# A CASE STUDY OF DREAMWALK – LEVERAGING MYTH AND RITUAL FOR GAME DESIGN

*Leveraging Myth and Ritual for Game Design*

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**Extended Abstract**

How can we design games that shed light on the human experience and can contribute to a meaningful life? This is a big question that seems to hold much interest for the gaming community. It is also an incredibly daunting one, screaming for definitions and qualifications: what is a meaningful life? To whom? How do we know a game is contributing to it?

The authors do not believe there are final answers to any of these concerns. There is no recipe that spells out how you create anything meaningful and transformative. And the kind of impact we are looking for so complex and personal, eludes measurement (see Paolo Pedercini's "Making Games in an F*** Up World", 2014). Yet, we have some thoughts we would like to share, hoping to inspire transformative games.

We propose drawing on myth and ritual (=enacted myth) with their archetypal patterns and transformative structures in order to create games that have the potential to increase our understanding of ourselves and others and construct our relationship to ourselves and the world around us. This approach is informed by an existential perspective. According to Irvin Yalom, the human experience is characterized by anxiety, stemming from the Givens of Existence or Ultimate Concerns: death (life is finite), freedom (we have to make choices and it is unclear what they should be based on), existential isolation (we are all ultimately alone in this universe), and meaninglessness (life has no inherent meaning, we have to find our own) (Yalom, 1980, pp.8-9). When we speak of games that can contribute to a meaningful life, we specifically mean games that help players grapple with the Givens of Existence – feelings of loss, loneliness, alienation, purposelessness, choice and suffering – in ways that can put them on a path to coming to terms with these experiences and discover their authentic desires, aspirations, connectedness, human potential and "bliss".

There is a close connection between existentialism and mythology. "A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world" (May, 1991, p.15) and to "reconcile consciousness to the preconditions of its own existence; that is to say, the nature of life." (Campbell, 2004, p.3). In myth and ritual metaphor and symbolism become messengers from the unconscious, shedding light on what goes on "down below", bringing us back in touch with our deeper selves (see Segal, 1998; Larsen, 1996; Feinstein and Krippner, 1997; Jodorowski, 2004). Myth and ritual are excellent starting points for transformative game experiences, as the purpose of myth since the dawn of humankind has been to reveal the

struggles of the human psyche and provide a guide to overcome them. This guide resides in the story structure and the actions taken that bring about the hero's transformation or demise. (Bonnett, 2006).

In *Pathways to Bliss – Mythology and Personal Transformation,* Joseph Campbell explains one function of mythology as **games people play**: "how to make believe you're doing thus and so. Ultimately, through the game, you experience that positive thing which is the experience of being-in-being, of living meaningfully." (2004, p. 6). Campbell is speaking of games metaphorically: when reading the story, we pretend we're in it, we pretend we're the hero, and we look at the world through his / her eyes. We live in a time now, where we can understand Campbell's statement literally, though: we can actually make *games* that allow people to explore new ways of acting and being – of "owning" the myth in a manner not previously possible in non-interactive, linear media. The intersections between games and ritual (as enacted myth) and other symbolic performative arts have been investigated in-depth by Huizinga (1955), Caillois (2001), (Schechner 1985) and Turner (1992), and we can identify one of their salient, common denominators as being liminal spaces or "inter-structural situations" in which participants are free to experiment with new identities and play with social norms within the magic circle. This relationship is further emphasized by Murray who speaks of games as symbolic dramas that allow us to enact our basic relationship with the world ((1997, pp.142-144)). Velázquez, Soares and Mendes further emphasize the emotional and symbolical language of videogames which mirrors that of myth, allowing games "to cast a powerful spell that, far from providing the cold and tired approach to rational denotative power, seduces us through the dynamics of its resources and opening an authentic playing field between the domain of simulation and the human realm." (2015, p. 8).

