
Video Games and the Hero's Journey

JAMES PLYLER

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Intro

New ideas, forms, and inventions that are innovative and worthwhile but exist in a niche group generally take a while to be fully embraced or understood by mainstream society. Certain books, such as those in the series *A Song of Fire and Ice* by George R. R. Martin, don't get mainstream attention until they are formatted in a different medium, such as a TV show. Comic books still aren't truly mainstream, but the stories they tell have been publicly praised due to their presence in cinema; people love superhero movies. The reason that these stories have only recently been realized isn't because the stories themselves don't have merit—in fact, the stories they tell are enjoyed and celebrated by many people—but because they exist in a format that isn't the most appealing. No matter how engaging the story of *Game of Thrones* may be, people aren't too quick to pick up a dauntingly fat fantasy novel. No matter how epic the narrative of Spiderman is, people often see comics as childish. This format-derived barrier not only keeps people from experiencing quality stories in a unique way, but it also ostracizes the individuals who exist in the niche communities that embrace them.

Video games have, unfortunately, been confined to just such a niche, and exist with a false association with being childish and a waste of time. While there are indeed childish video games out there, that doesn't mean that there aren't mature, worthwhile and engaging titles. The existence of childish movies and TV shows does not mean more quality ones cannot exist, too. Yet the general public has constructed a synthetic dichotomy of video games and other narrative mediums. This is understandable; video games haven't been capable of dramatic feats for very long. The fact that video games are capable of telling stories that are equal to (if not more immersive than) other narrative mediums goes unbeknownst to those who aren't very involved in gaming culture.

There has been extensive research that supports claims made that video games are an effective narrative medium—some even going as far as to say that video games should be used in classrooms (Dubbelman; Ostenson). Research has also been done that proves that there are benefits to being a regular video game player (Karle, Watter, and Shedden). As for claims that video games have adverse side effects, research has been done that usually reveals that there is more to such claims than first seems apparent (Adachi and Willoughby; Ivory and Kaestle). This research, if understood, would give the general public a much clearer picture of what today's video games really are like.

Video Games as an Emerging Narrative Medium

Video games didn't begin as a medium capable of telling a compelling story. In fact, the idea of narrative could be argued as being absent in the most early iteration of video games. Thus, the concept of video games as being a narrative medium is a relatively new idea. While there are video games that are over fifteen years old that indeed tell a compelling story even by today's standards,

video games only recently have reached a point where they can be considered a narrative medium. The problem is that video games are completely misunderstood by the general public (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum; Dubbelman; Ryan).

While there are video games that can tell compelling stories—engaging narratives that are on the same level of TV shows and movies—Dubbelman argues, “The difference between a presentational and a representational concept of narrative as proposed ... should help in making an elemental distinction in the broad range of narrative formats seen today, but may not suffice to describe the intricate differences between formats with the same logic” (169). What Dubbelman is talking about here is that, despite these various ways a player can be told a story (for instance, either through a first-person presentational method or a more hands-off representational method), there still exists a common issue of expressing these differences using the logic one would use when describing other narrative formats.

In furthering the discussion of the problems that arise when speaking of video games as a narrative medium, Marie-Laure Ryan offers that because video games have another objective besides telling a story—namely, having fun—it can be easy for some to dismiss video game narratives, and this decision will ultimately come down to what a given person’s definition of “narrative” is. What Ryan didn’t know when she wrote her article back in 2001 is how absolutely immersive video games would eventually become. Games today can put the player in the protagonist’s shoes like never before, establishing a bond that translates to full encapsulation of the player’s interests and motives. In looking at the critically acclaimed title *Mass Effect 2* (2010), Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tanenbaum claim that, “interactive narrative may well be the ‘holy grail’ of new media research and development,” although they do go on to cite some problems that arise: the implemented design choices must allow interactivity—player role and immersion—to complement and not detract from the pleasure of receiving the story (394).

Video Game Narrative in Regards to Player Role and Immersion

Player role in video games can serve many purposes in telling the game’s story, and understanding the different techniques of the player role in a narrative-centric game aids in understanding video games as a narrative medium. Similar to the player role is the idea of immersion—how engrossed one’s mind gets while engaging in a video game. The understanding of immersion provides a better context as to why video games are such an effective narrative medium.

