori and Holgeir*. It tells a Nordic version of *Romeo and Juliet*:

> In her 29th summer of life, Fjori the huntress met the warlord Holgeir on the field of battle. None remember what they fought over, for their love to come was so great it overshadowed all rivalries or disputes. They fought to a standstill, as their followers looked on—till her sword broke his axe and his shield dulled her blade and all could see that they were equals. (Bethesda, 2011)

This story has nothing to do with *Skyrim*'s narrative in particular; however, it adds to the lore and *mythos* of Skyrim, and reinforces the illusion that Skyrim is a real place with real cultural production. The player also gets the sense that her deeds will be chronicled in this vast literary system as well, and again reinforces the sense that the player is a part of a storied history.

A final narrative technique which in some ways mimics the cutscene, is text in loading screens. These are not always narratological in nature; indeed, they are often simply hints for the player. However, they do at times contribute to the game's heroic context. For example, one loading screen shows the image of a Nordic looking warrior against a black backdrop; underneath, there is a line of text which reads, "Skyrim legend tells of a hero known as the Dragonborn, a warrior with the body of a mortal and soul of a dragon, whose destiny it is to destroy the evil dragon Alduin" (Bethesda, 2011). This single sentence perfectly encapsulates *Skyrim*'s narrative frame, and of course closely resembles Campbell's monomyth. Another cutscene describes the stakes of the hero's actions and the ruthlessness of her enemies: "Once, the dragons sought to eliminate or enslave all mortal races. If given the chance, they would surely do so again" (Bethesda, 2011). Again, the heroic narrative is reinforced: The player must defend humanity from powerful, evil forces, and in so doing ensures that people live freely. The enemy is evil, and wishes to bring death and destruction to the inhabitants of Tamriel, and only

the player can prevent this from happening. The narrative frames in *Skyrim* are eerily similar to

Joseph Campbell's monomyth, as the player a) "Travels" to an uncommon realm; b) Encounters

fabulous forces; c) Defeats a world-threatening evil; and d) Bestows a boon upon his fellow man.

b. Procedural Rhetoric

In addition to narrative, *Skyrim* also utilizes procedurality to convey a rhetoric of

heroism. *Skyrim* and the other games in *TES* series are considered "open world" or "sandbox"

games. In this genre, player freedom and emergent gameplay are given precedence over rigid

linearity and authorial prescription. Again, these games have a "main" quest line or plot arc, and

many "side quests," which may or may not influence the main quest line. Although the player is

told countless times that her actions are of the utmost importance, and must be enacted with the

utmost urgency, the nature of quest completion itself is very leisurely. The player can choose to

ignore the main quest for dozens of hours, and the world will not be any closer to ruin. She can

complete side quests, or if she chooses, simply enjoy the scenery and atmosphere of the game.

Indeed, there is nothing in the game itself to incite the player to complete anything;

instead, games depend upon the player's own ludic drive. All that is necessary for these games to

work is that the player gets a sense that she is inhabiting the world. As Bartle (2003) puts it,

"Role-playing is about assuming a role and maintaining that role. The role doesn't change; if the

character changes, it's only for reasons that make sense for the character, not the role-player" (p.

190). From a Beckerian perspective, part of the appeal here is that *Skyrim* proceduralizes the

fantasy of freedom, power, and control. In the world of Skyrim, players ostensibly possess

limitless agency: They can go wherever they choose, and act however they wish. *Skyrim* acts as a

possibility space, a place for exploration and emergent gameplay. But more than that, it is also a

space of *heroic* possibility; the game provides a space in which the player can act in a heroic

context (e.g. battling wizards, exploring dungeons, influencing a civil war, etc.). This heroic

freedom contributes to a sense of potency: The game extends the player's agency, as her actions

ostensibly have a tremendous impact in the game world. Although the player is granted a higher

degree of freedom than, say, *CoD*, *Skyrim*'s reward structures highly incentivize actions

commensurate with war heroism. In short, the player is not required to take part in combat, but

she is certainly encouraged to do so.

Unlike many other RPGs, *Skyrim* allows the player to kill virtually any inhabitant at any

time,[11] even if the individual is friendly or unarmed. There are two interesting features to this

freedom, however. First, anything deemed a murder will usually result in arrest or death. The

player will eventually become powerful enough to take on city guards, but such battles are time

consuming, and severely limit the player's ability to explore an area. This process of 1) Immoral

act and 2) Punishment conveys an authoritarian rhetoric—breaking the law results in

punishment—but also reinforces a moral account of heroism, as heroes do not kill civilians

without consequence. The second interesting feature about the player's freedom to kill is that this

freedom does not extend to Skyrim's children. If the player does begin shooting a child with

arrows, for example, the child will simply run away, and will never die, no matter how much

damage he or she receives. This restriction once again belies a rhetoric of ethical heroism—

heroes do not kill the innocent or pure. Notwithstanding these restrictions, *Skyrim* provides the

illusion that the player has unlimited choice, and that her choices determine the fate of the realm.

Another way that *Skyrim* utilizes procedurality to construct a rhetoric of heroism, and

more specifically, of the soldier-as-hero, comes through its heavy reliance on combat. In many

ways, *Skyrim* is vastly different from *CoD*; however, both employ the same procedural rhetoric

of "kill to survive." Moreover, when the player uses "ranged" attacks in combat, via bow and

---

[11] There are some exceptions. For example, if an NPC is integral to the main quest, he or she cannot be killed.

arrow or attack spell, the gameplay itself closely resembles the FPS; the only difference is in the aesthetics of the projectile. Although *Skyrim* offers a far more nuanced and varied combat system than *CoD* when dispatching enemies, there are nevertheless plenty of instances in which the player must either kill or die, especially within the main quest. Like *CoD*, the player must inflict death upon others in order to succeed.

Granted, there are plenty of opportunities to avoid killing (e.g. by sneaking, persuading, bribing, etc.), but there is also a great deal of unavoidable combat. As a game which utilizes the thanatological metaphor, *Skyrim* depends upon a fair amount of killing and dying. Indeed, there are many varied forms of killing in *Skyrim*. The player can choose to use ranged attacks by using bows or by casting offensive spells (such as "Fireball"). Or, the player can elect to engage in close quarters combat by using swords, axes, or hammers. Like the guns and grenades in *CoD*, wielding these weapons can make the player feel powerful. Bashing a Draugr (a skeleton like creature) with a warhammer is surprisingly satisfying. It is important to note that this fantastic form of combat produces a much less particular rhetoric of war heroism than a game like *CoD*. Whereas *CoD* is clearly meant to valorize the American soldier, *Skyrim* valorizes soldiering in general, unrestricted by geography or even temporality. *Skyrim*'s rhetoric of war heroism is thus more universal than *CoD*'s, and only valorizes particular warriors indirectly.

Another instance of procedural rhetoric and war heroism can be found in the game's naming conventions. Like the *Iliad*, individuals must enact heroic deeds in order to earn a name for themselves. As the player completes missions, she begins to make a name for herself. If the player liberates a village, for example, the player will be cheered by NPCs, and will mention the player's bravery in future discussions. If, however, the player kills civilians or commits other unethical actions, then the player will become infamous, and then NPCs will either chastise the

player's immorality in conversation, or if she is really bad, run away in terror. Whether famous or infamous, in both cases the player is recognized for her actions; she becomes someone known, and significant throughout the land. So the player can make a name for herself; however, the naming convention works for the enemies as well, and this furthers the player's in-game *kleos*.

As Brown (2004) points out in her discussion of Homeric heroism, "heroes are named and their names are accompanied by epithets…. They engage in close combat through which they accrue honor, but the detailed accounts of these individualized, heroic encounters are embedded in the continuous clashes of the anonymous ranks and masses" (p. 46). The hordes of enemy one faces in *Skyrim* are typically not named; they are anonymous, replaceable, and disposable. Thus, a name signifies a stronger opponent, and so defeating that enemy will be a true test of strength. In Brown's words, "from the point of view of the heroic code it is desirable to know the identity of your victim because the more illustrious the name of your victim, the greater the glory you will derive from your triumph" (p. 48).

The most extreme (and glorious) example of gaining heroism through defeating a named enemy comes in the form of Boss battles. Such battles and naming conventions are not reserved for the RPG (e.g. "Bowser" in *Mario Bros.*); however, RPGs make particular use of this convention. For example, when scouring a dungeon in *Skyrim*, the player may encounter dozens of enemies simply labelled "Bandit." Although there is some variation in race, gender, and combat style (e.g. warrior or mage), they are all roughly the same in strength and difficulty. However, at the end of the dungeon, there will typically also be the "Bandit Leader." Whereas killing regular bandits will typically earn the player small amounts of "loot" and XP, killing the leader earns the player a great deal of these. Defeating an enemy with a special designation makes the triumphs that much more special. Earning a name takes time and skill, and so

defeating a named enemy proves the player's own prowess. In doing so, the player cannibalizes the enemy's *kleos* and adds it to her own. The major boss in *Skyrim* is Alduin "The Worldeater," a powerful, ancient dragon. Defeating Alduin not only closes out the main questline, but also earns the player a tremendous amount of XP, money, items, and powers. In this way, *Skyrim* reinforces the ancient rhetoric of war heroism by simulating the process of the "name" battle.

Achilles must kill countless anonymous Trojans in order to reach Hector; Batman must defeat countless anonymous thugs before reaching Bane or Joker, and so on. Not everyone can have a name in the game world; it is simply too massive an undertaking to program several thousand individual personalities. However, not everyone can have a name in the real world either, so to speak; if everyone is heroic then heroism loses its essence, which is specialness. A game needs its pawns, but the videogame is usually not the realm of the pawn; it is the realm of the King, Queen, Knight, or more accurately the manipulator of these "higher" pieces.

In an interesting instance of emergent gameplay, some players have attempted "Pacifist" playthroughs of *Skyrim*, in which they go the entire game without killing a single enemy. These playthroughs are notoriously tedious, and the player never earns enough XP to become powerful. However, although these players never *directly* kill an enemy with a sword, arrow, or attack spell, they must nevertheless find a way to dispatch with the enemies. To do this, they use a variety of spells, such as "Conjure," which summons a creature to fight (and kill) on their behalf, and "Frenzy," which turns enemies against each other. So even though the player is not pulling the trigger, so to speak, she is still arranging the hit. But more to the point, from a rhetorical perspective, the game uses a variety of processes to encourage the player to engage in combat, either through rewards (e.g. XP, items, or additional quests), or through the simple fact that it is much harder to succeed without killing the enemies trying to kill you.

The procedure for killing an enemy in *Skyrim* is fairly straightforward, although there are various methods one can use. Unlike turn-based RPGs, in which the player does not control individual combat movements, *Skyrim*'s combat system requires the player to press a button for each sword swing or spell. This again increases the link between the player's movements via the controller and the content on the screen. As a Warrior class character, the player will usually engage an enemy up close with a sword and shield. While engaged in battle, the music will shift into something frenetic and up tempo, and there are plenty of grunts and cries of pain. A sword hit typically draws blood or its equivalent,[12] and *Skyrim* can be a very gory game; the game provides plenty of real time feedback, displaying the player's power and prowess.

As soon as the player wins the battle, the next step is to "loot" the corpse for valuables. Indeed, looting is one of the purposes for engaging in combat in the first place, thus setting up an odd sort of feedback loop: The player engages in combat to attain valuable items, but only wants these items because they will aid in combat. Admittedly, most looted items are ultimately sold or bartered; however, the money earned from such sales usually goes back into the player's combat capability, in the form of health potions, new armour and weapons, repairs, and so on. As Becker (1975) observes, this seemingly infinite process of killing enemies to increase one's own power has been an essential component of heroism since "primitive man:"

> [T]he hero proves his power by winning in battle; he shows that he is favored by the gods…. The hero is… the one who accrues power by his acts, and who placates invisible powers by his expiations. He kills those who threaten his group, he incorporates their powers to further protect his group, he sacrifices others to gain immunity for his group. In a word, he becomes a savior through blood. (p. 150)

Procedurally, the player kills an enemy, and in doing so makes herself stronger by gaining XP, money, and potentially finding a powerful item. The in-group and out-group designations are

---

[12] The player encounters many immaterial foes who do not have blood, like ghosts and sprites.

informed by the simple fact that the enemies will attack the player, but such groups are also reinforced by the game's narrative frame. Taken together, these elements form a multi-faceted but coherent rhetoric of war heroism.

One final instance of a procedural rhetoric of heroism is not associated with war heroism *per se*; however, it still warrants some (brief) discussion. Like many other games in the genre, *Skyrim* boasts a highly developed economic system. Indeed, a significant portion of the game is spent looking for coin and valuable items. The player will usually keep the most potent items— weapons, armor, enchantments, etc.—and sell the rest for money. Money can be used to buy everything from health potions and powerful weapons, to new spells, property, and conversation options (bribery). The best items are generally the most expensive, and so there is a strong correlation between the use value of an object and its exchange value. Typically, the most useful and valuable items are combat related: Weapons, armour, spells, and enchantments are generally the most sought after.[13] At the beginning of the game, the player starts out poor; it is difficult to find ten gold coins to rent a room at an inn, for instance. However, after many quests, errands, and bartering, the player eventually becomes very wealthy, so that she can buy any item in the game several times over. This provides another sense of significance, freedom, and heroism.

The process represented here is that success can be defined and measured by the accumulation of wealth. As discussed in the first chapter, signifiers of wealth are also often signifiers of heroism, especially within a capitalist system. The player will thus gain a sense of importance and freedom from having vast hordes of gold, which greatly increase the player's influence in the game world. Again, this is not explicitly tied to a rhetoric of war heroism; however, in-game wealth is almost always utilized to purchase items and skills which aid in

---

[13] Granted, it depends upon the player's style of play and character choice. A Mage will look for different items than a Warrior or Rogue, for example.

future combat, and moreover, attaining material objects and gold after one's military exploits have always been a part of warfare, the so-called "spoils of war." This may reinforce the concept that invading a country and winning a war (e.g. Afghanistan or Iraq) entitles the victor to certain portions of the vanquished's resources. Thus, the looting process on its own can potentially serve to legitimate the economic benefits gained from successful invasions.[14]

Furthermore, from a death-denying perspective, accumulating wealth and collecting in general has been shown to mitigate existential anxiety, and in the context of the game, accumulating wealth matters. It is very difficult (though perhaps not impossible) to progress in the game without purchasing items of some sort, and indeed, certain missions will only be available to the player if she has sufficient wealth. I will save an in-depth discussion of Terror Management Theory (TMT) for the next and final chapter, but it is worth noting here that several studies have demonstrated a strong link between spending money and death denial. One study in particular, entitled "The Urge to Splurge" (Arndt et al., 2004) demonstrated that the possession of material objects mitigates death anxiety. The authors hypothesize this is because wealth and material possessions are signifers of success and status, and that objects can "live on" past biological death. Similarly, TMT studies have also shown that collecting objects mitigates death anxiety (Rindfleisch et al., 2008); again, it is hypothesized that this is due to the concept of "leaving something behind" after death.

Becker (1975) addresses this issue at length in *Escape from Evil*, writing,

> The origin of human drivenness is *religious* because man experiences creaturliness; the amassing of a surplus, then, goes to the very heart of human motivation, the urge to stand out as a hero, to transcend the limitations of the human condition and achieve victory over impotence and finitude. (p. 31)

---

[14] I am not sure if the "War on Terror" produces the best examples of this, however, since the wars have cost trillions of dollars, and are largely responsible for the current fiscal crises embroiling the U.S..

Becker thus assigns the very concept of accumulation and surplus a death denying function; although accruing wealth in a videogame is not equivalent to accruing wealth in "real" life, the same mechanisms could be at play here, the same "buttons" pushed. Again, there is something deeply satisfying about watching one's points (or gold) increase, and videogames provide this satisfaction on demand.

c. Ludological Rhetoric

Skyrim is a bit of a contemporary anomaly in that it does not have any real online, multiplayer element, which is a rarity nowadays. There are no *CoD* like leaderboards, and so players cannot show off their gaming prowess to others online, or compare statistics. However, as an RPG, *Skyrim* still presents plenty of quantifiable indicators of success and potency. The primary way this happens is through the XP and levelling system. Like most RPGs, the player begins at Level 1, with few items and skills. As the player completes missions, kills enemies, and explores the environment, the player will accrue XP and begin to "level up." With each new level, the player will become more powerful, harder to kill, and new items/spells will be made available. Levelling up is perhaps the most pervasive aspect of an RPG: There is a strong rhetoric of progress at play, and at a very basic level, it is satisfying to see one's character increase in power. Eventually, the player becomes the most powerful entity in the game. Once the player reaches this level, enemies do not stand a chance; their armour cannot withstand the player's powerful weapons, and their weapons cannot dent the player's armour. Enemies which once seemed impossible become mere gnats in the player's way.

