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THE TRACE OF ARCHAIC MYTH IN VIDEO GAMES

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Abstract

The relevance of studying video games is explained by ongoing transformation processes in modern culture due to the development of information and communication technologies. ICT radically change the image of the world, the whole environment of human existence. Video games are a significant phenomenon of digital culture, constituting new meanings, new forms of interaction and new cultural phenomena. McLuhan noted the mythmaking power of a medium and the return of the modern age people to the tribal state. Video games, in our opinion, fully involve the player in the space of myth building their own mythological worlds basing on certain archaic mythologies elements. The purpose of the article is to analyze video games in terms of archaic mythology elements representation. The comparative method, phenomenological approach, cultural-historical approach, hermeneutical analysis are used. We analyzed how video games use mythologemes. We can reveal various mythologemes in video games: mother goddess, cultural hero, trickster, heaven and hell, path, chaos-space, golden age, doomsday, etc. In this article we focus on the analysis of three mythologies common in video games: the axis of the world, initiation, the mother goddess. The analysis showed that video games in the genre of fantasy and adventure actively appeal to myth using and interpreting archaic images in their own way. These images get a new breath and a new life in the virtual worlds of video games. These images can be not only formally referred to by the player, but they can be more animated and embodied by one.

Keywords: Myth, video game, game studies, mythologeme.

1. Introduction

Today, culture is being transformed under the influence of the revolutionary possibilities of modern technology. Information and communication technologies radically change the image of the world, the whole environment of human existence, social, cultural, political, and economic practices. Digital culture is becoming a part of our everyday experience: we are used to online communication, fast access to information, virtual environments, computer interfaces, etc. Today it is quite difficult to imagine our life without technologies that have become usual. They influence absolutely all cultural processes changing traditional ways of cultural production, consumption, and social communication.

The language of digital culture is the language of digital code, which becomes the language of our reality, produced by media (Manovich, 2001). New media form the life and communication space of a modern person, in many ways defining the vision of oneself and the world around. Media form their own perspective of the world and meta-communication influencing modern cultural contexts. A computer becomes not just a computer, it is a kind of filter that mediates all types of cultural experience. As McLuhan (1959) notes, "The effect of media, like their "message," is really in their form and not in their content" (p. 340)

Like other new media, video games produce a certain message. The gaming industry today is rapidly developing and it is the leading driver of the entire digital entertainment industry. According to the 2018 Entertainment Software Association report, 60% of Americans play video games daily (The Entertainment Software Association, 2018). The results of the Limelight Networks marketing research show that people who play video games spend an average of 6 hours a week doing this (Limelight Networks, 2019). Video games affect not only our perception of what is happening on the screen, but also the functioning of cultural objects. Video games, as a type of new media, are a socially and culturally significant symbolic field that is able to influence the mass consciousness, influence the development of ideological attitudes, norms, values, behaviors, etc. Therefore, it is extremely important to explore video games and the meanings that they offer.

2. Problem Statement

The academic problem is caused by the processes of the modern culture field transformation caused by the development of ICT. Video games are one of the digital culture tendencies. We can consider video games as an aesthetic, social and cultural phenomenon of special significance for a modern person. Video games change us, our identity, the process of cognition and creativity, they influence how we feel in the world and how we comprehend it. The ideological and persuasive possibilities of video games have been repeatedly emphasized by researchers (Bogost, 2007). Video games can be an effective tool for social and cultural change, as demonstrated by, for example, the "Games for Change" community.

However, along with the fact that video games are a key phenomenon of modern culture, we still continue to neglect them, considering them to be a form of escapism, ignoring their meanings and special language, as well as new cultural phenomena and practices produced by them and requiring comprehension.

New media and new cultural forms are more open, interactive, plastic, dynamic, synchronic, etc. However, as noted by Manovich (2001), new media assign and process the old forms, conventions and

norms of different mediums existence (Manovich, 2001). And here we can identify and explore how the former cultural forms and symbolic systems appear in a new digital shape.

Myth is one of these symbolic systems. Myth allowed the archaic era people comprehend reality and adapt to it, construct the world picture, set the value scale for various phenomena, feel belonging to the cultural world, ensure the unity and integrity of society. Myth is the collective emotional, sensual, and at the same time rational reflection of the world mastering process results. And today, in the digital era, as McLuhan (1959) notes, "our new technology gives us many new means of access to group-dynamic patterns" (p. 341). From his point of view, modern culture and electric media bring humans from visual into audile-tactile space, to the tribal state, the preliterate state of being within a natural-like environment (Miroshnichenko, 2016).