While a film is consumed without interactivity from the audience, a game, on the other hand, is defined by its need for player input. There is an immersive quality that allows those who engage in them to feel as though they are making a difference in the outcome of events. This concept is explored by Jonathan Ostenson in “Exploring the Boundaries of Narrative: Video Games in the English Classroom.” Ostenson writes, “The first comment students make about the uniqueness of the video game medium is that this form of storytelling is participatory. They acknowledge that the main draw of these kinds of games is that you are the hero, you are the one who makes many of the choices and who drives the plot” (76).

Returning to the idea of player role, different video games have different methods for how to localize the player—something that isn’t exactly available in other narrative mediums. By being able to control the protagonist the player is capable of assuming different roles depending on what type of game is being played. In the aforementioned study of *Mass Effect 2*, Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum look at how the player role of Commander Shepard is a bit different than some video game protagonist strategies. They state, “Shepard exists in dialogue with the player: unlike many game protagonists, who are designed to be empty vessels for the player to project his or her identity into, Shepard has a fully formed identity that is independent of the player” (397). This creates two possible paradigms of immersion into games: one being the immersion where the player assumes the role of a fully written and voice acted protagonist (this paradigm is more relatable to other narrative mediums), the other being the immersion where the player is given a

silent protagonist with less obvious involvement, and is thus able to project herself more fully onto the character.

Understanding Video Games and their Benefits

It's interesting that video games aren't regarded with more respect than they are currently. Instead, they are always surrounded by controversy. However, despite all the numerous claims that violent video games cause violent behavior, numerous studies have only shown otherwise.

In a study looking at how profanity in video games affects the player, researchers Adrienne Holz Ivory and Christine E. Kaestle found that profanity used by the protagonist and antagonist of any given video game did indeed increase the hostile expectation of the player. What is important to note, though, is that the researchers state that "this study's finding that profanity can induce some similar effects [of aggression] could be interpreted as evidence that profanity in video games and other media poses a similar risk factor" (Ivory and Kaestle 237). Similarly, in a study looking at how video games can cause aggressive behavior, researchers found that it was not violent video games that made the players more aggressive, but rather competitive video games: racing games, sports games, multiplayer games etc. (Adachi and Willoughby).

Another aspect some of the public generally does not understand about video games is that they are not always some mindless activity. In fact, playing video games can make an individual more apt at certain skills. For example, through various studies, it has been found that "the apparent advantage in task switching performance for video game experts compared to non-video game players is due to a superior ability to control selective attention" (Karle, Watter, and Shedden 76). This demonstrates that expert video game players are so adept at focusing during their video game play—a focus that is not required when watching TV—that it significantly improves task switching ability.

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Furthering the Conversation

Video games have much to offer: they tell compelling stories in ways that no other narrative medium can, and they are mentally beneficial to those who play them regularly. It is likely that as video games progress both technically and in narrative capability they will eventually gain the attention and respect that they deserve, but until then further validation of their credibility is welcomed by both video game enthusiasts and professionals in the community. While researchers have looked at the benefits of video games, how video games can be used in the classroom, and how video games build narratives in unique ways, there hasn't been any confirmation that video games indeed demonstrate traditional narrative patterns, and, in fact, critics such as Ryan are cautious in referring to video games as a narrative medium. However, if one were to look at video games through the lens of monomyth—Joseph Campbell's definition of the Hero's Journey—it would be revealed that they follow the same narrative structure as all other narrative mediums.

Monomyth is essentially a pattern that most narratives structure themselves around, and the way Joseph Campbell has defined it is widely accepted as the quintessential narrative structure; there has even been a refined version of it used as a guide for writing cinema, as is apparent most obviously in George Lucas' *Star Wars*. Thus, I will look at two video games, *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Last of Us*—two recent titles that exemplify monomyth—in light of the Hero's Journey will further demonstrate video games are a valid narrative medium.

Methods

I conducted a textual analysis in order to validate the narrative quality of video game titles by comparing the stories of two critically acclaimed video games to the structure defined by Joseph Campbell in his *Hero's Journey*. The first step in this process was familiarization with both the *Hero's Journey* itself—its steps, transitions, and nuances—and the origin of monomyth (another name for the *Hero's Journey*).

While the *Hero's Journey* may indeed be looked at as a basic guideline for crafting narrative, one might err in having the impression that Joseph Campbell himself established these rules; he merely observed them, originally publishing his findings in a seven-page memo. To put it formally, the *Hero's Journey* is a set of observed patterns found in myriads of narratives around the world. Some narratives may lack certain elements of the pattern, but it is typical that the structure and nuances of many stories follow the arc of monomyth.