Like the heroes of the *Iliad*, the player-hero progresses, or moves up the ranks, by completing heroic deeds. Since it moves in a sequential, upward direction, the rhetoric of progress is ultimately procedural in nature: Events unfold according to a causal process, and

there is a necessary movement from one state to the next. As such, the rhetoric of progress is perfectly suited to the procedural nature of the computer, and by extension, the videogame. In one sense, almost all videogames utilize the rhetoric of progress since they are games, which keep score, determine winners and losers, and move from one state to another. However, RPGs and their ubiquitous levelling systems are particularly strong examples of this rhetoric of progress at work within a central game mechanic.

However, in addition to the XP and levelling systems, there are also some ludic elements which contribute to a rhetoric of heroism as well. For starters, I would classify the character creation and "Skill" statistics as primarily ludological. Much of the player's drive comes from increasing individual skills, levels, and simply improving the character in general. The rhetoric of heroic progress is very much a part of these games. Before starting the game in earnest, the player is given the opportunity to create and customize her character, and oddly enough, this mechanic actually points to an underlying, genealogical rhetoric of war heroism.

RPGs may get their narratological contexts from Tolkein; however, as Bartle (2003) notes, their gameplay derives from the early versions of *Dungeons and Dragons*, which were among the first to utilize the modern "character class" models. In this system, a player chooses to role-play as one of several classes, including Fighter, Magic User, or Druid. However, the class system of *D&D* was in turn based off of the miniature wargames like *Little Wars* which used different unit types—infantry, cavalry, and artillery. RPGs adopted this concept, and so for example, "If the battle were in a fantasy setting… there might be units representing monsters (wags, orcs) and specialist troops (elven archers, dwarven axe-wielders), plus a few for individuals…" (p. 192). Thus, the RPG itself traces its roots back to wargames. Like the toy soldiers, each class has its own set of unique skills, strengths, and weaknesses.

In *Skyrim*, the class system remains, but instead of a few generic categories, players are given several races to choose from, including humans, elves, and the cat-like khajeet. Again, each race has its own particular attributes. To add another level of customization, *Skyrim* also allows players to name the character, and even adjust its physical appearance. Players can choose gender, skin tone, hair colour, and even change facial features, such as brow height, eye depth, lip fullness, and nose shape. The character creation system is impressive, and at times overwhelming; there are seemingly countless variations to choose from. However, one attribute which players cannot influence much is body shape; both male and female characters boast idealized, heteronormative body types. Thus, men are lean and muscular, and women are thin but curvaceous. Of course, as a dragon slaying hero, this makes sense, but the static body type speaks to an association of military heroism with the physically ideal. Moreover, there is no option for transgender characters. These shortcomings notwithstanding, the ability to create such a highly customizable character adds to the sense that the character is special and unique.

Furthermore, like *CoD*, *Skyrim* has a robust "Achievement" system. And also like *CoD*, several of *Skyrim's* achievements explicitly employ the rhetoric of heroism. For example, "War Hero" (10 G) is awarded for capturing a heavily defended fort, and requires the player to kill dozens of enemies. "Hero of Skyrim" (30 G) is awarded for capturing a major city, which again, is both dangerous and requires killing. "Hero of the People" (30 G) is awarded for completing 50 miscellaneous objectives, and even though most of these objectives require killing, some do not; thus, this achievement emphasizes the moral, altruistic aspect of heroism. Other achievements employ a slightly less overt rhetoric of heroism: "Skill Master" (40 G) is awarded for maxing out a skill's level; "Dragon Hunter" (20 G) is awarded for killing twenty dragons; "Legend" (40 G) is awarded for defeating a boss dragon; and "Dragonslayer" (50 G) is awarded for slaying the

dragon, Alduin, "The World Eater" (the final quest in the main storyline). Again, these are all heroic goals, and in completing them, the player earns virtual badges of honour.

One achievement in particular explicitly links heroism with immortality, and takes after both Homeric and Norse mythology. The player must complete the mission, "Glory of the Dead," which centers around the Nordic afterlife realm of *Sovngarde*, a place clearly modelled after the Norse *Valhalla*. In Sovngarde, giant, stone statues of fallen heroes line the landscape, and the sky radiates with fantastic purple and red hues. The player must eventually reach the "Hall of Valor," or *Shor's Hall*, which is a vast mead hall where fallen warriors congregate after death, drinking and basking in glory for all eternity. They sing songs and regale each other with tales of combat and valour, in much the same vein as Beowulf and his compatriots. This virtual form of *kleos* is in fact representative of *Skyrim*'s heroic nature as a whole: The player is thrust into an immersive, heroic environment in which she must save the realm (narrative); the player is strongly encouraged to engage in "heroic" acts, such as combat, and thus increase her potency (procedurality); and finally, the player is rewarded with achievements and glory for completing tasks (ludic). In all these ways, *Skyrim* effectively constructs a rhetoric of heroism, and thus fulfills a vital death denying function, if only temporarily and virtually.

In speaking about war, epic quests and death defying combat, I have been staying primarily within the ludic form of *agon*, competition. Of the four ludic forms, *Skyrim* is probably agonistic most of all. The player must compete against the game itself, through defeating enemies in combat, solving puzzles, and even bartering with shop-owners. Moreover, through the levelling and stats mechanics, the player also competes against herself. For what else can we call the desire to rack up more and more points but an urge to *better* one's position? However, in addition to *agon*, *alea*, chance also plays a key role in the game as well and in all RPGs. Again,

this is due to the fact that the RPG traces its lineage back to dice games via *D&D*, which relied

heavily on chance (Bartle, 2003). Indeed, although there are strategies one can employ, players

of *D&D* and other similar games are ultimately left to the whims of the "dungeon master," (like a

referee) and the roll of the dice; in both cases, the player has limited control.

As an action RPG, *Skyrim* does away with much of the chance in combat; unlike the

"Turn-Based" combat models in other RPGs, *Skyrim* uses a real-time combat system, in which

the player is responsible for every swing of the sword.[15] Nevertheless, there is still a chance

effect which dictates the likelihood that the player will bypass the enemy's armour, for example.

More explicitly, much of the game is spent searching dungeons for valuable loot, and opening

thousands of treasure chests scattered throughout Skyrim. The player cannot see inside the chest

before opening it, so there is always an element of chance and surprise at play. Most of the time,

the player is disappointed with the chest's contents; she may have fought through a dozen

bandits to get to that chest, and only got a minor health potion out of it or some common spell

ingredient. But when the chest contains a desperately needed or valuable item, the player can feel

a sense of exaltation not unlike winning at the slots or racetrack. This grants a sense of divine

favour, that the videogame gods are shining down on the player, so to speak. As a result, players

will generally open every chest they come across, just in case. Thus, even though *Skyrim* takes

away a significant portion of *alea* relative to other RPGs, the thrill and motivation of

experiencing good luck is still very much present.

In closing, it must be reiterated that the warrior is only one hero-figure employed by

videogames; I could have just as easily focused on sports heroes or guitar heroes, for instance.

However, I choose the warrior-hero because it is the most pervasive, and in my view, has the

---

[15] *Skyrim* also got rid of the "Luck" attribute from previous games in the series. This attribute increased skills, and increased the likelihood of finding rare items.

greatest ideological and pragmatic implications. War is predicated on killing other human beings, no matter how much we whitewash it; thus, such violence must always fall under the utmost scrutiny. It is important for us to locate, examine, and ultimately challenge discourses which depict war in a positive or heroic light, even in—especially in—an entertainment medium like the videogame. This is not to push forward a pacifist position, but merely to call for increased reflection in how we negotiate rhetorics of war and war heroism.

Chapter 6: Terror Management Theory in Technoculture and Gaming

> I have reached far beyond my competence and have probably
> secured for good a reputation for flamboyant gestures. But the
> times still crowd me and give me no rest, and I see no way to avoid
> ambitious synthetic attempts; either we get some kind of grip on
> the accumulation of thought or we continue to wallow helplessly,
> to starve amidst plenty. So I gamble with science and write.
>
> - Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil*

In the previous chapter, I conducted a series of close readings on two popular videogames within the FPS and RPG genres. I demonstrated that these games utilize a series of mutually reinforcing techniques to construct rhetorics of war heroism and immortality. Until now, much of this dissertation has focused on the application of Ernest Becker's ideas to media theory and Game Studies in the form of qualitative analyses. This chapter, however, takes up Becker's call for an "ambitious," interdisciplinary attempt, and discusses how we can utilize empirical methods to aid in our understanding of videogame analysis and design. In particular, this chapter outlines the design and results of a videogame experiment conducted according to Terror Management Theory (TMT), an experimental paradigm that tests Becker's ideas empirically. As a layperson in the methods of Social Psychology, it must be noted that the primary purpose of these studies is to engage in an "epistemological exercise," which examines the intersections, strengths, and weaknesses of interdisciplinary inquiry. Thus, this exercise explores how qualitative and quantitative methods might work together, and how they might work against each other. In conducting this exercise, I hope to demonstrate that both epistemological forms have something to add to Game Studies, and should be combined when possible.

By supplementing my "theory" with empiricism, or *episteme* with *techne*, I do not contend that empirical knowledge is somehow "superior" to other forms of knowledge; I have no

interest in entering that ancient debate. However, it seems clear that empirical, evidence based

models do provide a certain concreteness, a kind of order, that non-empirical models lack; they

can help quantify and break down complex concepts into manageable data sets. And, it must be

noted, in our present age, empiricism adds a certain rhetorical "weight" to an argument. That

said, it is equally clear that empiricism has its limitations, as not everything can be neatly

quantified; to employ Heideggerian terminology, there are certain aspects of Dasein that do not

lend themselves to clear quantification, least of all matters of ontology, and identity.[1] Thus,

interdisciplinary research must be cognizant of the relative strengths and weakness of each

epistemological approach. If used wisely, disparate epistemological frameworks can complement

each other, and "fill in" each other's blind spots, so to speak. It is therefore fruitful to combine

disparate epistemological approaches when possible, since an interdisciplinary, synthetic

approach may provide a fuller, more complete picture of the subject at hand.

Game Studies in particular benefits from an interdisciplinary approach, since videogames

are made up of many inter-related, discrete units (Murray,1997; Bogost, 2006). As discussed in

chapter four, a videogame is many things at once—a piece of computing technology, a ludic

form, software, code, an entertainment commodity—and so it takes a truly eclectic mix of

disciplinary approaches to extract the greatest possible meaning from a videogame. An

understanding of micro-processors, programming languages, game design, critical theory, player

reception, and so on, can all aid in interpreting a game and gaming culture. For this dissertation

and this chapter in particular, I am interested in the player side of the equation, and how games

may be utilized for persuasive purposes. Thus, audience analysis is absolutely necessary.

Audience analysis is of course also amenable to interdisciplinary approaches. For example, a

---

[1] This not only holds true for "abstract" disciplines such as Philosophy, but poses a problem for the "hard" sciences as well (e.g. quantum entanglement).

marketing team will apply their understanding of human psychology, aesthetics, and possibly humour to their ads, but will also employ empirical approaches, such as focus testing and economic analysis. If we are going to study videogames from a rhetorical perspective, then it is essential that we understand player motivation; that is, why do people play them, and what can they do for us? To answer some of these questions, we must turn to empirical methods, particularly within Social Psychology.

1. Terror Management Theory: Overview and Methodology

TMT is an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry developed by Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski in the 1980s. Following Becker, TMT posits that the organismic need for survival combined with the knowledge that we will inevitably die is potentially a source of great anxiety (e.g. Pyszczynski T., Greenberg J., and Solomon S., 1997). To cope with mortality, human beings construct cultural hero systems, or worldviews, as a means for transcending finitude. TMT thus examines the role of worldviews in mitigating death anxiety through experiments designed around two fundamental hypotheses:

1) *The Mortality Salience hypothesis*: The idea that cultural worldviews buffer one's anxiety from the inevitability of death, and that reminders of death provoke individuals to assert cultural worldviews; and

2) *The Anxiety Buffer hypothesis*: The idea that self-esteem serves as a buffer insulating humans from death anxiety. If people cling to value systems as a means for mitigating death anxiety, then reminding them of death should increase their need to assert the validity of this value system, as well as their role within it (i.e. their significance).

Through experiments that place participants into a state of Mortality Salience (MS), TMT has repeatedly demonstrated that one's worldview is indeed an essential component for mitigating

death anxiety, and that placing individuals into a state of MS provokes them to more strongly

assert their own cultural worldviews, while eschewing worldviews at odds with their own (e.g.

Greenberg, J. et al., 1994; Arndt, J. et al., 2002; Routledge, C., Arndt, J., Sedikides, C., and

Wildschut, T., 2008).

The typical TMT experiment runs as follows.[2] Participants, usually recruited from

undergraduate Psychology classes, are brought into a lab under the guise of a personality trait

test, or some other deception.[3] They are typically divided into two conditions, one manipulated,

and one control. The participant will often begin by responding to a series of mood and

"personality" questions, ostensibly designed to gauge insight into the participant's mood and

personality. Participants will then respond to an independent variable (IV), which is often meant

to invoke MS in the manipulated condition—e.g. "Please describe the emotions that are aroused

in you at the thought of your own death" (Greenberg et al, 1997). The control condition will

respond to a similarly worded question, usually involving an unpleasant experience, such as

dental pain, or public embarrassment (Burke, Martens, and Faucher, 2010).

The participant will then complete an additional section, which may be another

personality questionnaire, or a literary analysis of some sort. The purpose of this section is to

serve as a "delay" before administering the dependent measure, which may test for MS or

worldview defence. Previous research has shown that a "delay" is needed in order to obtain

significant MS effects, since it is hypothesized that the brain will push death thoughts from

consciousness immediately upon encountering them; once these defences "wear off," death

thoughts will remain in the sub-conscious, and may therefore motivate the participant without his

---

[2] It should be noted that there are many variations, but there are some established methodological paradigms.
[3] A deception is necessary since participants should not be reminded of death before entering the lab.

or her explicit knowledge (e.g. Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., Simon, L. and Breus, M., 1994).

There are two common dependent measures employed in a typical TMT study: One which tests death-thought-accessibility (DTA), the prevalence of death thoughts in the subject, and one which tests worldview defence (WVD), the degree to which individuals defend the validity of their worldview. [4] One method for measuring DTA is a specialized word-completion exercise, which contains a series of semi-completed words, some of which may be completed in ways semantically linked with death. For example, when faced with the item, C_FF__, participants can complete the word as "COFFEE," or "COFFIN," among others; participants who receive the MS stimulus *and* a delay are more likely to complete these items as death terms than the control condition (Burke, Martens, and Faucher, 2010).

Measuring WVD can be a little more tricky, since an individual's "worldview" is usually complex and highly idiosyncratic; however, there are some established paradigms. Again, the basic premise is that individuals who become mortality salient will deploy psychological buffers to defend against death anxiety, and one of these buffers is the belief in a stable, explanatory worldview in which the individual is an important player. Although a worldview is complex, it is generally made up of several identifiable, semi-permeable components, such as gender, religion, political affiliation, socio-economic status, and so on. Individuals who identify as "conservative," or "liberal" for example, will show individual variance, but will nonetheless have a fairly recognizable set of values (e.g. a stance on reproductive rights, religion, the role of government, and so on). By identifying commonly held attitudes or symbols of a particular worldview, researchers can affirm or threaten the validity of that worldview (e.g. American

---

[4] The term "worldview" is in this sense similar to "ideology," or in Beckerian terms, "hero system." However, a worldview is perhaps more complex, and can be made up of several, often competing ideologies or hero systems.

exceptionalism) more effectively. For example, mortality salient Christians have been shown to respond more favourably to pro-Christian discourses, and with more hostility towards anti-Christian discourses than Christians in a control group (Harmon-Jones, E. et al., 1997). Although there are several variations on this general paradigm, this general structure—deception, independent variable (e.g. MS prime), delay (e.g. literary analysis), then dependent measure (e.g. word-completion exercise)—remains fairly consistent.

2. Selected Literature Review

At the time of writing, over 300 published articles have used TMT as an experimental paradigm. The latest meta-analysis (Burke, Martens, and Faucher, 2010) found that in their examination of 238 empirical TMT articles, 83% directly tested the MS hypothesis (p. 156). In their review, the authors examined only those articles which directly tested the MS hypothesis (164 articles, 277 total experiments). The meta-analysis ultimately found that out of the experiments examined, "221 (80%) were both positive and statistically significant (nonzero) in favor of the MS hypothesis of TMT" (p. 179).

The authors note that sample sizes varied considerably, ranging "from 17 to 343 participants, with a mean of 87.3;" moreover, "participant age ranged from 7 to 84, with a mean age of 22.2" (p. 177). Interestingly, participant age did seem to affect results, at least some of the time. The authors note that "under some circumstances, older adults appear to respond to the problem of death quite differently than younger adults: unlike younger adult (17-37) participants, older adults (61-84) did not judge moral transgressions more harshly after MS (Maxfield et al., 2007)" (p. 181). This makes sense intuitively, since it stands to reason that attitudes towards death will change as individuals grow older, lose their sense of invulnerability, and perhaps more

readily accept the inevitability of death.[5] However, it is also somewhat counter-intuitive, since we often associate moral rigidity with old age. In any case, the age effect only occurred some of the time, and only under certain conditions.