Ear culture, simultaneous, circular and immersive, dominated in tribal preliterate society. Written-printed culture with a wide distribution of the alphabet and further typography replaces the acoustic space with the visual. "The interiorization of the technology of the phonetic alphabet translates man from the magical world of the ear to the neutral visual world" (McLuhan, 1962, p. 49). The current stage of civilization development with the help of electric media again instantly connects people all over the world, turning the whole world into a global village. Thus, there is a return to the status of a tribal person and the auditory, synchronous, collective, multidimensional perception of the world is being revived. As McLuhan (1959) writes, "The mythmaking power of a medium that is itself a myth form appears now in the postliterate age as the rejection of the consumer in favor of the producer" (p.345). For instance, television requires constant creative dialogue and active participation of the viewer.

3. Research Questions

Video games possess the mythmaking power of a greater extent, making the player not only a participant in the game, but also a cocreator. In video games, the audience is involved in the creative process, the process of constructing the world image and the image of a person in it. Video games return a person to the audile-tactile space, simultaneous, immersive, open and interdependent. As Asimos (2018) notes, "video games provide a new medium for myths to inhabit, and its audience can directly interact with it" (p.105).

Along with the fact that video games, of course, produce various myths, just as television, cinema and advertising do, there are currently quite a few studies in the field of modern myth-making in video games.

In this article we pose the following research questions:

- How do video games involve players into the myth space?
- How are mythologemes represented in video games?

4. Purpose of the Study

Mythologemes are elements of archaic mythology, such as mythological recurring plots, symbols, and images. They are universal and are widespread in various world cultures. For example, it is customary to single out the myths of the center of the world (axis mundi), the golden age, the mother goddess, the

cultural hero, the trickster, etc. Mythological thinking, from the point of view of Eliade (2017), can leave behind its former forms, can adapt to new cultural fashions, but it cannot disappear completely. Myth and mythologemes have become the implicit content of popular culture. Mythologemes as elements of the archaic myth are fairly well represented in modern art, cinema, literature, including video games. As Thomas (2009) notes, "myth is an increasingly popular matrix for game-fiction experience" (p.254).

The purpose of this article is to analyze video games in terms of representing the archaic mythology elements, basing on the mythologemes frequently found in video games.

5. Research Methods

The main research methods are: the comparative method to identify similar features in mythologemes represented in video games; phenomenological approach to classify and identify mythologemes that reveal the categories of the sacred in video games, cultural and historical approach to analyze myths and video games in the context of modern culture, hermeneutical analysis to interpret and comprehend mythological narration of video games.

6. Findings

There are lots of various mythologemes borrowed by video game developers together with the imagery of German-Scandinavian, Ancient Greek and other mythologies. In video games we can reveal the mythologemes of the goddess-mother, cultural hero, trickster, heaven and hell, the path, chaos-cosmos, the golden age, doomsday, etc. Let us analyze common mythologemes in video games: the mythologeme of the axis of the world, the mythologeme of initiation, the mythologeme of the mother goddess.

The axis of the world which permeates the entire universe and connects the earth and the sky is present in almost all ancient cultures. Most often, in archaic mythology, the axis of the world is represented as the world tree (Yggdrasil in Scandinavian mythology, Vyri among the Slavs) or the sacred mountain (Olympus in Ancient Greece, Meru in Hindu mythology). The axis of the world can also be symbolically depicted as a pillar, column, mountain, tower, city, navel of the earth, etc.

Similar mythological symbols are present in video games. So, in the universe of Warcraft there are trees of life (Nordrassil, Teldrassil, Fordrassil, Shaladrassil) which symbolize the center of the universe. Prince of Persia (2008) uses the Zoroastrian mythological foundation and the image of the world tree. The main character seeks to save the kingdom of Princess Elika enslaved by the dark forces of the ancient Persian god of evil Ahriman (Angra-Maya). The hero needs to help the girl to restore the heart of the fairy kingdom - the tree of life in order to imprison the dark deity in a dungeon again.

In the Legacy of Kain series the axis of the world is symbolically depicted as the pillars of Nosgoth. Their destruction in Legacy of Kain: Blood Omen provokes confusion and chaos. In God of War III Kratos who challenged the Greek gods climbed the sacred mountain of Olympus. In God of War (2018) Kratos with his son Atreus travels the world of Scandinavian mythology using the roots of the world tree Yggdrassil.

The axis of the world mythologeme is represented in Silent Hill 4: The Room. The protagonist Henry is forced to undergo various nightmare worlds that are alternative to ordinary reality and are connected by

a single umbilical cord leading to his locked room. A similar image of the umbilical cord connecting the entire universe with the center is also used in American McGee's Alice.