Not every game, however, is infused with mythical content, archetypal patterns, evocative symbolism or potent, ritualistic performance. We still have to design for that – we have to design for experiences that facilitate self-reflection, emotional resonance and transformation. This requires exploration along two axes: 1) The Self: how can we access our own imaginations and creative unconscious to birth viable symbols and emotionally resonating, archetypal game content (see Feinstein and Krippner 1997; Larsen 1996; Bonnett 2006; Conner 2008)? 2) The Intersection of Ritual and Game: what can we learn from ritual and other psycho-technologies that are based on performative, symbolical acts that access the unconscious (e.g. Jungian psychodrama (Moreno, J.L. and Moreno Z.T., 2011) and sand-play therapy (McCarthy, 2015) as well as shamanic psychotherapy (Jodorowski, 2004) to inform evocative and transformational game structures and mechanics? A thorough discussion of these axes can inform a conceptual, theoretical framework of mythical, existential game design, but goes beyond the scope of this paper. We are thus focusing on a particular case study of a table top, storytelling, role playing game called *DreamWalk* that shall serve as a first, concrete illustration of how we can leverage self-exploration, myth and ritual for game design.

### Case Study *DreamWalk*

*DreamWalk* is a game of personal exploration through storytelling and mythmaking. It is an adventure game that waits for player participation to form its narrative definition. We designed processes and rituals to help players to get into the proper mindset for engaging the deeper play loop of the game. The game is made of the following parts.

The first part is the players' part. It is the creation of a self that will navigate and explore the Dreamspace. In making avatars, or dream self, players have to identify important pieces of themselves

which we call virtues. These virtues are narrative elements that are the inventory of tools that they bring into Dream with them. Each player identifies three virtues which will be used to help them engage the narratives that arise in play. Players also identify a flaw. This flaw represents the constant struggle and the part of themselves that causes not only trouble for others, but also for themselves. There is an understanding that it is all the troubles, of all the players, working in unison, that are the destabilizing factors of the Dream that would otherwise be at balance and a source of nourishment. In addition, players all have to manage a resource called Essence. Essence represents the inherent creative ability in everyone. It presumes that no one is mundane and that we all have a magical spark. Care must be taken to ensure that the spark doesn't take us towards madness or allow us to turtle into extreme comfort spaces of bliss. Essence is consumed, generated and transformed as the player interacts with the places and denizens of Dream. When a player's Essence falls out of balance (too much madness or too much bliss) they disappear from dream and have to tell stories to their companions that allow them to re-enter the Dream.

The second part of the game is the Dream itself. The Dream is comprised of The Maelstrom, which lies at the heart of Dream, generating troubles which creep out into the world. The Havens, which are locations in Dream that represent archetypal ideals of nourishment and growth; places where learning and transformation can happen. Lastly there are the Dwellers who represent all sort of archetypal personifications. The Dwellers have interactions and needs in relation to each other, representing collaborating or conflicting inner forces. As the player meets and interacts with the Dwellers, the Dweller's present trials to the player – i.e. the Self striving towards fulfilling of its potential expressed through building and meaningfully transforming its Essence. The trial is presented in the form of a card that suggests it is about helping or hindering another Dweller. On the card is one word, an action verb like "love", or "take" or "guard", that sets the nature of the interaction.

The player's role in dream is to meet the Dwellers, project their own ideas onto the dwellers to give them identity and then describe the story of the interaction and what trial is at hand. The players create myth where they must alternately claim the roles of protagonists and perpetrators. They then support or challenge each other to overcome the challenge or add to the narrative of the challenge. Success brings the players closer to overcoming their own flaws, which allows them to all, eventually, descend into the Maelstrom and tame it once they've turned their own flaws into virtues. The taming of the Maelstrom and bringing balance to Dream is the endgame, representing the integrative nature of living your authentic self and coming to terms with existential struggles.

Because of the introspective nature of the storytelling process, the players don't do all of this alone. The game requires an extra player, the Scribe, whose role is to ask the players what they're doing, why they're doing it, what they find in the Dwellers, what they perceive the Dwellers needs to be, and how those needs speak to each other. The Scribe also tends to the troubles that are spilling into the world from the Maelstrom, which players mut also manage else they overwhelm the Havens. If a Haven is overwhelmed with troubles it is lost to Maelstrom. If enough Havens are lost, the Maelstrom is empowered to swallow everything. This, too, ends the game.

We intend this case study to be an illustration of how salient elements of myth and ritual – narrative events as representations of internal processes, characters as personifications of inner aspects, symbols as evocative images from the soul (places, resources) and symbolic action as vehicle for transformation to make the ideal real – can be leveraged for game design. Clearly, a life action role

playing game has very specific affordances that digital games do not possess and more theoretical investigation as well as application of theory to design experimentation is required to build a robust conceptual framework that can guide the design of games that tackle existential themes the way myth and ritual do and potentially contribute to a meaningful life.

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