TMT has also been employed across a geographically diverse participant pool as well. Although the vast majority of TMT studies were conducted in the U.S. and Europe (52.1% and 36.9% respectively), studies have also been conducted in Israel, Canada, Australia, and Iran (Burke, Martens, and Faucher, 2010, p. 177). Geographical location did not seem to influence results in any significant way. Perhaps surprisingly, gender did not appear to significantly influence responses to MS either. As the authors note, "Gender did not significantly moderate MS effects between studies;" however, the data did indicate that "males and females may defend themselves against death differently depending on the situation" (p. 184). From a Beckerian perspective, these slight differences would make sense, since gender is a major component of a culture's hero system (e.g. gender roles) and of an individual's self-identification within that system.

In addition to these inter-demographic consistencies, the authors also note that differences in the control topic

> made no significant difference... [and] this piece of evidence suggests that death does not elicit its effects merely because it is more negative than other threats to self (e.g., dental pain, failing an exam, social exclusion) but rather because there is something qualitatively different about the threat of death. (p. 182)

A recurring criticism against TMT is that the MS effects could simply be the result of negativity in general, not death *per se,* and that the relationship between death and self-esteem is not so clear-cut (e.g. Kirkpatrick and Navarette, 2006). However, the fact that geography, gender, control topic, and to a lesser extent, age, did not produce significant differences in the data

---

[5] This is just speculation, of course, but perhaps an individual's cognitive defenses against death anxiety are not as necessary if the individual has "accepted" the inevitability of death.

strongly suggests that the MS hypothesis is universal.[6] Since all human beings must cope with

existential anxiety, this would seem to support the hypotheses put forth by both Becker and

TMT. As Burke, Martens, and Faucher (2010) conclude,

> This meta-analysis reveals that the MS hypothesis of TMT—that death affects us
> without our conscious realization—is robust and produces moderate to large
> effects across a wide variety of MS manipulations as well as attitudinal,
> behavioral, and cognitive DVs [e.g. administering hot sauce to an out-group, etc.].
> (p. 187)

One potential problem with making general conclusions about the data may be that the

"vast majority of these studies (89.7%) employed college students as their participants" (Burke,

Martens, and Faucher, 2010, p. 177). Thus, it may be argued that the data is valid for that

particular demographic only. However, this is a problem not unique to TMT. Indeed, most

Psychology studies draw from the student population as it is more difficult to recruit, monitor,

and adequately compensate participants from the general public. To their credit TMT researchers

have tested their hypotheses outside of the lab setting and obtained similar results (e.g. E. Jonas,

I. Fritsche, and Greenberg, J., 2005). Another potential problem is publication bias. Journals are

more likely to publish positive effects than null effects. Again, this is not unique to TMT, and the

fact that hundreds of studies *have* confirmed the MS hypothesis strongly supports its validity.

With TMT's validity as an experimental paradigm established, I will now briefly discuss

a few particular trends and articles which more directly relate to my own research. As discussed

in chapter two, media in general can provide individuals with a sense of increased agency and

influence, or "extension." Media use can fulfill the desire to increase one's sense of significance,

since it demonstrates that one is somehow not confined to a finite, static body. One way to deny

mortality is to deny our materiality and fundamental animality; human beings distinguish

---

[6] For a more thorough rebuttal to TMT criticisms, see Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., and Maxfield, M. (2006).

themselves from the rest of the animal kingdom, which is lowly, insignificant, material, and finite. Unlike other animals, *we* are cosmically significant, capable of living on past physiological death. Several TMT studies have examined the relationship between feelings of human specialness, animality, and death denial.

For example, in their article, "I am *Not* an Animal: Mortality Salience, Disgust, and the Denial of Human Creatureliness," Goldenberg et al. (2001) tested the Beckerian hypothesis that "cultures promote norms that help people to distinguish themselves from animals, because this distinction serves the very important psychological function of providing protection from deeply rooted concerns about mortality" (p. 427). To test their hypothesis, they had participants read two essays, one which likened human beings to animals, and one which ascribed a preferential place to human beings. Ultimately, they found that "MS participants preferred the essay that distinguished humans from animals to the essay in which humans were portrayed as similar to other animals" (p. 432), which supports the "idea that distancing from the rest of the animal kingdom helps humans defend against anxiety associated with the awareness of death" (p. 427). After all, if human beings are no more significant than other animals, then perhaps we do not possess a "soul," or some immaterial property which allows us to live on after death.

In another article, Goldenberg et al (2009) examine TMT and "infrahumanization," a term coined by Leyens et al. (2001) to describe the way "that people attribute the human essence to their group, and a lesser degree of humanity to the outgroup" (p. 396). The concept of infrahumanization suggests that the quality of 'humanness' is not simply an either/or binary, i.e. human *or* animal, but a spectrum, and that individuals will view their in-group as "more human" than an out-group. The study of infrahumanization attempts to shed light on how and why we as human beings define ourselves in opposition to the animal, and how this affects intergroup

relations. As Leyens and others (e.g. Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, and Bastian, 2005; Paladino and

Vaes, 2009) have demonstrated, infrahumanization can lead to hostility towards, and

dehumanization of, members of an out-group. Thus, there are clear political, "real world"

applications for the study of infrahumanization.

In one of their experiments, Goldenberg et al (2009)

> directly tested if humanizing the ingroup in response to mortality salience
> protected people from death thoughts. The results supported this, revealing that
> within the mortality salience condition, humanization of the ingroup (Americans)
> was associated with decreased death accessibility, whereas humanization of the
> out-group (British) was unrelated to the accessibility of death thoughts. These
> results provide direct evidence for the association between in-group humanization
> and the management of mortality concerns. (p. 769)

In other words, individuals placed into a state of MS are more likely to view their in-group as

unique and human, while viewing members of an out-group as less human.

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that games such as *CoD: WaW* (Activision, 2008)

provide American soldiers with individualized names, appearances, personalities, and "noble"

motivations; the Japanese enemies, on the other hand, were not given names, appeared similar to

one another, and possessed animalistic characteristics (e.g. pronounced brow, nose, etc.).

Goldenberg et al.'s (2009) experiment therefore provides some empirical support for a TMT

inspired "reading" of group representations in games like *CoD*; by playing on our most deep

seated anxieties surrounding the human and the animal, or in-group and out-group, TMT can

help us understand the rhetorical efficacy of in-group and out-group representations in

videogames. It may also help explain the satisfaction which arises from destroying an animalistic

enemy who looks different from "us."

Staying with *CoD: WaW*, and the WWII FPS subgenre in general, TMT researchers have

also shown that nostalgic, positive depictions of the past serve a terror management function. For

example, Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, and Wildschut (2008) examined the terror management function of nostalgia, vis-à-vis its role in meaning-making. As individuals require stable meaning systems and self-esteem to buffer death-related anxiety, nostalgia offers both a continuity with the past as well as a "reservoir" of meaningful and positive experience to draw upon when needed (i.e. when facing an existential threat). Moreover, previous research (e.g. Wildschut et al., 2006) has demonstrated a correlation between nostalgia, feelings of positivity, connectedness with social groups, and higher self-esteem, all of which serve a terror management function. Three experiments confirmed the authors' hypotheses that nostalgia reduces both death-related anxiety and death-thought accessibility. In their words, "nostalgia may serve a terror management function by directly bolstering feelings of meaning, as opposed to indirectly providing such feelings via self-esteem and social bonds" (p. 138). By playing a WWII shooter which reaffirms "our" role in a morally righteous, heroic conflict, players may have their worldviews confirmed, and may feel as if they are participating in a significant historical action.

Although TMT is primarily an experimental paradigm, its tenets have also been used for qualitative analyses as well. For example, Sullivan, Greenberg, and Landau (2010) used TMT to analyze *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968) and *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah, 1971). The authors note that "Applying TMT reveals new dimensions of meaning," which may go unnoticed otherwise, and that generally, TMT can be viewed "as a useful framework for film readings" (p. 190). In their discussion of *Rosemary's Baby*, for example, the authors note that "the TMT approach sheds novel psychological insight on this work," (p. 193) especially when analyzing the themes of gender, parental roles, Satanism, and immortality. In their reading, "from a TMT perspective, *Rosemary's Baby* is a chilling parable about the dark underside of all our attempts at defeating death and a tale of what can happen to a person where her death-conquering worldview is

mercilessly abducted" (p. 193). In *Straw Dogs*, reminders of mortality abound in the form of death imagery, and from a thematic perspective, "[t]he characters engage in acts of aggression or defend their bases to sustain their sense that they are significant beings" (p. 195).

TMT is put forth as a useful analytical tool since in "examining character motivations in light of the desire for immortality and the repression of animality, new layers of understanding both the content and power of *Rosemary's Baby* and *Straw Dogs* are revealed" (p. 197). In short,

> TMT can be profitably applied to films that explicitly explore people's responses to death, [but] we suggest that this new form of existential film analysis could also reveal much about films covering a variety of psychological and sociological themes, including clashes of cultures, alienation, cultism, heroism, and sacrifice. (p. 198)

This "existential" analysis can also be applied to other media forms, such as literature, television (e.g. Taylor, 2012) and videogames.

Finally, from a technical, methodological perspective, it should be noted that although to date there are no published articles examining the link between videogame use and terror management concepts, videogames have been used as a medium for examining terror management in the form of "behavioral DV[s] such as driving speed in a video game simulator" (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010, p. 178). For example, Taubman Ben-Ari, Florian, and Mikulincer (2000) examined the effects of MS on reckless driving behaviour in part by using a driving simulator as the dependent measure. They found that mortality salient participants were more likely to drive recklessly than participants in the control condition, especially for those who self-reported that driving was relevant to their self-esteem. From a conceptual standpoint, this study also demonstrates that individuals are willing to engage in risky, even dangerous behaviour for the sake of self-esteem, or for the sake of their particular hero-systems. This study also demonstrates that videogames can be utilized in a TMT context, although as I will discuss below, my own study uses the medium as an independent instead of a dependent variable.

3. Two Experiments in Terror Management Theory

While working as a research assistant under Dr. Marcel O'Gorman, I helped design and administer two TMT inspired experiments. The first experiment (E1) was originally conceived by Dr. O'Gorman, and sought to examine the prevalence of "technoculture," as discussed in chapter one. We essentially tested if "technoculture" is an emerging cultural hero system, i.e. if individuals are using technology and its communities for terror management purposes. The second study (E2) applied TMT to videogame analysis, and asked if playing violent videogames would lead to increased a) Death-thought accessibility, and b) Worldview defence. Since my thesis is largely concerned with videogames, I will spend much more time on E2 than E1. Furthermore, overall we did not observe any significant results for E1, and we adjusted our methodology a number of times. Both experiments received Ethics Clearance from the University of Waterloo's Office of Research Ethics. Before describing the experiments and the data themselves, however, several acknowledgements must be made.

As noted above, there are many good reasons for conducting interdisciplinary work; the world does not fit into neatly demarcated disciplines, and different epistemological frameworks can contribute in their own particular ways. However, a potential weakness of interdisciplinary work is that one cannot possibly be an "expert" in everything, and so it is important to collaborate with people from the appropriate disciplinary backgrounds. In addition to Dr. O'Gorman and myself, these experiments were designed in collaboration with Dr. Mark Zanna and one of his graduate students, Steven Shepherd, both of the University of Waterloo's Psychology department. We also consulted with Dr. Sheldon Solomon, a TMT co-founder, who assisted us in interpreting the data, and in designing future iterations of our studies. Dr. Zanna was also instrumental in helping us interpret the data. Special recognition belongs to Steven

Shepherd, who not only helped us design the studies, but was also responsible for essentially all of the statistical analysis. All graphs and tables shown below were produced by Steven Shepherd.

a. E1: Technology and the Denial of Death: An Experiment in Terror Management Theory

The first experiment attempted to identify what O'Gorman (2010) has called *technoculture*, "a distinct heroic action system in which technological production is viewed as an end in itself, and individual recognition and death-denial are hypermediated by technologies that permit us to feel that we transcend time and space with increasing ease" (para. 4). In our study, we tested the presence of technoculture by applying established TMT experimental paradigms. As discussed, belief systems, worldviews, or in our jargon, cultural hero systems, act as buffers against mortality anxiety. When placed into a state of Mortality Salience (MS), individuals are more likely to strongly agree with discourses that affirm their worldview, while eschewing those at odds with, or threatening to their own. Thus, we hypothesized that if participants do indeed buy into technoculture as a heroic system, then reminders of death should cause them to strongly support pro-technology rhetorics or rhetorics of progress, and strongly dislike discourses which criticise technology, or threaten its significance.

Throughout the course of our experiments we adjusted the dependent measures for gauging the degree to which participants "bought into" technoculture. In our first run, we examined participant responses to one "pro-human" and one "pro-tech" essay. We had hypothesized that individuals who had undergone the MS manipulation would prefer the pro-tech essays, especially if they were men studying a STEM discipline. However, we did not observe this effect on the whole, and furthermore, any effects we observed in the first run were contradicted by the effects observed in subsequent runs. Nevertheless, designing the essays and

311

later interpreting the responses forced us to examine the relationship between technology, identity, and death-denial in some novel ways.

For example, since TMT suggests that human beings want to feel special and significant, we had to ensure that our "pro-tech" essays did not subjugate humanity to technology, i.e., that we are nothing without it. Likewise, our pro-human essay may have emphasized humanity's uniqueness and mastery over technology too much; thus, it may be inferred that the desire to be a unique and significant species "trumped" any particular desire to be a part of a technoculture. This is of course a *post hoc* attempt to explain the results of a failed experiment; however, from a Humanities perspective, such attempts point to the highly dynamic and complex nature of the self and its belief systems. On the one hand, we do not want to derogate technology since it may represent a key component of one's identity and sense of self-worth, but on the other, we do not want to convey that we are "enslaved" by technology, or that we would be useless without it. As an epistemological and rhetorical exercise, it forced us to condense a complex, heteroglottic and postmodern worldview into a single, essentialized paragraph.

In later iterations of the study, we removed the essays and instead tested for inclusion in technoculture by administering a 25 item questionnaire using a five point Likert scale (e.g. 1 = "not at all," and 5 = "very much"). According to their scores, participants would be assessed on the degree to which they valued technology as a part of their worldview. Items included "I feel anxious when I can't access the internet," and "My friends would think of me as someone who always has the newest piece of technology." We ascertained that the 25 items could be roughly broken down into three subcategories, labelled a) Identity, in which items directly corresponded to participants' sense of self; b) Ownership/Addiction, in which terms corresponded to addictive behaviours; and c) Social Networking, in which items indicated the importance placed on using

social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter (e.g. "Without social networking sites… my social life would be more or less the same" [reverse coded]). We switched from the essays to the technoculture scale for two primary reasons. First, encapsulating an entire yet-to-be-established worldview into a single small paragraph proved very difficult, as there are many aspects of identity one must account for. Secondly, the scale allowed us to include more variety in our questions, and so allowed us to break down the data in more ways (e.g. according to "Identity" or "Social Networking"). In spite of this second methodological approach, we still did not observe the effects we had hoped for.

Although our results were disappointing, this exercise helped Dr. O'Gorman and myself better understand the methods, strengths, and limitations of the empirical TMT approach, and moreover, we were able to apply the lessons learned to future studies. Furthermore, the process of designing, running, and refining these experiments provided invaluable insight into the machinations of both Social Psychology and empirical epistemological frameworks in general. As I will discuss in greater detail below, approaching a question from an empirical perspective forces the researcher to think in a quantifiable, measurable way. For Humanists, quantitative methods can provoke novel modes of thinking.

5. E2: "Gaming and the Denial of Death: A Terror Management Experiment in Digital Games"

The second experiment applied TMT concepts in an attempt to better understand how videogame depictions of death influence death thought accessibility (DTA) and worldview defence (WVD). If videogames are a space for ideological discourse, then employing metaphors of death and heroism may be especially powerful rhetorical devices. Thus, this experiment was conducted in part to better understand how human psychology factors into a player's experience,

particularly when playing games which employ the thanatological metaphor. Ultimately, we were interested in the role of videogames in inducing MS, propagating worldviews, and aiding in death denial. That is, do videogames serve as reminders of death? Might playing videogames mitigate death anxiety? Does exposure to game-death provoke individuals to assert the validity of their worldview? From our perspective, these are important questions for a number of reasons.