El Shaddai: Ascension to the Metatron uses the image of the tower as the axis of the world. Stepped towers (ziggurats) in Sumerian, Assyrian and Babylonian cultures symbolized the tops of the world, the spiritual ascension of a person approaching the sky. Climbing the tower is the oldest symbol of the initiation rite. A similar mythological scenario is used in Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening, where the protagonist Dante climbs a tower connecting the underground, the earth and the celestial worlds. Therefore, it is natural that in a video game young Dante, ascends the tower to gain supernatural powers and become a protector of people.

The axis of the world in the form of a mystical city "Scala ad Caelum" (which can be translated from the Latin as "stairway to heaven") is represented in Kingdom Hearts III. This is the axis of the world from which the universe or the entrance to the "kingdom of hearts" begins giving rise to all living and nonliving. "Scala ad Caelum" is depicted as a snow-white city over which the sun never sets, which inevitably refers to the mythological images of paradise.

The initiation mythologeme (death and subsequent revival in a new capacity) refers to one of the most significant sacred rites for ancient cultures - the initiation rite, which continues to exist in one form or another in modern culture. The initiation rite produces symbolic, temporary death of a neophyte in its former capacity and its revival in a new capacity for a new life, thereby changing social and religious status of the initiate.

J. Campbell in "The hero with a thousand faces" described the stages of the hero's journey, the monomyth, which can be found in mythological scenes of various world cultures. Before a hero becomes a hero one must go through a certain path of formation, through a series of serious challenges. The torments and sufferings of the hero, the tests of the labyrinth, the tortures, the battles with monsters embody the sacred image of initiation or rebirth in myths. A universal element of the hero's journey is the story associated with swallowing the hero and the image of the womb, often in the form of the belly of the whale. In Australia, for instance, there is a mythological tradition about the giant Lumaluma, who was devouring all the people on his way until he was killed. Eliade (1960) interprets this myth as follows: the humanoid giant whale swallowed people to make them initiates, but people did not know this and killed him. All these terrible experiences are required for the birth of a person in a new capacity. No initiation is possible without agony, death and resurrection.

The mythologeme of initiation can be seen rather often in video games. For example, in Cryostasis: Sleep of Reason the image of the belly of the whale is presented by the atomic icebreaker "North Wind", the protagonist falls into (meteorologist Nesterov). Inside the icebreaker, a real nightmare awaits for the hero, all the crew members and the captain are dead while the icebreaker itself is inhabited by supernatural monsters. The gameplay is the hero's journey through the ship, in which he penetrates into the past with the help of the "mental echo" and tries to prevent the death of the captain and the crew, correcting their mistakes. The icebreaker can be interpreted as sacred space, bush, another world that chews and makes the initiate suffer. However, immersion in this world is a necessary condition for initiation. The initiation ritual, most terrible and awful for the hero, is destined to transform or give a new life to his world. Meteorologist

Nesterov passes the sacred path of the mythological hero, whose main task is to acquire power to heal the sick.

In The Last Guardian a little boy is kidnapped by the cannibal monster Triku. It takes him to a mysterious nest, a prison-fortress, from which he is to get out. The very appearance of Trika is collective: the monster as a chimera consisting of various elements that refer to medieval griffins, dragons and manticores. The boy will make friends with the monster and get out of the castle, but during the game, Trika will eat and spit the boy out several times. This symbol is not explained in any way, however, we can assume that it embodies the mythologeme of initiation.

In Assasin's Creed Origins the main character Mejay Baek has the same nightmare: he swims in a boat in the depths of the earth (similar to ancient Egyptian afterlife), again and again surviving the attack of the huge serpent Apep or Apop (in ancient Egyptian mythology Apep embodies darkness and evil). The plot resembles the journey of the Sun god Ra.

In Shadow of Tomb Raider the protagonist strives to stop the end of the world. The path of Lara lies through the tombs of the Aztecs and Mayans, each tomb is revealed as another test necessary for initiation. For example, in one of the tombs the hero needs to crawl into the mouth of a stone monster in order to find the entrance to the treasury, in another, risking her own life, she climbs a rotating pole with traps. The meaning of all trials is revealed at the end of the game, when the hero is sanctified as the goddess Ish-chel, in order to sacrifice her later. Ish-chel is revered as the goddess of the moon and fertility in Maya. Thus, the whole game is built around the initiation process.

The mythology of the mother goddess is found throughout the world in countless forms and varieties. The sacred veneration of the mother woman goes back to the period of the emergence of the Paleolithic Venus. Graves (1992) points out the cult of the mother-goddess as it symbolically appears as a sacred triad: the war maiden, the mother and the old woman. In the mythologeme of the mother goddess there is duality: on the one hand, the mother goddess appears as the giver of life and patroness of the sacred marriage, on the other hand, as the warrior who chooses life, the goddess of the underworld.

