CHAPTER 1

Existential, Transformative Game Design

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores an approach towards creating existential, transformative games—games that contribute to a meaningful life. It takes its departure from existential psychotherapy and proposes to draw on its main themes and goals to inform the conception of game ideas and gameplay experiences. Making an argument for the function of myth to communicate existential ideas in a way that speaks to the unconscious and affects intrinsically motivated, personal change—change that is based on psychological resonance rather than imposition or force—it investigates strategies for game designers to create new mythologies.

Keywords

Existential psychotherapy, transformative game design, psychological resonance, myth, unconscious, dream, active imagination

INTRODUCTION

When I speak of existential games—games that contribute to a meaningful

life—my main frame of reference is existential psychotherapy. According to existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom (1980), 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). A meaningful life is one in which a person has faced and accepted the inevitability of death, developed a sense for their purpose or calling, focused on making self-directed choices that are in alignment with their true nature, and cultivated quality connections to things beyond their self. Another key figure in existential psychotherapy, James Bugental (1992), wrote, "Viewed from an existential perspective, the good life is an authentic life, a life in which we are as fully in harmony as we can be. Inauthenticity is illness, is our living in distorted relation to our true being." (p.246).

Games have the power to transform us on a deep, existential level. One of the most famous and striking testaments of this is the letter that (then) 15-year old Sophia sent to Jenova Chen after she played *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012) with her dying father:

> Your game practically changed my life (...) My father passed in the Spring of 2012, only a few months after his diagnosis. (...) In my dad's and in my own experience with *Journey,* it was about him, and his journey to the ultimate end, and I believe we encountered your game at the most perfect time (Takahashi, 2013).

For Sophia, *Journey* is an existential game. It contributed to making her (and her father's) life more meaningful by way of contemplating death and experiencing the preciousness of life and connection. My goal in this paper is to explore how we can create more games that do this without merely trying to re-create the ones that already exist. Please note, I do not believe there is a recipe or easy formula we can apply that will lead to mind-blowing, profound, life-altering games. There is, however, a lot of ground to be (dis)covered between going about game design as the modeling of systems in a systematic way (that follows a repeatable framework) and a purely intuitive approach that relies on a designer's genius or tacit knowledge. What I am proposing here is between the poles of following

rigorous, rational processes and opaque, artistic exploration. This article will help map the territory of existential, transformative game design and provide orientation for designers interested in intentionally designing games that contribute to a meaningful life. This relates strongly to the mission of the *Journal of Games, Self, and Society*: to foster a deeper understanding of humanity—and possibly its thriving—through games. This paper sketches out salient areas of exploration. No doubt it will still leave much to be discovered in future work.

First, please note that what I am proposing here is not that games shall become substitutes for existential (or any other kind of) psychotherapy. Neither do I want to engage in a discussion about the parallels and differences of the transformative mechanisms and potentials of games and therapy or whether games by themselves can *be* therapy. I am not excluding this possibility, but it is neither my focus nor my goal in this paper. What I am proposing is for designers to be inspired by salient themes and concepts from existential psychotherapy to create evocative, expressive games that provoke a meaningful engagement with the Givens of Existence, and—as Joseph Campbell (1991) wrote in regards to creative mythology—allow players to "respond to them of themselves, with recognition, uncoerced." (p.3).

After a review of relevant, existing work, I will discuss how the overarching themes and goals of existential psychotherapy can inform experience goals for games that contribute to a meaningful life. I will then make a case for myth as inspiration source for existential themes and provide practical guidelines and strategies on how to tap the unconscious to create new mythologies for games. I will further discuss the concept of "psychological resonance" as established by psychiatrist Erik Goodwyn (2012, 2016, 2018). I propose designing for psychological resonance as a means to prompt intrinsically motivated and personalized transformation as an alternative to the approach of many games for change that aim to change players in specific ways, determined by the game's creators or other stakeholders. Note that for simplicity's sake I use "games for change" to subsume all flavors of transformational games, including educational games, serious games, empathy games, training simulations, behavior change games, games for health, citizen science.