If one's worldview is a way to overcome existential anxiety, then videogames which at once induce MS and convey ideological messages may be powerful propagandistic tools; in effect, they could "open" the player to ideological susceptibility by creating existential anxiety and then offer a remedy through a particular worldview. Moreover, if reminders of death force individuals to cling to their worldviews while eschewing others, then conceivably, we can identify a game's underlying worldview, or ideology, through inducing MS: After becoming mortality salient, players should prefer games which affirm their worldviews (e.g. American exceptionalism), over games which convey conflicting worldviews (e.g. in Islamogaming).

We believe that TMT can also offer important insights into our understanding of game design and criticism. By explicitly utilizing the tenets of TMT, game designers can tap into powerful psychological forces. As the last two chapters have discussed, many game designers already do this anyway; however, TMT could provide a more focused application of these concepts. For example, a developer may consider design choices which add to the player's sense of power, significance, and luck, as these might contribute to a sense of heroism. Or, in applying TMT to game criticism, we may better understand why certain games and genres are successful, or how they may fulfill deeply rooted psychological needs. As mentioned, to date there have been no published articles examining the relationship between violent videogame usage and TMT. The first step, however, is in finding out if playing violent videogames can induce MS.

To test this, we hypothesized that players exposed to representations of death and dying in videogames would induce MS, and therefore increase both DTA (H1) and WVD (H2). In other words, if death in videogames does indeed induce MS, then players should be more likely to demonstrate higher DTA and increased instances of WVD. Based on previous empirical research into gaming (e.g. Bushman et al., 1999; Anderson, 2002) we also hypothesized that gaming familiarity would influence participant responses, and so we included a videogame demographic questionnaire.

i. Methodology and Procedures

Participants were recruited from UW undergraduate Psychology classes, and awarded with course credit for their participation. Participants were told they would be participating in an experiment testing "The Effects of Gaming on Mood and Cognition." We had participants play one of two games, *Call of Duty*: *Modern Warfare 2* (Activision, 2009), a violent First Person Shooter war game in which reminders of death are seemingly ubiquitous, and *Paintball 2* (Majesco, 2010) also an FPS, but without any images of death. Both games were played on Microsoft's Xbox 360 console. Although the gameplay mechanics are very similar—shoot opponents to win and avoid getting shot—the contexts are very different. Whereas *CoD* takes place in the context of war, *Paintball* takes place in the context of a friendly game of paintball. In addition to these two gameplay conditions, we also included a "Baseline" condition, which did not play any games but simply completed the questionnaire. Since no prior TMT studies had examined videogames in this way, we wanted to control for the potential influences of gameplay on death-denial generally (described below). Again, we hypothesized that participants who played *CoD* would be reminded of their mortality or become mortality salient, and therefore show higher instances of DTA and WVD when compared to those who played *Paintball*.

The study (n = 66) was comprised of 26 men and 40 women. Since men tend to be more familiar with the FPS genre than women, future iterations may want to set parameters when it comes to participant gender. At this preliminary stage in the research, it may be best to "cherry pick" certain participants whom we think will support the hypotheses. If the hypotheses are confirmed, we can then move into more general participant pools. Furthermore, relying on randomization for assigning condition improves data reliability, but also means that gender distributions can vary within and between conditions. In the gameplay conditions, i.e. *CoD* and *Paintball* (n = 47), women outnumbered men 27-20. The *CoD* condition (n = 27) had 15 women and 12 men, and the *Paintball* condition (n = 20) had 12 women and only 8 men. However, our Baseline condition (n = 19) had a male majority—6 women and 13 men. This just means that we are not controlling for gender as much as we would like, and this is especially important when gender correlates with game consumption, and game consumption (familiarity) correlates with participant responses. In future iterations, we would like to see the gender distributions (and participant numbers) more even across conditions.

Once in the lab, participants were randomly assigned to one of three possible conditions: *CoD* (MS), *Paintball* (Control), and the Baseline condition, which did not play any games. After 20 minutes of gameplay, the researcher came back into the room, turned off the television and console, and administered a 17 page questionnaire (pen-and-paper). A brief outline framing the questionnaire as a measure of mood and cognition (one to two minutes) was given in order to reinforce the deception and lengthen the delay between the independent variable (gameplay) and the first dependent measure (word completion exercise). The researcher then left the room once again so that participants could complete the questionnaire.

The first section was a dummy mood questionnaire, designed to serve as a delaying mechanism. The second section contained the first dependent measure, which tested for DTA prevalence. We hypothesized that since *CoD* is filled with images of death and dying, participants who played *CoD* would show higher instances of DTA than those in the control group playing *Paintball 2*. For measuring DTA, we used a modified TMT word-completer exercise (Arndt, 1997), which also included words to test for aggression, such as "H_TR_D" and "B__T" (Anderson, 2002). In combining the two word-completion exercise, we diverged from traditional TMT methodology, and so it is unclear if or how this affected participant responses.[7] Moreover, our exercise included 121 total items, which is much longer than usual. We wanted to control for aggression in order to make the data more reliable; that is, we wanted to be sure that any effects were a result of death in particular, and not general aggression, since some items (e.g. "K_L_") could belong to either the death or aggression categories.

The third section contained the second dependent measure, which was designed to measure WVD. In this case, participants were asked to read and respond to two paragraphs, ostensibly written by undergraduates new to Waterloo and Canada, one praising Canada, and the other derogating Canada. These essays were adapted from previous American TMT experiments (Greenberg, J., Simon, L., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., and Chatel, D., 1992).

Student Essay # 1 (Pro-Canada)

The first thing that hit me when I came to this country was the incredible freedom people had. In my country of Egypt, everything is not as good. Here there is freedom to go to school, freedom to work in any job you want. In this country people can go to school and train for the job they want. Here anyone who works hard can make their own success. If they get sick, they do not have to become bankrupt to see the doctor. In my country most people live in poverty with no chance of

---

[7] We did not observe any effects for aggression, however.

escape. In this country people have more opportunity for success than any other and unlike America, success does not depend on the group belong to. While there are problems in any country, Canada truly is a great nation and I don't regret my decision to come here at all.

Student Essay # 2 (Anti-Canada)

When I first came to this country from my home in Turkey I believed it was a land of opportunity and fairness but I soon realized this was only true for the rich. The system here is set up for rich against the poor. All people care about here is money and trying to have more than other people. There is no sympathy for people. Its all one group putting down others and nobody cares about the foreigners. The people only let foreigners have jobs like work at gas stations or work in fields because no Canadian would do it. Canadians are spoiled and lazy and want everything handed to them. There is not even such a thing as Canadian culture. Canadians just steal from the British and Americans for their culture. Canada is a cold country that is unsensitive to needs and problems of foreigners. It thinks it's a great country but its not.

Participants were asked to put the paragraph into their own words, before rating how much they agreed with each author's assessment, how much they liked each author, and how intelligent they perceived each author according to a nine point scale (1 = "not at all," 9 = "very much"). Again, we predicted that Canadians who played *CoD* would show higher instances of WVD than the control group, who played *Paintball*. After the second dependent measure testing WVD, participants were then asked to provide some information on their views on gaming, and prior experiences playing videogames. This section served two main purposes.

First, it let us know if participants were familiar with the FPS genre in particular, and videogames in general (e.g., "I would consider myself a 'gamer,'" and "I have played this game before today"); as noted, we hypothesized that player familiarity would influence the results.

Secondly, I was simply interested in collecting data on player preferences, apart from any real relevance to the immediate hypothesis. Players were asked to rank their favourite videogame characteristics, including excitement, narrative, and meeting with friends online. We placed these questions after the dependent measures in order to reduce the chance of unintentionally influencing participant responses. Finally, participants were asked to provide demographic information, such as age, gender, identified-ethnicity, and academic major. The Baseline condition simply completed the questionnaire without playing any games. We did not expose them to any alternate dependent measures, such as a reminder of death. This condition was implemented so that we could more accurately measure the effect of playing a videogame in and of itself.

ii. Results

We hypothesized that players exposed to the representations of death in *CoD* would show increased H1) DTA and H2) WVD when compared to the participants who played *Paintball 2*. Ultimately our hypotheses were not confirmed. This is not to say that there no effects, however; indeed, the data is encouraging, but in many ways contradictory. We observed significant effects for H1, but only marginally significant effects for H2. This would be encouraging; however, the effects for H1 in fact contradicted the effects for H2. Finally, the effects we did observe only occurred according to one factor, gaming familiarity; we predicted familiarity would matter, but not to the degree that it did.

For H1, we did not see the cut and dry distribution we had hoped for. Taken as a whole, we did not observe any significant condition effects; those who played *Paintball* were just as likely to complete the blanks with death related terms than those who played *CoD*. But when we factored in gaming familiarity, we did observe some interesting effects (Y axis = DTA):
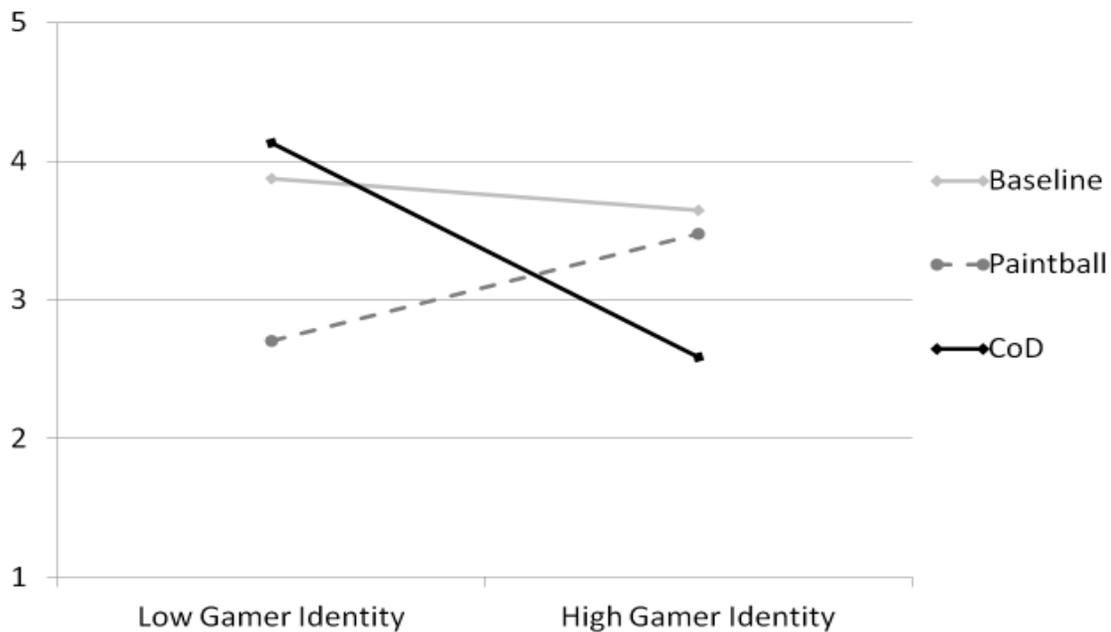
Fig. 12. Effect of condition on DTA. Produced by Steve Shepherd.

First, between the *CoD* and *Paintball* conditions, DTA went up as gaming familiarity went down. In other words, as we expected, participants who were not familiar with videogames ("low gamers") showed increased DTA after playing *CoD* when compared to low-gamers who played *Paintball 2* (p = .01).[8] Moreover, within the *CoD* condition itself, we likewise observed a significant effect in DTA according to gamer familiarity: again, low-gamers showed higher DTA than high-gamers (p = .01). In terms of magnitude, low-gamers who played *CoD* completed a mean of 4.13 death-related words out of 11 (37%), while low-gamers who played *Paintball* completed 2.71 death related words (24%), a difference of 1.32 words, or 13%.

For H2, we did not observe any significant effects on the game played to WVD, although we did find a couple of marginally significant effects (Y Axis = anti-Canada essay evaluations):

---

[8] A *p* value less than .05 is considered statistically significant, i.e., there is a 95% probability that the effect did not occur due to chance.
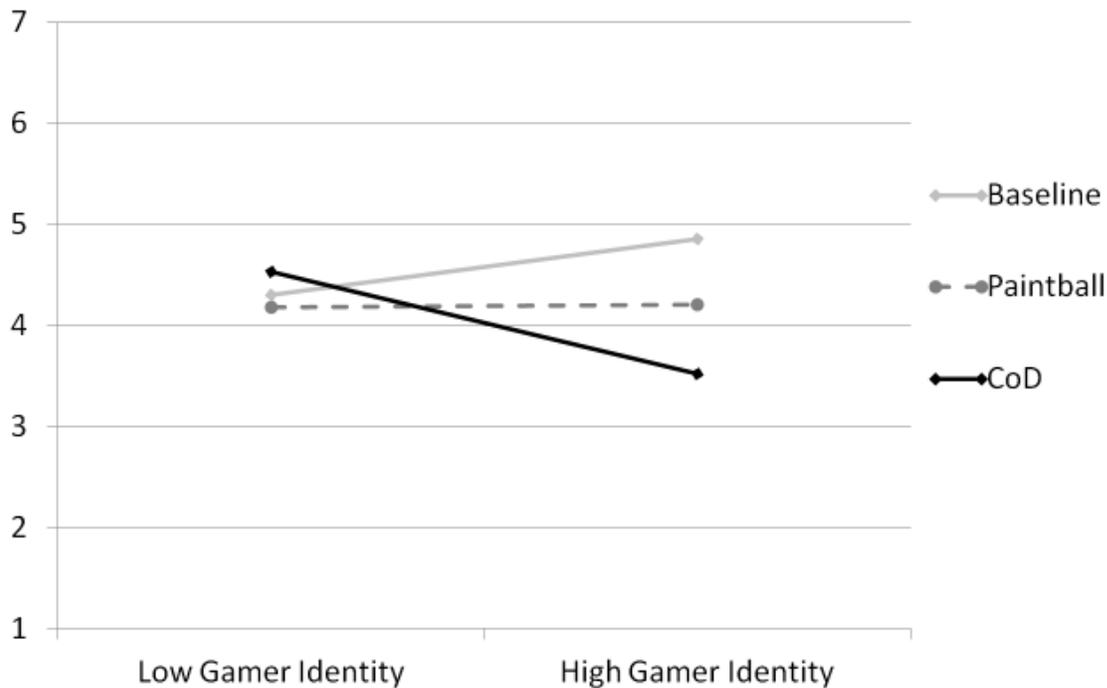
Fig. 13. Evaluations of "anti-Canada" essay. Produced by Steve Shepherd.

Among high-gamers, there was a marginally significant difference between the Baseline and *CoD* conditions, wherein high-gamers who played *CoD* were more likely to dislike the anti-Canada essay than high gamers in the Baseline condition (p = 0.59). Moreover, within the *CoD* condition, high-gamers disliked the essay more than low-gamers, though again, this effect was only marginally significant (p = .09). When evaluating the pro-Canada essay within the Baseline condition, high-gamers marginally liked the essay more than low-gamers (p = .05). Moreover, among high gamers, participants in the Baseline condition liked the essay marginally more than participants in the *CoD* conditions (p = .065). Y-axis = pro-Canada essay evaluations:
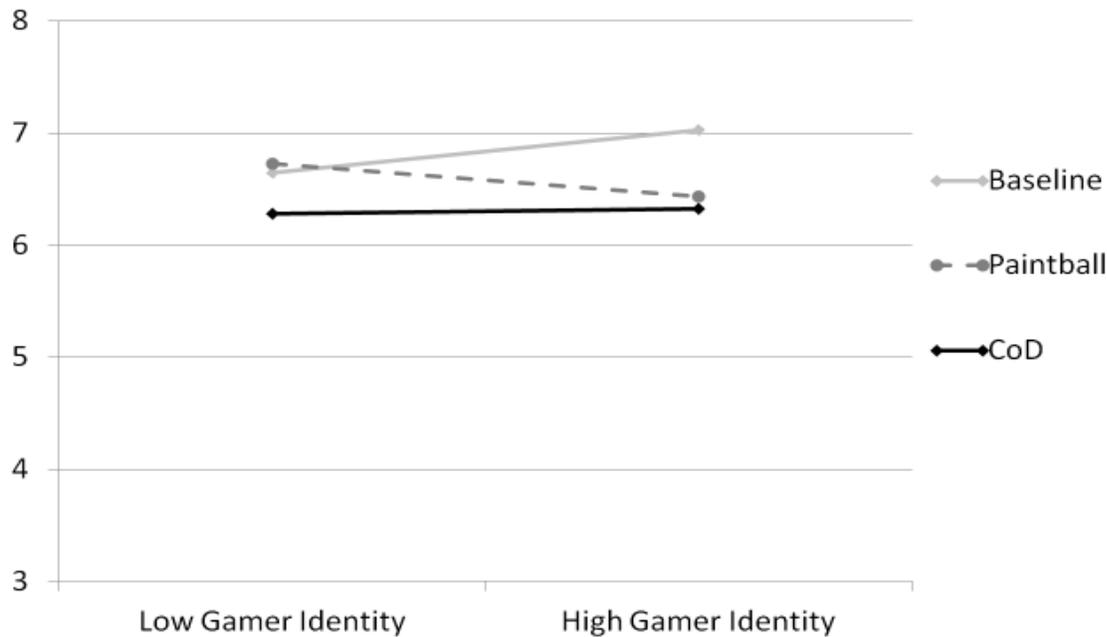
Fig. 14. Evaluation of "pro-Canada" essay. Produced by Steve Shepherd.

iii. Discussion

Since we only ran this experiment once, it should primarily be viewed as an attempt to apply TMT to videogame analysis. Future experiments are needed both to improve upon methodological weaknesses and to try to replicate the results. From an epistemological (and pedagogical) perspective, this was an incredibly fruitful exercise. But it must first be noted that from an empirical perspective, these results are disappointing, and indeed troubling, since our hypotheses were only supported within particular groups, and in fact ran counter to one another.