The basic concept of monomyth is summarized in Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*: "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" (Campbell 23). This brief thesis is more collectively reflected into seventeen various stages. For the sake of concision, I used in my own analysis an abridged, Hollywood version of the *Hero's Journey* outlined by Christopher Volger—a screenwriter heavily influenced by Campbell's work. This version has only twelve of the seventeen steps, omitting some of the less critical stages. With this outline, I began analyzing two distinctive video game titles.

The titles I chose for my analysis were *The Last of Us* and *Beyond: Two Souls*. I chose these two titles seeing as they were two recent, critically acclaimed titles—both differing from each other in gameplay and player role. For anyone who looks to conduct similar research, there are many games that will work for this type of research; however, not all video games will work. There are, indeed, games that are simply games and thus lack any sort of coherent narrative.

In looking at these narrative-heavy titles, I wanted to see not only which aspects of monomyth the games portrayed, but how the video game genre specifically met various stages of the monomyth in a way that other narrative mediums could not. For example, in catering to the section of the *Hero's Journey* that describes various tests and enemies the hero must overcome, *The Last of Us* presents players with many targets or objectives that the player must actively conquer. The player doesn't passively observe these events, but rather actively participates. It was this careful consideration of the unique ways video games are able to demonstrate monomyth—whether it be through gameplay or other unique forms of interactivity—that was at the crux of my validation of the video game narrative medium.

Results/Discussion

My textual analysis of *The Last of Us* and *Beyond: Two Souls* revealed that indeed both games exemplified monomyth; however, the way that each game portrayed certain portions of the *Hero's Journey* differed not only from each other, but also from the orthodox monomyth found in the more traditional formats of film and literature. This is not to say that these games' stories were unorthodox—they indeed exemplified monomyth—but rather their unique ways of enacting certain portions of monomyth were leveraged differently.

The Last of Us has a clear and literal version of the *Hero's Journey*: it begins with a seemingly normal man, Joel, dealing with the everyday struggles of life, but he is soon thrown into the unknown when an infection spread by cordyceps—a rare form of parasitic fungi—causes those infected to turn ravenously feral. The section of monomyth that this specifically adheres to is the "Call to Adventure" portion; the game shows a man who did not choose this adventure, but accepts

its call. This was similar to what can be found in the narrative of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: Frodo, the protagonist, at the beginning of the journey didn't actively seek out the adventure he undertook, but rather he accepted the removal from the normal world. Where the difference lies was that in the video game format, not as much time was focused on developing the normal world before the call to adventure occurred. While the understood passivity of watching a movie allows for an extended exposition of characters and setting during the opening hour of the film—in *Lord of the Rings* this would be the exploration of the Shire, introduction of the characters, Bilbo's party, etc.—the expectation of activity in video games, and, in particular, action-oriented activity, causes such preliminary sections to be abridged. A game player expecting to participate in shooting enemies would be rather bored watching an hour long cutscene before being given control. This isn't a bad thing as the marriage between gameplay and character development in *The Last of Us* augments narrative progression in a way only video games can.

At the start of the game, I was limited in how I was allowed to play the game—weak guns and primitive player-statistics allowed me primitive strategies—which fit the story quite well. To return to the narrative of *Lord of the Rings*, just like how Frodo had no idea the power that he'd come across as he ventured out into the unknown, I, as the player, was unaware of the power I'd be provided in the context of the game's protagonist; Joel was indeed supposed to be a gruesome fellow, but by no means was he the killing machine that he becomes after being faced with the tribulations found throughout his journey. As the game went on, I was not only allotted better equipment and statistics, which allowed me to employ a much heavier array of tactics, but I was becoming more skilled and tactical in my playing, just like Joel was. What this aforementioned marriage between gameplay and character development had resulted in was a similarity between Joel and myself: as he became stronger through the Hero's Journey, as his character was developed and morphed throughout the story, so was I. In literature, the trials and tribulations of the Hero's Journey are merely observed through narration of the Hero overcoming whatever obstacle is in his or her way. In the game, however, through traditional third-person-shooter gameplay mechanics done in such a way that it felt organic, I was able to immerse myself into the character of Joel and thus experience the tribulations he faced firsthand. Not only that, but by progressing through the various trials, I would begin using strategies that I had learned along the way, with this learning being a key aspect of monomyth.