In archaic antiquity the cult of the mother goddess is universal and extends from pre-Aryan India to the Phoenician kingdom. Phrygian Cybele and Roman Ceres, Ancient Egyptian Isis, Maat and Sekhmet, Sumero-Akkadian Nammu, Innan or Ishtar, Greek Athena, Hera and Demeter, Irish Anu have different forms of the great mother goddess who gives life and takes it away. The symbolism of the mother goddess is also diverse: along with the anthropomorphic appearance the mother goddess is associated with images of water, cave, vegetation, lunar symbolism (e.g., Selene).

Images of the mother goddess can often be found in video games. In Ni No Kuni - The Wrath of the White Witch a boy named Oliver enters a magical kingdom where he travels with his new friends to find a way to save his mother Ally. Oliver visits the unusual Fairground site, where the locals ask Oliver to help the Fairy Godmother. He learns that Fairy Godmother has ceased to give birth to new fairies due to a mysterious illness. So, the boy jumps right into the Fairy Godmother's mouth to explore her womb and find the source of the disease. Fairy Godmother is depicted in a video game as a giant intelligent ball sprouting from the ground. She is the source of life of the magical kingdom. The image of Fairy Godmother embodies the ancient image of the mother goddess as the giver of life. Oliver's immersion into the womb of the Fairy Godmother can be interpreted as the journey of the mythological hero to the sacred space of initiation.

In Undertale a small child finds himself in an unusual world, located underground, which is inhabited by unusual creatures. It is interesting that at the beginning of the game the boy takes under his care an anthropomorphic creature named Toriel. Toriel saves the boy and bring him home, trying to keep him there afterwards. She wants to protect the boy from any possible harm, as she believes that it is not safe for him outside the dungeon. The player has to fight her to leave the house. During the game it becomes clear that Toriel is the Queen of that underworld. The dungeon into which the boy falls can be interpreted as the afterworld inhabited by chthonic forces. The image of Thoriel is mythological: she is depicted as a woman with the head of a Nubian goat or a cow. This refers to the pantheon of the Ancient Egypt gods, namely, the sky goddess Hathor, who is depicted as a woman with the head of a cow. In the Hellenistic period Hathor was identified with Mesopotamian Ishtar and Roman Venus, i.e., the image of the ancient Egyptian goddess possesses features of the mother goddess. The behavior of Toriel confirms this conjecture: according to the plot of the game, she suggests the boy becoming her adopted son. On the other hand, in the video game there are allusions to the Eleusinian Mysteries, connected with Demeter and Persephone, who are also the incarnations of the mother goddess. While making the Eleusinian mysteries the mystics or the initiates used to travel into the afterlife, like the hero of *Undertale*.

Let us consider the duality of that image as the giver of life and at the same time the warrior who brings death. This mythologeme is most vividly represented in the aforementioned *God of War (2018)*. According to the game story Kratos and his son get acquainted with the Scandinavian goddess Freya. The Santa Monica Studio developers have combined the features of two Scandinavian goddesses: Freya and Frigg in the game image. Frigg - the supreme goddess of German-Scandinavian mythology, the goddess of fertility, marriage and hearth, is the mother of Baldur. In *God of War (2018)* Freyja becomes the mother of Baldur (originally revered in Scandinavian mythology as the goddess of love and war, the leader of Valkyries). In the video game the two images (warrior goddess and mother goddess) are finally joined when Freya/Frigg is called the queen of the Valkyries. Such an ambivalence of the character, in our opinion, reveals the duality of the archaic mother goddess, personifying both life and death.

7.   Conclusion

We have analyzed a number of video games (mainly in the genre of fantasy and adventure) and examined how video games rely on such archaic mythologemes as the axis of the world, initiation, the mother goddess. Video games have mythmaking power, involving the player in co-creation inside and outside the gameplay (cosplay, fan fiction, modding). Constructed images, unlike cinema or literature, can be not only formally referred to, but more animated due to tastes and preferences of a player in accordance with one's character, traits, identity, etc.

We looked at how video games appeal to archaic mythological content, and, in our opinion, this content is not just perceived. Due to the interactivity, immersiveness, openness of video games the player becomes an accomplice in a specific mystery modeled by modern technical means. In the archaic culture an initiate was told at the end of the mystery that the mythological hero whom he had listened about and whom he empathized to had been the initiate himself. In video games we know this from the very beginning and with this knowledge we go on a journey putting ourselves into it.

Acknowledgments

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