On the positive side, in light of my general thesis that videogames can serve a death denying function, it was encouraging to see that low-gamers (who may not be desensitized to in-game violence) showed increased DTA after playing *CoD* than after playing *Paintball*. This suggests that in-game representations of death may in fact remind people of mortality, but that increased exposure to *game-death* lessens the player's association with his or her *actual death*. Thus for avid gamers, playing games in which the player encounters death may mitigate death

322

anxiety, at least for a short time. This is further supported by the fact that high-gamers showed less DTA after playing *CoD* than those in the Baseline condition. In other words, those who consider themselves "gamers" showed less DTA *after* exposure to game-death than "gamers" who were not exposed to game-death (i.e. in the Baseline condition). It is not clear why DTA was so high among avid gamers in the Baseline condition in the first place and so further, more focused experiments are needed. However, this result may suggest that playing violent videogames actually mitigates death anxiety among avid gamers, or put another way, that "hardcore" gamers receive a terror management benefit from playing violent videogames. This interpretation is only one reading of the data of course, and several questions remain.

For example, why is DTA so high among high-gamers in the Baseline condition in the first place? Does playing games generally lead to increased DTA, and if so, might playing death games "soothe" death anxiety temporarily for high-gamers, not unlike an Aspirin? In other words, perhaps playing violent videogames leads to higher DTA while away from the game, and playing violent videogames serves as a death-thought "remedy."[9] Future experiments can address these issues. Our results do not concretely confirm our hypothesis that exposure to in-game death leads to increased DTA—we would have liked a more general condition effect —but our findings do point to some potentially interesting effects which warrant future consideration.

However, when we look at the data for H2—that exposure to in-game death will lead to increased worldview defence (WVD)—the story begins to fall apart. For starters, we only obtained marginally significant results (i.e. p values between .05 and .1), and when we did, these results actually ran counter to the results found in H1. According to our hypothesis, we should have seen participants in the *CoD* condition respond more strongly to our pro- and anti-Canada essays. However, this effect was not observed in general, and was only marginally significant

---

[9] This may also have implications for the growing problem of game addiction.

among high-gamers. Among this demographic, those in the *CoD* (MS) condition rated the anti-Canada essay lower (i.e. disliked it more) than the Baseline condition. This would be encouraging, since perhaps playing *CoD* did remind players of their deaths and so triggered increased WVD; however, these same high-gamers showed *lower* DTA in H1. In other words, while gaming familiarity tended to *decrease* DTA (H1), it also tended to *increase* WVD (H2); if we presume that repeated exposure to game-death leads individuals to increasingly dissociate game-death with mortality in general, then we should expect these two terror management measures to correspond with, not contradict one another.

In short, the effects we did observe for H1 were countered by the effects observed for H2. If MS had been triggered by playing *CoD*, even within a single demographic, then increases or decreases in DTA and WVD should be consistent. Furthermore, we expected to see participants in the *CoD* condition to like the pro-Canada and dislike the anti-Canada essays more than their counterparts in the *Paintball* condition, but we did not observe this effect. Thus, on the one hand, it is encouraging to see *some* effects, however, contradictory (i.e., it is preferable to no effects at all), but on the other hand, all these contradictions pose problems for interpreting the data. So what went wrong?

First, as noted, we had uneven conditions, both in terms of total numbers, and in gender distribution. Furthermore, self-identified ethnicity also varied among conditions. Although "White" and "Asian Canadian" were the most frequent responses in all conditions, "White" participants made up the majority in both the *CoD* (12 Wh, 9 AC), and Baseline (9 Wh, 6AC) conditions. However, "Asian Canadian" participants made up the majority in the *Paintball* condition (8 AC, 5 Wh). Furthermore, our demographic questionnaire asked participants for their self-identified ethnicity, but did not ask them for their self-identified nationality. When checking

for worldview defence (H2), we had assumed that most participants would identify as Canadian, and therefore would feel proud/insulted after reading the essays. But at a diverse institution such as UW, this assumption was likely a mistake. By controlling for nationality and even patriotism, we could have more accurately gauged the effect of game-death on WVD, since the essays were directly related to feelings of Canadian-ness.

Future iterations of this study should thus revamp the WVD essays in a way that better captures "Canadian-ness." We adapted our essays from a frequently used American equivalent, and tried to include aspects of Canada generally associated with Canadian pride, such as "freedom," public healthcare, and an implied moral superiority over our American counterparts. The pro-Canada essay mentioned that a sick individual does "not have to become bankrupt to see the doctor," and the anti-Canada essay asserted that there "is not even such a thing as Canadian culture. Canadians just steal from the British and Americans for their culture." These may not be the best indicators of Canadian culture, and in fact, perhaps the concepts of "freedom" and "moral superiority" are not very "Canadian" at all.

Thus, future iterations of the study should perhaps follow the methods of Schimel, Hayes, Williams and Jahrig (2007), who explicitly examined the relationship between Canadian-ness and TMT. They pre-screened participants and selected them based on their responses to a questionnaire gauging levels of Canadian patriotism, such as "I would proudly display the Canadian flag," and "Being Canadian is an important part of my self-worth" (p. 790). The authors found that patriotic Canadians showed increased DTA after exposure to an anti-Canadian essay taken from an American blog, which narrowed in on the subject of healthcare. According to the authors of the study, the arguments in the essay "were designed to be demeaning but rational and extremely potent," and included passages such as "Let's point out something… that

should be obvious to anyone who has a semi-active brain stem. In Canada, the state has a monopoly on healthcare. What happens in any monopoly? Poor service. Waste. Cost inflation. That's a fact…" (p. 790). The advantage to this approach is that all participants will strongly identify as "Canadian" in the first place, and therefore it is reasonably clear that Canadian-ness will make up a significant part of their worldview. Furthermore, focusing on a single Canadian issue (i.e. healthcare) in the essay may also clear up any ambiguity which may arise from overlapping or competing systems (e.g. "freedom," which is not specifically Canadian).

Apart from difficulties in participant recruitment and essay design, the medium itself presents significant empirical challenges. Part of the difficulty in applying TMT to videogames is that self-esteem is a primary terror management buffer. This poses a problem since a player's self-esteem may vary depending upon his or her performance, or on the outcome of the game. Thus, even if we do observe a clear increase in DTA or WVD after playing violent videogames, it is difficult to gauge if these arise from the ludic context (narratological, visual, ideological, etc.), or from a potential self-esteem deficit accrued through poor performance. In other words, if demonstrably performing poorly decreases self-esteem, and self-esteem buffers MS, then decreased self-esteem may lead to increased WVD and DTA, regardless of the game's narratological or representational content.

In a recent study, Clay Routledge (2012), examined the relationship between failure, self-esteem, and death anxiety. Ultimately, Routledge found that perceived failure adversely affected self-esteem, and in turn increased death anxiety when compared to the control conditions (self-esteem boost and non-self threat). Since success and failure are such integral parts of gameplay, it is essential that we control for player performance. One possible method is to simply record player performance through video recording. By doing this, we can take into account player

performance, and therefore better understand the influence of gameplay in general on death-anxiety. Does winning act as a buffer against death anxiety? Does losing decrease self-esteem, and therefore increase worldview defence? If two players perform equally well, but the context differs (threatens/affirms worldview), would we see any TMT effects? Once such questions are addressed, we can then examine issues involving the significance of a videogame's use of narrative or symbolism on worldview construction.

In addition to participant and self-esteem controls, future iterations should also contain a larger sample size, and perhaps include more game genres as well. For example, if we see increased DTA in participants who do poorly in vastly different games (e.g. *CoD* and *Tetris*), then that would suggest that videogames are relevant for terror management purposes simply by virtue of their self-esteem granting capabilities, i.e. their ability to quantifiably attribute success and failure apart from any narrative frame. Thus, this may help us better understand the complex relationship between ludology and narratology; perhaps from a terror management perspective, genre or game narrative does not matter, but it is relative success or failure which really counts.

4. Combining *Episteme* and *Techne*

When examining something as complex as human motivation, the benefit of an empirical approach is that it allows us to break down complex issues such as identity, ideology, and mortality into quantifiable component parts. In particular, when examining death anxiety and its influence on our thoughts and behaviour, it is important to understand how we conceptualize death in the first place: Is it an absolute end, from which there is no return? Or is it perhaps viewed as a transitional phase between two types of being? These are philosophical questions to be sure, but perhaps empirical studies using videogames can helps us address them in some novel ways. For example, in *CoD*, there is a great deal of death imagery, as the player continually kills

and dies; however, the player also always resurrects after dying, and so from a procedural perspective, this can perhaps be viewed as a religious model of death. In *Paintball 2*, there are no images of death at all. However, when the player is hit, she is eliminated from play and cannot return until the next round begins; from a procedural perspective, this may be viewed as a "materialist" model of death, from which there is no return. We thus see a representational tension at play in these games between the narratological and visual representations of death, and the procedural representations of death. Which one is closer to how we conceptualize death? Empirical studies utilizing videogames may help us better understand such complex questions.

On the other hand, this exercise also demonstrated the limitations of empiricism. Human beings are incredibly complex organisms, comprised of a seemingly endless web of experiences, emotions, memories and beliefs. It is often difficult to identify our motivations and feelings, or to articulate our sense of self. It is thus very difficult to identify and account for all this complexity in a quantifiable, measurable way. Furthermore, there are also methodological limitations. As noted, in many ways the lab is not "real life," and people may behave or feel differently depending on the context. TMT has addressed this by experimenting outside of the lab, but this is not always possible. In short, when it comes to understanding human being, empiricism alone only gets us so far. We also need art, theory, and philosophical inquiry as well, since these provide a mode of thinking and exploration not generally permitted in empiricism.

Yet if we can explain components of identity both theoretically *and* empirically (i.e. by testing our theories), then, in my view, such explanations should be viewed as accurate and reliable. Approaching a subject from several epistemological positions simultaneously is key for obtaining a more thorough understanding of it. As discussed in chapter three, contemporary propagandists in "PSYOPS" combine multiple disciplines when crafting their messages,

including rhetoric, neurobiology, and psychology, and we should follow suit. When attempting to understand something in its fullest form, we should utilize theory and empiricism, *episteme* and *techne* whenever possible.

In addition to these academic applications, TMT may also yield insights into game design as well. In better understanding human psychology and mortality, perhaps we can make more engaging, compelling games. Since so many games utilize death related metaphors, a better understanding of how players perceive and conceptualize death may produce more engaging, compelling death mechanics. By utilizing the tenets of TMT, game designers can potentially tap into powerful psychological drives, which closely resemble ludic structures (e.g. progress, success, superiority, and so on).

Game designers could, for example, make death more significant in games. A designer may add to player engagement and exhilaration by making death actually matter. If a character is only able to die once in a game, for instance, then the player may view that character's life as more valuable and less disposable, not unlike the attachment players feel to their MMORPG characters (e.g. as seen in *World of Warcraft*). By making death matter, perhaps facing death in the game would not be treated so frivolously, but would instead increase tension, anxiety and therefore the satisfaction of survival. Moreover, TMT can be applied even without explicit representations of death. A developer may consider design choices which add to the player's sense of power, significance, and luck, as these might contribute to a sense of heroism.

This chapter has argued in favour of an inter-disciplinary, inter-epistemological approach to Game Studies. In particular, it has argued that a terror management approach can yield important insights, both as an analytical framework and as a game design heuristic. By applying TMT to game criticism, we may better understand why certain games and genres are successful,

and how they may fulfill deeply rooted psychological needs. By applying TMT to game design, we can perhaps implement more interesting and engaging game mechanics, particularly in relation to the themes of death and heroism. This chapter has also called for greater inter-disciplinarity in general; different epistemological frameworks possess their own relative strengths and weaknesses, and so should be used in concert with one another when appropriate. This is not to derogate a specialist approach, but merely to highlight the fact that the world does not fit into neatly defined disciplinary divisions. Since TMT stems from Beckerian philosophy, it may be particularly well suited for empirically testing questions typically reserved for Humanities scholars.

Conclusion: Towards an Unconventional Heroism

> The truth is, Walker, you are here because you want to feel like something you're not: a hero.
>
> - Colonel Konrad, *Spec Ops: The Line*

This dissertation has shown that videogames are a particularly potent death denying medium. Since human beings are strongly motivated by an urge to deny mortality, this makes them powerful vehicles for constructing and deconstructing persuasive arguments. Understanding and exploiting death's motivational capabilities can be utilized for persuasive purposes. Discourses that offer individuals an escape from their "final extinction" can be very enticing. People are told, either explicitly or implicitly, that they need only act thusly and eternal life is theirs. And in doing so, they transcend death through either metaphysical or symbolic means, and leave behind a presence in Dasein after they are gone. For Becker, the symbolic systems which are used to negotiate this interaction between behavioural guidelines and death transcendence are cultural hero systems, which define the parameters of heroism. People *want to* excel within their particular hero system, and so defining these parameters can be a powerful way to influence beliefs and behaviours.

Since videogames consist of so many component parts, this dissertation adopted a "unit operations" (Bogost, 2006) approach. Videogames are particularly well suited for conveying rhetorics of heroism and immortality because they can simultaneously employ a variety of mutually reinforcing techniques, emerging from several discrete but inter-related units. Because they are a medium, videogames allow players to extend their sense of self, reaffirm the Cartesian dichotomy, and thereby increase their sense of significance and essential immateriality. Because they are games, they provide a means for quantifiably demonstrating excellence and superiority;

they allow us to stand out over others and to demonstrate our potency. Through victory, we accrue honour, material rewards, and renown, if only such renown comes from a hi-score display at an arcade or Xbox Live leaderboard. Because of their agonistic, binary structure, videogames are able to provide easily recognizable, clearly delineated sides, Us and the Opposition. Because they are an audiovisual medium, videogames are capable of representing Us and the Opposition according to the sights and sounds of culturally defined heroism, such as the American soldier and the Arabic "terrorist."

Videogames use narratological and audio-visual techniques for reinforcing the binarism of the medium by employing a cultural binarism as well. In this model, we have in effect a cross-media metonymy, in which the audio-visual representations of the opponents—Islamic, non-white, infrahuman, etc.— are linked with the agonistic and antagonistic structure of competitive videogames. In this way, videogames have the potential to metonymically link individual groups with otherness, hostility and aggression. When videogames represent "real" groups, such as Iranians or Afghans, this poses the risk of further vilifying these groups, and therefore of justifying hostile actions against them "in real life."

However, there is some flexibility in how we represent this binary, agonistic structure through narratological and audio-visual techniques. The hero does not always have to be a straight, usually white American man with bulging biceps and a square jaw. And the opponents do not always have to be culturally prescribed others, who speak in foreign languages and are only driven by an irrational hatred of "freedom." Furthermore, war-themed games need not attempt to nullify the deadly aspects of war, but can in fact use the medium to emphasize and interrogate them. Although this dissertation has largely focused on general trends, in which depictions of heroism and immortality are quite simplistic, there are in fact games and game

332

mechanics which contest conventional rhetorics of heroism and immortality.

1. Complicating the Hero Figure

Indeed, over the past few years, both independent and major game studios have begun moving away from the unambiguous videogame hero, at least in some respects. In games like *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar, 2008), the player is not only allowed, but encouraged to commit violent crimes, even if the game's protagonist, Niko Bellic, is ultimately a sympathetic character. In a very different way, Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* (Sony, 2010) requires players to engage in mundane tasks, such as brushing the character's teeth, and pushing his son on a swing.[1] Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (Microsoft, 2008) upends typical rhetorics of heroism intentionally, primarily by exploiting generic conventions. *Braid* very much resembles *Mario Bros.*(Nintendo, 1983); it is a 2D platformer in which a male hero must (ostensibly) rescue an abducted "princess" from an evil villain. Throughout the game, the player must avoid obstacles, defeat enemies, and solve puzzles in order to progress. However, once the player reaches the final stage, it is revealed that the princess was not abducted by an evil villain, but is in fact fleeing from the player; the "villain" turns out to be a knight who is trying to save the princess from the player. The ending reveals that the player's character worked on the atom bomb, and is responsible for great destruction. In this way, the game is very Beckerian: In attempting to be a hero and vanquish anything that stands in the way, the player ends up committing acts of evil.