Beyond: Two Souls, also follows the monomyth quite closely; however, this journey is a much less literal form of the Hero's Journey, and is instead portrayed through the protagonist's mental development. The game looks at the life of Jodie Holmes, a girl who all her life has had a strange entity attached to her, which she calls Aiden. Having this entity attached to her and being the victim of assaults from other supernatural forces caused Jodie to live quite the unconventional life; the rest of the world was quite normal and thus didn't entertain the notion of ghosts. During the course of the game, Jodie's actions, dispositions, and attitude are reflective of the mental monomyth that was playing out in her mind; it was the game's unconventional gameplay that allows players to connect to what would otherwise seem like abstraction.

Unlike *The Last of Us* where traditional gaming conventions—shooting, sneaking, enemy prioritization, stat-optimization, etc.—caused the preliminary portions of the Hero's Journey to be abridged, *Beyond: Two Souls* utilizes the conventions of an interactive narrative. This essentially functions like a movie that has a set way of playing out; however, the viewer is allowed to physically control and, to a limited degree, make mental decisions for a given character. This allows for much

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greater exposition seeing as how the objective of the game was not to be a shooting gallery, but more of a museum. What this puppeteering allows is a very close connection between Jodie and the player, especially in regards to the optional choices that are offered in the game. For example, during what I would identify as the “Ordeal” section of the Hero’s Journey—a section characterized by a low part in the Hero’s adventure, typically before the Hero’s rebirth—while on the run from the CIA and after having been betrayed by those she trusted, Jodie find herself homeless and alone. Stan, another man who lives on the streets, takes her under a bridge where a handful of homeless had found refuge. While exploring her newfound home, Jodie comes across a knife. The player is then given option to pick up the knife and interact with the control in such a way that it feels like the player is actually the force sliding the knife across Jodie’s wrist. This is optional, and it is actually possible that some players would not even discover this scene, but for those who are immersed in the story, this moment is a melancholy reflection of Jodie before her mental rebirth; it fits directly into monomyth, and the interactivity allows the player to be immersed fully while guiding Jodie through various further tribulations. Thus, as I had previously with Joel, I was able to participate in the Hero’s Journey with Jodie.

Conclusion

Video games are still young compared to other media, and it is understandable that their narrative potential isn’t realized by everyone. With this said, video games undeniably have the most potential of these media: by their active nature and in keeping in line with the monomyth, video games allow for a more intimate connection with the Hero’s Journey as opposed to the passivity of books and cinema. This is clearly illustrated through *The Last of Us* and *Beyond: Two Souls*, and certainly by many other games as well.

This intimacy with the Hero’s Journey is something that should be further studied. The understanding of how immersion allows the player to experience the Hero’s Journey almost firsthand could lead to incredible strides both for the video game medium and for the evolution of narrative itself. Something that should be encouraged is the increased study of video game narratives in the classroom. A large portion of gamers are in the high school and college demographic, and this unique field of study would potentially foster more interest and enthusiasm towards the subject of English. Video game technology is constantly evolving, and how different ways of playing could affect this immersion and narrative intimacy is also worth studying.

Ultimately, despite whatever degree of recognition they receive, video games will continue to be an excellent, unique, and engaging narrative medium; one can only hope that those who are cautious towards video games’ unconventional nature will lay down their preconceived notions and find an appreciation for what is the most dynamic and immersive of the narrative media.

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James Plyler

James Plyler is currently a sophomore majoring in creative writing. With this education, he hopes to write the narrative of a video game for one of the top name video game developers like Square Enix, Bandai Namco, or Naughty Dog, though he would not be opposed to starting an independent studio as well. He'll eventually need to learn Japanese. Reading and playing video games take up the majority of his free time. He also manages and writes the Sony channel for the avant-garde video game and entertainment news website, Pulp365.com. If one were to ask him which video game to play, he would direct them to *Dark Souls*.

Appendix: Christopher Volger's 12 Step Hero's Journey (Hollywood)

1. Ordinary World
2. The Call to Adventure
3. Refusal of the Call
4. Meeting with Mentor
5. Crossing the Threshold (End Ordinary World)
6. Test, Allies, Enemies
7. Approach
8. The Ordeal
9. The Reward
10. The Road Back
11. The Resurrection
12. Return with Elixir