The attempt to complicate conventional rhetorics of heroism and villainy is perhaps most explicitly seen in Yager/2K's Third Person Shooter (TPS), *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). This "meta-game" questions both videogame heroism in general, and the heroism associated with

---

[1] That being said, although the mundane is the true antithesis to the heroic, the playable character in *Heavy Rain* is an integral part of a dramatic and significant series of events. A true anti-hero game would look something like a virtual pet game, popular in the 1990s.

Western interventionism in particular. In many ways, *The Line* feels like a typical TPS, at least at first. Like other popular games in the genre, such as *Gears of War* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2006), the majority of the gameplay consists of ducking in and out of cover while engaging in firefights with hordes of enemies. Also like most Shooters, the player must use weapons such as assault rifles, machine guns, and various explosives. There is no real chance to negotiate with enemies, and even when it appears that there is, negotiations almost always break down and killing ensues.

The game's narrative also appears to follow generic conventions very closely, at least at first. The game takes place in Dubai, which has been engulfed in a devastating sandstorm. The playable character is an American Special Operations soldier, Captain Walker, who leads two other men on a righteous mission to save (innocent) lives and restore order. Ostensibly, the player's mission is to track down members of "the 33rd," a regiment of American soldiers with whom the military has lost contact. Almost the whole city is buried in the sand, and all institutions have broken down. At first, the situation on the ground is unclear, and there is nobody in sight. However, once the player starts encountering NPCs, they are Arabic, armed, and suspicious of Walker and his comrades. Although it initially appears that the two groups might reach an understanding and avoid violence, like most games in the genre, the player is ultimately forced to kill them. In the opening levels, everything appears to be *normal*.

However, after about the halfway point in the game, *The Line* abruptly upends the typical rhetorics of patriotism, heroism and moral righteousness which characterise most shooters. As the game progresses, it becomes clear that Walker is willing to go to greater and greater lengths to fulfill his mission. He commits increasingly brutal acts of violence, including summary executions, and becomes obsessed with simply moving forward. After a while, it is clear that

Walker is not the unequivocal, righteous hero we expected him to be. Even more surprising, however, is that the enemies shift from nameless, faceless Arabs, to American soldiers and citizens. It turns out that two American factions—the 33rd and the CIA—are at war with each other, and so Walker and his men continually find themselves being mistaken for one or the other. Thus the rest of the game consists primarily of battles against the 33rd, the very unit Walker was initially meant to rescue.

There are very few games which depict American soldiers killing other Americans.[2] As Brendan Keogh (2012) observes in his book length analysis of *The Line*, switching the ethnicity of the enemies forced him to reflect on how he had previously conceptualized the "insurgents:"

> Simply changing the human NPCs I am shooting to an ethnicity that more closely reflects my own is a startlingly powerful way to force me to acknowledge the humanity of the targets I am shooting…. As the orders being screamed by the enemies are suddenly in English, suddenly understandable to me, I instantly realise just how much I had othered the insurgents before now. Before long, I will inevitably start to other the 33rd, too. I must, if I am to keep shooting them. But from this point the game will consistently and systematically force me to remember their humanity. At this early stage, just the fact they are Americans speaking English is enough to make me feel wrong about what I am doing. (pp. 38-39)

For Keogh, it is almost impossible to view Walker and his men as heroes when they begin killing members of the in-group; even if only subconsciously, Keogh had clearly not identified with the nameless, faceless Arabic enemies he had been killing up until then. Even though the ludic structures remain the same—kill the enemies trying to kill you—*The Line* utilizes audio-visual techniques for problematizing the othering which is a pre-requisite for the genre, and perhaps for killing generally.

---

[2] As noted in chapter five, *CoD*'s *Modern Warfare* series depicts a "traitor," in General Shepherd, and in a case of mistaken identity, the player battles British soldiers. However, such complications are not central to the game, as they are in *The Line*.

The starkest example of *The Line*'s willingness to critique both war games and war occurs during the now infamous "White Phosphorous" stage. In this section, Walker and his men are confronted by a sizeable enemy force blocking the way to their mission objective. They are heavily outmanned and outgunned, so there is no way to attack the enemy head on. Instead, there just so happens to be an artillery weapon-system nearby which fires White Phosphorous (WP) rounds. WP is an incendiary round which burns at very high temperatures; it is a grotesque and cruel weapon. While Walker and his men debate the morality of using the WP rounds—and on Americans, no less—the enemy force begins firing at them. Walker decides they have no choice, and that they must use the WP. The player gets a God's eye view of the battlefield via a thermal imaging interface, and is able to select targets for bombardment. It is not clear who is who on the ground, but there appear to be tanks, firing soldiers, and a large cluster of enemy infantry huddled together. Eventually, the player incinerates the entire battlefield. In most games, that usually signifies the end of the mission; it is the last the player sees of the charred landscape. However, this is not the case in *The Line*.

Instead, Walker approaches the burning battlefield, and is horrified to find that those tanks weren't hostile after all, but friendly, and those large clumps of people weren't enemy infantry, but the very civilians he was trying to protect. Everywhere Walker looks, there are badly burned soldiers begging to be killed, and charred remains of dead mothers holding their dead children. In an interview with Polygon's Russ Pitts (2012), narrative designer Richard Pearsey offers his thoughts on the scene, and comments on the reactions during testing:

> A lot of [players] at that point—they can't watch what they're seeing ... which puts [the player] and [Walker] in an identical psychological state ... because that's what you're doing and that's what the player is dealing with to a degree. The city is burning and you're the ones who burned it. (polygon.com)

Again, like we see in *Braid*, there is a Beckerian message here: Walker tries to be a hero, to vanquish evil and save the innocent, but he ends up committing irreparable harm. Indeed, this horrifying scene encapsulates Becker's entire project: In our attempts to be heroic, we often cause great harm to others. The willingness to "rain fire" on one's enemies requires a special, vicious form of psychological justification, and the promise of immortality provided by a valid, univocal hero system provides just that justification.

The Line's attempts to upend and question prevailing rhetorics of heroism have elicited very strong responses in the major gaming outlets. Polygon ran several features on the game, including an extended interview with the game's writing team entitled "Don't be a hero" (2012). G4TV.com likewise ran an extended critique of the game, noting its thematic similarities to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; according to author Adam Rosenberg (2012), *The Line* "accomplishes a rare feat for a video game: it tells a story that matters" (para. 1).

Most notably, Brendan Keogh (2012) wrote an entire e-book on the game, entitled, *Killing is Harmless*.[3] In this book, Keogh meticulously picks apart *The Line*'s narrative and gameplay, demonstrating how it is in fact a "meta-game" which serves as a critique of the Shooter genre, but of war itself. As Keogh (2012) writes,

> *The Line* is a shooter about shooters. It makes some interesting commentaries on modern warfare and Western interventionism to be sure, but what I got out of it most were questions about the shooter genre itself—the questions that other shooters either wilfully ignore or simply don't think to ask. Is it really okay to be shooting so many people? Does it actually matter that they aren't real? What does it say about us, the people who play shooter[s]…? What does it say about us, as a culture, that these are the kinds of games that make so much money? (pp. 4-5).

---

[3] The title is taken from a load screen, which reads, "To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless" (2K, 2012).

Whether one agrees with Keogh's take on the game or not, it is nevertheless refreshing to see a big-budget game take a chance, however small. Games like *The Line* may stumble in their attempts to complicate conventional characterizations of heroes and villains, but at least they try.

2. Complicating Immortality through Permadeath

In addition to complicating rhetorics of heroism, videogames also possess the potential to examine death and immortality in novel ways. As discussed in chapter four, since success and failure are easily expressed in terms of life and death, games have used thanatological metaphors since their very beginnings. Furthermore, videogames typically mimic the theological model of death, wherein dying is only temporary, and is conceptually closer to a "transition" than an "end." Thus, videogames are well suited for engaging in discourses surrounding death, and for examining death in sophisticated and nuanced ways.

One way in particular is the concept of permanent death—"permadeath"— which deviates from the conventional respawn motif discussed earlier.[4] Game designer Richard Bartle has written about permadeath more than anyone else. Although he primarily discusses permadeath in the context of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), many of the concepts still apply to other genres. Bartle (2009) defines permadeath as

> the regime whereby when your character is killed in the virtual world, it's obliterated. You have to start from scratch; there's no resurrection. Although real life seems to work this way (religious arguments aside), this attention to detail is not universally popular among players. (p. 116, en 29)

With permadeath, there is no "load checkpoint" option; the player must begin the game over again. All character attributes, weapons, items, and game progress accrued throughout the

---

[4] The fact that we have to describe this mechanic in tautological terms—i.e. since permanence is death's defining feature—shows how deeply ingrained the resurrection motif has become in videogames.

338

character's life are lost upon death. This is especially unfortunate in MMORPGs, in which players will often devote hundreds of hours to building a character.

Although there are games which use the permadeath mechanic to varying degrees—e.g. *Rogue* (Toy et al., 1980), *Diablo II* (Blizzard, 2000) and *DayZ* (Bohemia, 2012)—for the most part, death does not typically "matter" in most videogames; resurrection or "respawning" requires no more than the click of a button, and there is usually very little penalty for death. As Bartle (2004) puts it, "Merely labelling something as 'death' doesn't make it a serious matter. In many cases... the penalties for losing a fight are so lax that even the word 'hurt' would overstate them" (p. 421). Permadeath upends this model, making death in effect the *only* thing that matters to a player. In games that do not use permadeath, death is usually a mild inconvenience, quickly nullified. In games that do use permadeath, death means the end of the character, full stop.[5]

The advantage of permadeath is that it is more "realistic" and may increase the player's sense of exhilaration (Bartle, 2004). Games like the online zombie survival shooter *DayZ* (Bohemia, 2012) employ permadeath in an open-world setting, and the player must constantly be alert for zombies and other players, who will often kill each other for gear. In this model, there is simply more at stake, and so each movement seems to matter that much more. However, there are clear disadvantages to the permadeath mechanic as well, and as Bartle (2004) observes, gamers "really do not like it when their character dies. That's *really* do not like it" (p. 424). It is difficult to pinpoint any one factor which explains why most players do not like permadeath; clearly, it is frustrating to irrevocably lose one's progress, and all the hours put into carefully refining a character can seem wasteful. But on a psychological level, one factor may be that the permadeath mechanic undermines the videogame's death denying function. If people play

---

[5] To be fair, permadeath does not quite mimic "real" death, since the player can always begin the game again. Thus, the character does not really "die" as much as it loses its progress, statistics and gear.

videogames to help them cope with existential anxiety, then perhaps players will reject death mechanics which procedurally mimic the finality of physiological death.

If games like *Call of Duty* and *Skyrim* can be viewed as well-oiled, death-denying machines, then permadeath throws a wrench into the machine. Permadeath uses the same audio-visual and narratological signifiers of death we see in most games—characters are shot, stabbed, fall down pits, and so on. However, unlike most other games permadeath does not follow the theological model of life-death-rebirth; rather, permadeath closes the loop completely. In Bartle's (2004) words, permadeath "amounts to a statement of total, that's-all-folks loss. There's no wheedling out of it; it's final. That's what people dislike about it" (p. 417). This may be true, but perhaps it is time we moved away from likeability as the sole criteria for making games.

3. Towards a "Richly Humane and Spontaneous Poetry"

Indeed, maybe we need games which are tough to play, both ludically and psychologically. Videogames need not be accommodating, or even fun. As a mature medium, videogames need to be able to evoke a wide range of experiences and emotions. Thus, we could, for example, utilize the permadeath mechanic to emphasize the significance of death in the context of war. If games can force the player to associate war and combat with a sense of irrevocable loss, then perhaps players will better understand the significance of death in "real" war. This may combat the prevailing sense of war and death as distant, abstract concepts, and can be used to construct the argument that war and the resulting deaths do *matter*, and so should be carefully considered before entering an engagement. Furthermore, if videogames insist on featuring combat, they should do more to humanize the enemies whom the player kills. Turning to *The Line* once again, there are numerous points in which Walker must kill unsuspecting enemies conversing about their families and their desire to return home. A small detail such as

this can go a long way towards humanizing enemies, and therefore to draw attention to the fact that war means *actual* people with *actual* histories, emotions and lives die.

Admittedly, this dissertation covers some very grim topics. However, in understanding that many cultural, religious, and social divisions are largely the result of the same psychological anxieties, perhaps we can foster tolerance and understanding between distinct groups. As Becker (1971) puts it, "One of the great advantages of being able to boil down the human situation to the same questions the world over is that it partly lifts the screen that divides us from other peoples and ways of life" (p. 113). This passage belies Becker's undergirding optimism: For all his talk of death and evil, Becker is an activist philosopher; he sees true benefit in his work. Instead of merely criticizing the situation as he sees it, Becker also proffers some remedies.

Although he, and others such as Kenneth Burke (e.g. 1969) are clear that human beings will always need heroism, and an accompanying villain to serve as scapegoat, "we can," Becker (1975) suggests, "argue for non-destructive myths" (p. 160). We can, perhaps, vilify those characteristics which are detrimental to humankind. In Becker's (1975) words,

> a hate object need not be any special class or race or even human enemy, but could be things that take impersonal but real forms, like poverty, disease, oppression, natural disasters, etc….We could work against the enemies of freedom, those who thrive on slavery, on the gullibilities and weaknesses of their fellow man. (pp. 144-145).

We can, in short, engage in propaganda, a counter-insurgency against the violence of conventional hero systems. Instead of targeting particular ethnic or cultural groups, our hero systems could target the *racist, exploitative, selfish, intolerant, and bellicose*.[6] If heroism and enmity are not immutable, but changeable, subject to influence and persuasion, then we have an opportunity to define the terms of heroism in a way which promotes the will to peaceful co-existence, mutual understanding, and altruism.

---

[6] Some of the enemies in *Bioshock Infinite* (2K Games, 2013), for example, are depicted as racist ideologues.

We cannot be rid of our very human will to gain recognition, to stand over and above others; however, we can promote forms of heroism which do not rely on life taking, and indeed, we already see examples of this in contemporary media—e.g. anti-bullying campaigns, the valorization of the community volunteer, and so on. We should utilize all media to, in Becker's (1975) words, "argue and propagandize for the nonabsoluteness[7] of the many different hero systems in the family of nations" (p. 168). We can utilize the insights gleaned from historical propaganda to construct counter-propaganda campaigns with humanistic ends. And in doing so, perhaps we can find a way "to translate our self-expansion into a furtherance of life instead of the destruction of it" (p. 145). This is not an argument in favour of pacifism, or even against the valorization of the warrior altogether, but a call for a more critical examination of hero rhetorics which glorify killing and antagonism.

If we must preserve the villain and give the hero a dragon to slay, then the dragon need not be a hyperbolic misrepresentation of some sectarian Other. Echoing Becker's sentiment above, Burke (1974) offers Nazism as a material example of an acceptable "hate object:"

> It may well be that people, in their human frailty, require an enemy as well as a goal. Very well: Hitlerism itself has provided us with such an enemy—and the clear example of its operation is guaranty that we have, in him and all he stands for, no purely fictitious 'devil-function' made to look like a world menace by rhetorical blandishments, but a reality whose ominousness is clarified by the record of its conduct to date. (p. 219)

In other words, for Burke, there are worldviews which deserve antipathy and people should be persuaded against subscribing to them.

However, since belief systems are so deeply ingrained and perform such an important psychological function, dismantling them in place of other, alien systems is a difficult enterprise indeed. It would take a concerted attempt, the utilization of all media at all times. In Burke's

---

[7] Propagandizing for "nonabsoluteness" is in effect the entire post-structuralist enterprise; indeed, there are interesting and unexpected parallels between Beckerian and post-stucturalist thought.

(1969) words, "It would require sustained rhetorical effort, backed by the imagery of a richly humane and spontaneous poetry, to make us fully sympathize with people in circumstances greatly different than our own" (p. 34). In other words, difference need not signal enmity. Videogames cannot alter attitudes towards war, killing, and othering on their own; however, they are capable of adding a unique contribution to a larger discursive project. And as an increasingly ubiquitous and multi-modal medium, they may be one of our best weapons for combating the often destructive rhetorics that characterize contemporary global discourse.

REFERENCES

Aarseth, Espen J. (1997). *Cybertext: Perspectives in ergodic literature*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Aarseth, Espen J. (2004). Genre trouble. In Wardrip-Fruin N, & Harrigan, P. (Eds.), *First person: New media as story, performance, and game* (pp. 45-54). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Aarseth, Espen J. (2004). Nonlinearity and literary theory. In Wardrip-Fruin, N, & Montfort, N. (Eds.), *The new media reader* (pp. 762-780). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Adams, E. (2004). The designer's notebook: Postmodernism and the 3 types of immersion. Retrieved from http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2118/the_designers_notebook.php

America's Army [Computer software]. (2002). West Point: U.S. Army

America's Army: True Soldiers [Computer software]. (2007). Montreal: UbiSoft.

Anchor, R. (1978). History and play: Johan Huizinga and his critics. *History and theory, 17*(1), 63-93.

Anderson, Craig A. & Bushman, Brad J. (2002). Human aggression. *Annual review of psychology*, *53*, 27-51.

Anderson, C.A., Carnagey, N.L., Flanagan, M., Benjamin, A.J., Eubanks, J., &Valentine, J.C. (2004). Violent video games: Specific effects of violent content on aggressive thoughts and behavior. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *36,* 199-249.

Aristotle. (2009). Nichomachean ethics. (W.C. Ross, Trans.). In D.C. Stevenson (Ed.), *The internet classics archive*. Retrieved from http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html

Aristotle. (2009). Politics. (B. Jowett, Trans.). In D.C. Stevenson (Ed.), *The internet classics archive*. Retrieved from http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html

Aristotle. (2009). Rhetoric. (W. R. Roberts, Trans.). In D.C. Stevenson (Ed.), *The internet classics archive*. Retrieved from http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.html

Arndt, J., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T., & Simon, L. (1997). Suppression, accessibility of death-related thoughts, and cultural worldview defense: Exploring the psychodynamics of terror management. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73,* 5-18.

Arndt, J., Greenberg, J., Schimel, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. (2002). To belong or not to

belong, that is the question: Terror management and identification with gender and ethnicity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *83*, 26-43.

Arndt, J., Solomon, S., Kasser, T., & Sheldon, K. M. (2004). The urge to splurge: A terror management account of materialism and consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 14,* 198-212.

Assassin's Creed. [Computer software]. (2007). Montreal: Ubisoft.

Asscher, S. & Widger, D. (2008). Introduction to Plato's *Phaedo*. *Project Gutenberg*. Retrieved from http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1658/1658-h/1658-h.htm

Associated Press. (2012, Feb. 26). "Hilary Clinton: Syrians Must Abandon Assad." Retrieved from http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0212/73311.html

Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Balsamo, A. (1995). Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the body in contemporary culture. *Body and Society*, *1*(3-4), 215-237.

Balsamo, A. (1996). *Technologies of the gendered body: Reading cyborg women*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Barnet, B. (2004). Technical machines and evolution. Retrieved from http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=414

Baron, J. (2010). Digital historicism: Archival footage, digital interface, and historiographic effects in *Call of Duty: World at War*. *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, *4*(2), 303-314.

Barthes, R. (1982). *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography*. (R. Howard, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang

Barthes, R. (1988). Rhetoric of the image. (S. Heath, Trans.). *Image, music, text*. New York: Noonday Press.

Bartle, Richard A. (2004). *Designing virtual worlds*. USA: New Riders Publishing.

Bartle, Richard A. (2009). Alice and Dorothy play together. In Wardrip-Fruin, N, & Harrigan, P. (Eds.). *Third person: Authoring and exploring vast narratives* (pp. 105-116). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Barton, M. (2007). The history of computer role-playing games part III: The platinum and modern ages (1994-2004). Retrieved from http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/129994/the_history_of_computer_.php?page=5

Bateson, G. (1973). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Batman, Arkham City [Computer software]. (2011). London, UK: Rocksteady.

Becker, E. (1971). *The birth and death of meaning*. New York: The Free Press.

Becker, E. (1973). *The Denial of death*. New York: The Free Press.

Becker, E. (1975). *Escape from evil*. New York: Collier Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.

Becker, E. (2005). *The Ernest Becker reader*. D. Liechty (Ed.). Seattle: University of
Washington Press.

Benigni, U. (1913). Sacred congregation of propaganda. In *The original Catholic encyclopedia*.
Retrieved from http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=Sacred_Congregation_of_
Propaganda

Bernays, Edward L. (1928). *Propaganda*. New York: Horace Liveright.

Bethesda Softworks. (2011). The elder scrolls told of their return. Retrieved from
http://www.elderscrolls.com/skyrim/

Bible. King James version.

Bioshock [Computer software]. (2007). Novato, CA: 2K Games.

Bitzer, L. (1998). Aristotle's enthymeme revisited. In Enos, Richard L. & Agnew, Lois P. (Eds.).
Landmark Essays on Aristotelian Rhetoric: (Vol. 14). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum
Associates, Incorporated.

Blancato, J. (2007). Bethesda: The right direction. Retrieved from
http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_83/471-Bethesda-The-
Right-Direction.2

Bogost, I. (2006). *Unit operations*: *An approach to videogame criticism*. Cambridge: MIT
Press.

Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames.* Cambridge: MIT
Press.

Bogost, I. (2011). *How to do things with videogames*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Bolter, J. & Grusin, R. (2000). *Remediation: Understanding new media*. Cambridge: The MIT
Press.

Bostrom, N. et al. (2003). Transhumanism FAQ. Web. Retrieved from
http://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-faq/

Bracken, Cheryl C. & Skalski, P. (2009). Telepresence and video games: The impact of image
quality. *PsychNology Journal*, *7*(1), 101-112.

Braid [Computer software]. (2008). WA: Microsoft Game Studios.

Bremmer, J. (1983). Scapegoat rituals in ancient Greece. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*,
87, 299-320.

Brennan, T. (2002). Immortality in ancient philosophy. In Craig, E. (Ed.). *Routledge
encyclopedia of philosophy*. London: Routledge. Retrieved from
http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/A133

Brown, Georgia E. (2004). Engendering war in classical literature. In Deats, Sara M., Lenker,
Lagretta T., & Perry, Merry G. (Eds.). *War and words: Horror and heroism in the
literature of warfare*. (pp. 43-64). MD: Lexington Books.

Burke, K. (1969). *A Rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1974). The rhetoric of Hitler's "battle." *The philosophy of literary form*. (pp. 191-
220). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1989). *On symbols and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Burke, B. L., Martens, A., & Faucher, E. H. (2010). Two decades of terror management theory:
A meta-analysis of mortality salience research. *Personality and Social Psychology
Review, 14,* 155-195.

Bush, George W. (2002). State of the union address. Retrieved from
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm

Bush, George W. (2003). American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military
operations to disarm Iraq. [Televised address]. Retrieved from
http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/mar/20/iraq.georgebush

Bushman, Brad J., Stack, Angela D., & Baumeister, Roy F. (1999). Catharsis, aggression, and
persuasive influence: Self-fulfilling or self-defeating prophecies? *Journal of Personality
and Social Psychology, 76*(3), 367-376.

Caillois, R. (1961). *Man, play, and games*. (M. Barash, Trans.). Champaign, IL: University of
Illinois Press.

Call of Duty. [Computer software]. (2003). California: Activision.

Call of Duty 3. [Computer software]. (2006). California: Activision.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare [Computer software]. (2007). California: Activision.

Call of Duty: Black Ops [Computer software]. (2010). California: Activision.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 [Computer software]. (2009). California: Activision.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 [Computer software]. (2011). California: Activision.

Call of Duty: World at War [Computer software]. (2008). California: Activision.

Call of duty: World at war global total. (2013). Retrieved from
        http://www.vgchartz.com/game/23992/call-of-duty-world-at-war/

Cameron, J. (Producer). (2009). *Avatar*. [Motion Picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.

Campbell, J. (1968). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Campbell, J. (2002). *Inner reaches of outer space: Metaphor as myth and as religion*.
        Novato, CA: New World Library.

Carlisle, Rodney P. (2009). Caillois: Man, play, games. In *Encyclopedia of play in today's
        society*. (pp. 107-110). California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Castle, W. (Producer), & Polanksi, R. (Director). (1968). *Rosemary's Baby*. [Motion Picture].
        United States: Paramount Pictures.

Costikyan, G. (2007). Games, storytelling, and breaking the string. *Electronic book review*.
        Retrieved from http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/storyish

Creel, G. (1920). *How we advertised America*. London: Harper & Brothers.

Crogan, P. (2003). Gametime; History, narrative, and temporality in *Combat Flight Simulator 2*.
        In Wolf, Mark J.P., and Perron, B. (Eds.). *The video game theory reader*. (pp. 275-302).
        New York: Routledge.

Csikszentmihlayi, M. (2008). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. (First Harper
        Perennial Modern Classics ed.). New York: HarperCollins.

Culler, J. (2007). *On deconstruction: Theory and criticism after structuralism*. Ithaca, NY:
        Cornell University Press.

Darwin, C. (1859). *On the origin of species by means of natural selection*. London: John Murray.

DayZ [Computer software]. (2012). Prague: Bohemia Interactive.

Dead Rising [Computer software]. (2006). Osaka, Japan: Capcom.

Defense Science Board Task Force. (2000). *Report on the creation and dissemination of information in support of psychological operations (PSYOP) in time of military conflict*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense. Retrieved from http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports2000s.htm

Defense Science Board Task Force. (2004). *Report on strategic communication.* Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense. Retrieved from http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/ADA428770.pdf

Department of National Defence. (2004). *Joint doctrine manual: Psychological operations*. Ottawa: Chief of Defence Staff. Retrieved from http://www.psywar.org/psywar/ reproductions/CF_Psychological_Operations_ Joint_Doctrine.pdf

Derrida, J. (1973). *Speech and phenomena and other essays on Husserl's theory of signs*. (D.B. Allison, Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Derrida, J. (1993). *Aporias*. (T. Dutoit, Trans.). Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, J. (1997). *Of grammatology*. (G.C. Spivak, Trans.). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Derrida, J. (2002). The animal that therefore I am (more to follow). (D. Wills, Trans.). *Critical Inquiry, 28*(2), 369-418.

Derrida, J. (2006). *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*. (Kamuf, P., Trans.). New York: Routledge Classics.

Deterding, S. (2009). Living room wars: Remediation, boardgames, and the early history of video wargaming. In Huntemann, Nina B. & Payne, Matthew T. (Eds.). *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games*. (pp. 21-38). New York: Routledge.

Detweiler, C. (2010). Born to play. In Detweiler, C. (Ed.). *Halos and Avatars: Playing Videogames with God*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Diablo II [Computer software]. (2000). Irvine, CA: Blizzard Entertainment.

Doom [Computer software]. (1993). Richardson, TX: Id Software.

Dragon Age: Origins [Computer software]. (2009). Edmonton: BioWare.

Dragon Age II [Computer software]. (2011). Edmonton: BioWare.

Dunniway, T. (2000). Using the hero's journey in games. Retrieved from http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131527/using_the_heros_journey_in_games.php

Ellul, J. (1973). *Propaganda: the formation of men's attitudes.* New York: Vintage Books.

Elmer, G., & Opel, A. (2006). Surviving the inevitable future: Preemption in the age of faulty intelligence. *Cultural Studies, 20*(4-5), 477-492.

Escobar, A. et al. (1994). Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture. *Current Anthropology*, *35*(3), 211-231.

Eskelinen, M. (2001). The gaming situation. *Game Studies: The international journal of computer game research*, *1*(1). Retrieved from http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/

Fable III [Computer software]. (2010) Surrey, U.K.: Lionhead Studios.

Fallout 3 [Computer software]. (2008). Rockville: Bethesda Softworks.

Ferguson J. (1978). Classical civilization. In Lasswell, H.D., Lerner D., & Speier, H. (Eds.). *Propaganda and communication in world history*. (Vol. 1). (pp. 257-290). New York: Hastings House.

Frasca, G. (2003). Simulation versus narrative: Introduction to ludology. In M. J. P. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The video game theory reader* (pp. 221-236). New York: Routledge.

Gears of War [Computer software]. (2006). Redmond: Microsoft Game Studios.

Geisler, Robert M., Hill, G., & Roberdeau, J. (Producers), & Mallick, T. (Director). (1998). *The thin red line.* [Motion Picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.

Gibson, W. (1984). *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books.

Girard, R. (1989). *The scapegoat*. (Y. Freccero, Trans.). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Goldenberg, J. L., Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Kluck, B., & Cornwell, R. (2001). I am not an animal: Mortality salience, disgust, and the denial of human creatureliness. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 130, 427-435.

Goldenberg, J., Heflick, N., Vaes, J., Motyl, M., & Greenberg, J. (2009). Of mice and men, and objectified women: A terror management account of infra-humanization. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, *12*, 763-776.

Goodall, J. (1971). *In the shadow of man*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Grainger, P. (2010, Aug. 24). Video game set in Afghanistan upsets B.C. veterans. Retrieved from http://bc.ctvnews.ca/video-game-set-in-afghanistan-upsets-b-c-veterans-1.545723

Grand Theft Auto IV [Computer software]. (2008). New York: Rockstar Games, Inc.

Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., Simon, L., & Breus, M. (1994). Role of consciousness and accessibility of death-related thoughts in mortality salience effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67,* 627-637.

Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., & Pyszczynski, T. (1997). Terror management theory of self-esteem and social behavior: Empirical assessments and conceptual refinements. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology (Vol. 29, pp. 61-139). New York: Academic Press.

Greenwald, Maurine, W. (1990). *Women, war, and work: The impact of World War I on women workers in the United States*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Gregersen, A, & Grodal, T. (2009). Embodiment and interface. In Perron, B. & Wolf, Mark J.P. (Eds.). *The video game theory reader 2*. (pp. 65-84). New York: Routledge.

Haenni, P. (Interviewer) & Sisler, Vit (Interviewee). (2009). Religion and technology: Video games in the Arab world and beyond—Interview with Vit Sisler. Retrieved from Religioscope Web Site: http://religion.info/english/interviews/article_413.shtml

Halo 3 [Computer software]. (2007). Redmond: Microsoft Game Studios.

Harmon-Jones, E., Simon, L., Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., & McGregor, H. (1997). Terror management theory and self-esteem: Evidence that increased self-esteem reduces mortality salience effects. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72, 24-36.

Harrington, A. (1969). *The immortalist: An approach to the engineering of man's divinity*. New York: Random House.

Halter, E. (2006a). "Islamogaming: Looking for videogames in the Muslim world." Retrieved from http://www.1up.com/features/islamogaming

Halter, E. (2006b). *From Sun-Tzu to xbox: War and video games*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.

Hayles, K.N. (1999). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Heavy Rain [Computer software]. (2010). Paris: Sony Computer Entertainment.

Heidegger, M. (1982). *The question concerning technology, and other essays*. New York: Harper & Row.

351

Heidegger, M. (2008). *Being and time*. (J. MacQuarrie, & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper Perennial.

Herman, Edward S., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Herz, J.C. (1997). *Joystick nation: How videogames ate our quarters, won our hearts, and rewired our minds*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Hitler, A. (1971). *Mein kampf*. Madison, WI: Houghton Mifflin.

Hocking, C. (2007). Ludonarrative dissonance in *Bioshock*. Retrieved from http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html

Homer. (2003). *The Iliad*. (G. Chapman, Trans.). Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions Limited.

Homer. (2002). *Odyssey*. (G. Chapman, Trans.). Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions Limited.

Howard, J. (2008). *Quests: Design, theory, and history in games and narratives*. Wellesely, MA: A.K. Peters, Ltd.

Huizinga, J. (1936). *In the shadow of tomorrow*. New York: WW. Norton & Company Inc.

Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo ludens: A study of the play element in culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Huntemann, Nina B. (2009). Interview with Colonel Casey Wardynski. In Huntemann, Nina B. & Payne, Matthew T. (Eds.). *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games*. (pp. 67-72). New York: Routledge.

Ihde, D. (1990). *Technology and the lifeworld: From garden to earth*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Innis, H. *Empire and communication*. (2007). Toronto: Dundurn Press Limited.

Jantzen, Grace M. (2004). *Foundations of violence*. New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2004). Game design as narrative architecture. In Wardrip-Fruin, N, & Harrigan, P. (Eds.). *First person: New media as story, performance, and game*. (pp. 118-130). Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Jewett, R. & Shelton Lawrence, J. (1977). *The American monomyth*. Norwell, MA: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Jonas, E., Fritsche, I., & Greenberg, J. (2005). Currencies as cultural symbols - An existential psychological perspective on reactions of Germans toward the Euro. *Journal of Economic Psychology, 26,* 129-146.

Jowett, Garth S. & O'Donnell, V. (2006). *Propaganda and persuasion*. (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Jung, Carl, G. (1963). *Memories, dreams, reflections*. [Recorded by A. Jaffe]. (R. Winston, & C. Winston, Trans.). New York: Pantheon

Juul, J. (2005). *Half-Real: Video-games between real rules and fictional worlds*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Kamuf, P. (2005). *Book of addresses*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Keen, S. (2004). *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the hostile imagination*. New York: Harper Collins.

Keogh, B. (2012). [E-book]. *Killing is harmless: A critical reading of* Spec ops: The line. Marden, Australia: Stolen Projects.

Kirkpatrick, L, & Navarette, Carlos D. (2006).Reports of my death anxiety have been greatly exaggerated: A critique of terror management theory from an evolutionary perspective. *Psychological Inquiry: An International Journal for the Advancement of Psychological Theory 17*(4), 288–298.doi:10.1080/10478400701366969

Kittler, F. (1990). *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. (M. Metteer, & C. Cullens, Trans.). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Kittler, F. (1997). Media wars: Trenches, lighting, stars. In Johnston J. (Ed.). *Literature, media, information systems: Essays*. (pp. 117-129). New York: Routledge.

Kittler, F. (1999). *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. (Winthrop-Young, G. & Wutz, M., Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Klein, B. (2002, May 6). Immortalist philosophy. [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.longecity.org/forum/topic/151-immortalist-philosophy/

Konijn, E. A., Bijvank, M.N., & Bushman, B. J. (2007). I wish I were a warrior: The role of wishful identification in effects of violent games on aggression in adolescent boys. *Developmental Psychology*, *43*(4), 1038-1044.

Kramer, R. (1995). The Birth of Client-Centered Therapy Carl Rogers, Otto Rank, and "The Beyond." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *35*(4), 54-110.

Kurzweil, R., & Grossman, T. (2004). *Fantastic voyage: Live long enough to live forever*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale, Inc.

Kurzweil, R., & Grossman, T. (2009). *Nine steps to living well forever*. New York: Rodale, Inc.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Lasswell, H. (1971). *Propaganda technique in World War I*. (First MIT Press Paperback Edition). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lenoir, T. (2000). All but war is simulation: The military-entertainment-complex. *Configurations*, *8*, 289-335.

Lenoir, T. & Lowood, H. (2003). Theaters of war: The military-entertainment-complex. Retrieved from http://www.stanford.edu/class/sts145/Library/Lenoir-Lowood_TheatersOfWar.pdf

Leyens, J-P. et al. (2001). Psychological essentialism and the differential attribution of uniquely human emotions to ingroups and outgroups. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 31*(4), 395-411.

Lifton, Robert J. (1983). *The broken connection: On death and the continuity of life*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, Inc.

Lister, M., et al. (2009). *New media: A critical introduction*. (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Lombard, D. & Ditton, T. (1997). At the heart of it all: The concept of presence. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *3*(2). Retrieved from http://jcmc.indiana.edu/index.html

MacDonald, M. (2006). Empire and communication: The media wars of Marshall McLuhan. *Media Culture & Society, 28*(4), 505-520. doi: 10.1177/0163443706062912

Machin, D, and Suleiman, U. (2006). Arab and American Computer War Games: The influence of a Global Technology on Discourse. *Critical Discourse Studies*, *3*(1), 1-22 (2006).

Mario Bros. [Computer software]. (1983). Kyoto: Nintendo.

Mass Effect [Computer software]. (2007). Edmonton: BioWare.

Maxfield, M., Pyszczynski, T., Kluck, B., Cox, C., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., & Weise, D. (2007). Age-related differences in responses to thoughts of one's own death: Mortality salience and judgments of moral transgressors. *Psychology and Aging, 22,*343-351.

McElroy, J. (2011). *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* review: Paths of desire. Retrieved from

http://www.joystiq.com/2011/11/10/skyrim-review/

McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. New York: The Penguin Press.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The extensions of man*. New York: New American Library.

McLuhan, M. (1996). Playboy interview: Marshall McLuhan—A candid conversation with the high priest of popcult and metaphysician of media. In McLuhan, E. & Zingrone, F. (Eds.). *Essential McLuhan*. (pp. 233-269). New York: BasicBooks.

McMahan, A. (2003). Immersion, engagement, and presence: A method for analyzing 3-D video In M. J. P. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The video game theory reader* (pp. 67-86). New York: Routledge.

Mechling, J. (2000). Performing imaginary rhetoric. [Review of the book *The ambiguity of play* by Brian Sutton-Smith]. *American Quarterly*, *52*(2), 364-370.

Medal of Honor [Computer software]. (1999). Los Angeles: DreamWorks Interactive.

Medal of Honor [Computer software]. (2010). Redwood, CA: EA, Inc.

Medal of Honor: Allied Assault [Computer software]. (2002). Redwood, CA: EA, Inc.

Medal of Honor: Warfigher [Computer software]. (2012). Redwood, CA: EA, Inc.

Melnick, D. (Producer), & Peckinpah, S. (Director). (1971). *Straw Dogs*. [Motion Picture]. United States: ABC Pictures.

Metacritic.com [Website]. *The elder scrolls V: Skyrim* Metascore. Retrieved from http://www.metacritic.com/game/xbox-360/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim

Minsky, M. (1980). Telepresence. *Omni Magazine*. Retrieved from http://web.media.mit.edu/~minsky/papers/Telepresence.html

Moore, Gordon E. (1965). Cramming more components into integrated circuits. *Electronics, 38*(8). Retrieved from http://download.intel.com/museum/Moores_Law/Articles-Press_releases/Gordon_Moore_1965_Article.pdf

Murray, J. (1997). *Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Myers, D. (2009). The video game aesthetic: Play as form. In Perron, B. & Wolf, Mark J.P. (Eds.). *The video game theory reader 2*. (pp. 45-64). New York: Routledge.

Nagy, G. (1999). *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the hero in archaic Greek poetry* (Revised ed.). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved from http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/nagy/BofATL/toc.html

Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit [Computer software]. (2010). Redwood, CA: EA, Inc.

Nichols, R. (2009). Target acquired: *America's Army* and the video games industry. In Huntemann, Nina B. & Payne, Matthew T. (Eds.). *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games*. (pp. 39-52). New York: Routledge.

Nieborg, David B. (2006). Mods, nay! Tournaments, yay! The appropriation of contemporary game culture by the U.S. military. *Fibreculture Journal, 8*. Retrieved from http://eight.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-051-mods-nay-tournaments-yay-the-appropriation-of-contemporary-game-culture-by-the-u-s-military/

NPD Research Group. (2009, Feb. 2). 2008 global video game software sales across top global markets experience double-digit growth. Retrieved from https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-releases/pr_090202/!ut/p/c5/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os3g3b1NTS98QY0MLPxMXA09Lf0unULNQA18vI_1I_Shz3PLG-gXZgYoAR6Ssug!!/

Nye, Joseph, S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign policy, 80*, 153-171.

Nye, Joseph, S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York: Public Affairs

Obama, B. (2011). Osama bin Laden's death. [Speech]. Retrieved from. http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/02/nation/la-na-bin-laden-obama-text-20110502

O'Gorman, Marcel. (2010). Angels in digital armor: Technoculture and terror management. *Postmodern Culture*, *20*(3). Retrieved from http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/summary/v020/20.3.o-gorman.html

Oppenheim, L. (1979). *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a dead civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Owen, W. (1917). Dulce et decorum est. Retrieved from http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen1.html

Pac-Man [Computer software]. (1980). Tokyo: Namco.

Paladino, Maria P., & Vaes, J. (2009). Ours is human: On the pervasiveness of infra-humanization in intergroup relations. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 48*(2), 237-251. doi:10.1348/014466608X322882

Parfitt, B. (2012). Call of duty suffers 14 percent sales decline in first month in US. Retrieved from http://www.mcvuk.com/news/read/call-of-duty-suffers-14-per-cent-sales-decline-in-first-month-in-us/0107851

Penney, J. (2009). No better way to experience 'World War II': Authenticity and ideology in the *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* player communities. In Huntemann, Nina B. & Payne, Matthew T. (Eds.). *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games*. (pp. 191-205). New York: Routledge.

Petersen, W., Rathbun, D., & Wilson, C. (Producers), & Petersen, W. (Director). (2004). *Troy*. [Motion Picture]. United States/United Kingdom: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Pitts, R. (2012). Don't be a hero: The full story behind *Spec Ops: The Line*. Retrieved from http://www.polygon.com/2012/11/14/3590430/dont-be-a-hero-the-full-story-behind-spec-ops-the-line

Plato. (1925). Phaedrus. (H.N. Fowler, Trans.). *Plato in twelve volumes*. (Vol. 9). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Retrieved from http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=plat.+phaedrus

Plato. (1956). *The Symposium*. (W. Hamilton, Trans.). London: The Penguin Classics.

Plato. (1969). The Republic. (P. Shorey, Trans.). *Plato in twelve volumes*. (Vols. 5-6). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Retrieved from http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0168

Plato. (2008). *Phaedo*. (B. Jowett, Trans.). Retrieved from http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1658/1658-h/1658-h.htm

Propaganda. [Defs. 1, 2]. In *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the folk tale*. (L. Scott, Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S. (1997). Why do we need what we need? A terror management perspective on the roots of human social motivation. Psychological Inquiry, 8, 1-21.

Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., & Maxfield, M. (2006). On the unique psychological import of the human awareness of mortality: Theme and variations. *Psychological Inquiry, 17*, 328-356.

Quintus. (1913). The fall of Troy. (A.S. Way, Trans.). London: William Heinemann. Retrieved from http://www.theoi.com/Text/QuintusSmyrnaeus1.html

Rank, O. (1950). *Will therapy and truth and reality*. (J. Taft, Trans.). New York: A.A. Knopf.

Rank, O. (1959). *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and other Writings*. (F. Robbins, & S.E. Jelliffe, Trans.). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Rank, O. (1989). *Art and artist: Creative urge and personality development*. (C.F. Atkinson, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Rank, O. (2011). *Beyond psychology*. New York: Dover Publications.

Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad [Computer software]. (2011). Roswell, GA: Tripwire Interactive.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2001). *Discourse and discrimination: Rhetorics of racism and anti-Semitism*. New York: Routledge.

Resident Evil [Computer software]. (1996). Osaka, Japan: Capcom.

Rindfleisch, A., Burroughs, J. E., & Wong, N. (2008). The safety of objects: Materialism, existential insecurity, and brand connection. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *36*, 1-16.

Roberts, A. (2003). Introduction to *The Iliad*. In *The Iliad*. (pp. 5-21). Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions Limited.

Rogue [Computer software]. (1980). Toy, M., Wichman, G., Arnold, K, & Lane, J.

Routledge, C., Arndt, J., Sedikides, C., & Wildschut, T. (2008). A blast from the past: The terror management function of nostalgia. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *44*, 132-140.

Routledge, C. (2012). Failure causes fear: The effect of self-esteem on death-anxiety. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *152*(6), 665-669.

Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Sandars, N.K. (Trans.). (1972). *The epic of Gilgamesh*. London: Penguin Books.

Saunders, D. (2012, Sep. 18). Have 'green-on-blue' killings brought the Afghan campaign to a tragic halt? *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from http://www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/ have-green-on-blue-killings-brought-the-afghan-campaign-to-a-tragic-halt/article4552417/

Schiesel, S. (2011, Oct. 20). You, Batman, keep Arkham city in line. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/20/arts/video-games/you-batman-keep-arkham-city-in-line-review.html?ref=sethschiesel&_r=0&gwh= 28ACD517852F20DFF3A9D00E1CDB A3C9

Schimel, J., Hayes, J., Williams, T. J., & Jahrig, J. (2007). Is death really the worm at the core? Converging evidence that worldview threat increases death-thought accessibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *92*, 789-803.

Schreier, J. (2011, Nov. 10). Review: Boundless *Skyrim* will become your life. Retrieved from http://www.wired.com/gamelife/2011/11/skyrim-review/

September 12th: A toy world [Computer software]. (2003). Montevideo, Uruguay: Newsgaming.

Shakespeare, W. Sonnet 18.

Six Days in Fallujah [Computer software]. (Unreleased). Minneapolis, MN: Atomic Games.

Sliwinksi, A. (2012. Dec. 5). *Call of duty: Black ops 2* sales reach $1 billion in 15 days. Retrieved from http://www.joystiq.com/2012/12/05/call-of-duty-black-ops-2-1-billion/

Smicker, J. (2009). Future combat, combating futures: Temporalities of war video games and the performance of proleptic histories. In Huntemann, Nina B. & Payne, Matthew T. (Eds.). *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games*. (pp. 106-121). New York: Routledge.

Spacewar! [Computer software]. (1962). Cambridge: Steve Russell et al.

Spec Ops: The Line [Computer software]. (2012). Novato, CA: Yager/2K Games

Special Force [Computer software]. (2003). Lebanon: Hezbollah.

Spielberg, S., Hanks, T., & Goetzman, G. (Producers). *The Pacific*. [Television Series]. United States: HBO.

Stahl, R. (2006). Have You Played the War on Terror? *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(2), 112-130.

Stahl, R. (2009). *Militainment, inc.: War, media, and popular culture*. New York: Routledge.

Steur, J. (1992). Defining virtual reality: Dimensions determining telepresence. *Journal of communication, 42*(4), 73-93.

Stiegler, B. (1998). *Technics and time: The fault of Epimetheus* (Vol. 1). (R. Beardsworth, & G. Collins, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Stiegler, B. (2002). The discrete image. In Derrida, J. & Stiegler, B. *Echographies of television: Filmed interviews*. (J. Bajorek, Trans.). (pp. 145-163). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Stiegler, B. (2007). Anamnesis and hypomnesis. *Ars Industrialis*. Retrieved from
http://arsindustrialis.org/anamnesis-and-hypomnesis

Stiegler, B. (2008). *Technics and time: Disorientation* (Vol. 2). (S. Barker, Trans.). Stanford,
CA: Stanford University Press.

Stiegler, Bernard. (2009). *Acting out.* (D. Barison, D. Ross, & P. Crogan, Trans.). Stanford, CA:
Stanford University Press.

Sullivan, D., Greenberg, J., & Landau, M.J. (2010). Toward a new understanding of two films
from the dark side: Terror management theory applied to Rosemary's Baby and Straw
Dogs. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, *37*, 42-51.

Super Mario Bros. [Computer software] (1988). Kyoto, Japan: Nintendo.

Taubman-Ben-Ari, O. (2000). The effect of death reminders on reckless driving—A terror
management perspective. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 9,* 196-199.

The Elder Scrolls: Arena [Computer software]. (1994). Bethesda, MD: Bethesda Softworks

The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall [Computer software]. (1996). Bethesda, MD: Bethesda
Softworks.

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind. [Computer software]. (2002). Bethesda, MD: Bethesda
Softworks.

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion [Computer software]. (2006). Bethesda, MD: Bethesda
Softworks.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim [Computer software]. (2011). Bethesda, MD: Bethesda Softworks.

Thorsen, T. (2009, May 12). First *Modern Warfare 2* details emerge. *Gamespot*. Retrieved from
http://www.gamespot.com//news/first-modern-warfare-2-details-emerge-6209543?tag
=recent_news%3Bimg%3B1

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon [Computer software]. (2001). Montreal: Ubisoft

Tosca, S. (2003). The quest problem in computer games. Paper presented at the *Technologies for
Interactive Digital Storytelling and Entertainment (TIDSE)* conference. Darmstadt,
Germany: Fraunhofer IRB Verlag. Retrieved from http://www.it-c.dk/people/tosca/
quest.htm

Toulmin, S. (1969). *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press
Toy Soldiers [Computer software]. (2010). Seattle, WA: Signal Studios.

Vales, L. (Producer). (2012, November 11). *Erin Burnett: OutFront*. [Television series]. Atlanta, GA: CNN.

Van Ord, K. (2011, Nov. 10). *The elder scrolls V: Skyrim* review. *Gamespot.* Retrieved from http://www.gamespot.com/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/reviews/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim-review-6344622/

Virilio, P. (1989). *War and cinema: The logistics of perception*. London: Verso.

Virilio, P. (2004). Pure power. In Redhead, S. (Ed.) *The Paul Virilio reader*. (pp. 45-56). New York: Columbia University Press.

Virilio, P. (2005). *Desert screen: War at the speed of light*. London: Continuum.

W. (2012). Call of apathy: Violent young men and our place in war. Retrieved from http://www.mediumdifficulty.com/2012/03/01/call-of-apathy-violent-young-men-and-our-place-in-war/

Warmington, J. (2010, June 4). There is only one highway of heroes. *Toronto Sun*. Retrieved from http://www.torontosun.com/news/columnists/joe_warmington/2010/06/04/14271871.html

Weatherford, D. (2008). *American women and World War Two*. Secaucus, N.J.: Castle Books.

White, Stephen A. (1992). *Sovereign Virtue: Aristotle on the Relation Between Happiness and Prosperity*. (Stanford Series in Philosophy). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Wintrhop-Young, G. (2011). *Kittler and the media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1958). *Philosophical Investigations*. (G.E.M. Anscombe, Trans.). Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Wolfenstein 3-D [Computer software]. (1992). Garland, TX: Apogee Software.

Wollaeger, M. (2008). *Modernism, media, and propaganda: British narrative from 1900 to 1945*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

World of Warcraft [Computer software]. (2004). Irvine, CA: Blizzard Entertainment.

Worthy. [Defs. C.1.a, C.1.b]. In *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Zelda: Twilight Princess [Computer software]. (2006). Kyoto: Nintendo.

Zimbardo, Philip. (2008). Dehumanization. Retrieved from http://www.lucifereffect.com/dehumanization.htm