THE KNOWN SHORE

The following section is an overview and critical discussion of existing research that is relevant for an existential, transformative game design framework. It investigates the capital "T" Transformational Framework by Culyba (2018) and its limitations. It discusses the contribution of reflective game design (Khaled, 2018) and existential game studies (Leino, 2010; Möhring, 2013) for the design of games that contribute to a meaningful life. It then turns towards existential psychotherapy, myth, and ritual as inspiration sources for existential games and indicates the gaps in existing games research in that regard. Finally, it points towards a key concept in existential, transformative game design, psychological resonance, and explains how existing games research has acknowledged the importance of resonance for design that is relevant to players' lives, but understood it in a very different way.

The Capital "T" Transformational Framework and its Limitations

Before we can dive into where we are going, we need to discuss where we are coming from. First and foremost, this concerns the notion of transformational game design. Transformation has become a staple of the Games for Change discourse, with more and more games, game design approaches or whole labs being labeled "transformational" or "transformative." Sabrina Culyba (2018), author of *The Transformational Framework* and principle designer at Schell Games, explains that, regardless of any specific topic, *transformational* is meant to be "an inclusive term that can apply to any game where the intention is to change the player" (p.15). She acknowledges that any game has the potential to be transformational, but that Transformational games with a capital T are those designed with the explicit intent to change players in particular ways and beyond the gameplay experience itself. That means for a game to deserve the adjective "Transformational," the change ignited within the reality of the game (e.g., a new skill, behavior, attitude) must be transferred to real life. Furthermore, the change needs to persist beyond the time the player engages with a game. Intention, transfer, and persistence are

thus the three cornerstones of successful, Transformational game design (Culyba, 2018).

This definition makes good sense for many games in the games for change category. It also helps to label games as purposeful products with concrete uses, which increases their respectability and marketability to educational, therapeutic or other wholesome institutions. This is why the Transformational Framework has – in my experience as someone who has been heavily involved in this domain as a researcher and designer for the last 15 years – won significant influence in this domain. It further implies the expectation and / or promise that the change ignited by such a game can be measured. If we know exactly in what regards we want to transform players, and how to design for it, we should be able to clearly assess whether our design accomplished its goal, whether the change transferred to real life and persisted over time, or not. If we are not able to assess that, we cannot say with certainty whether Transformation happened. In a space where the most prominent question (and the most relevant question to secure funding and ensure institutionally-supported dissemination) seems to have become "can you prove it works?", the pressure is on to design for capital T Transformation.

Here is the rub, though: The kinds of change that we can pinpoint, design for, and assess so clearly with the Transformational Framework are limited. Or as Paolo Pedercini put it more boldly in his keynote at the 2014 Games for Change Festival, "Making Games in an F*** Up World," "the kinds of change we can clearly measure are not all that interesting." Yet, it is the dominant kind of change in the games for change community, particularly when we focus on games for (mental) health. This is supported by an extensive state-of-the art systemic content analysis of games for health conducted by Lu and Kharrazi (2018). Out of 1552 analyzed games, they found three levels of claimed influence: raising awareness for an issue (904 games, 58,27%), behavior change through change of intention / attitude towards a health issue (139 games, 8,95%), and changing the behavior directly through playing the game itself (509 games, 32,78%). These three types of change—awareness, attitude and behavior change—are arguably the most measurable. They are hardly, however, the only types of change possible or worthy of designing for. For one, they do not cover the kind of

profound transformation that can ignite subtle, elusive, uniquely personal, internal shifts that are based on what resonates with players, rather than change that is pre-defined and determined by the designers.

Tying up to Reflective Game Design and Existential Game Studies

Complementary work that influenced my thinking around transformation through games, and games that contribute to a meaningful life, is Rilla Khaled's (2018) research on reflective game design. Her theory revolves around the concept of *critical reflection*, which she explains as:

> (...) an interrogative process in which we critically assess the validity of presuppositions on which our beliefs have been based or how problems are posed or defined in the first place. Critical reflection is therefore less specifically focused on teaching us how to do, and more on how we make meaning, particularly concerning normative views, judgements, propositions, beliefs, opinions or feelings. It is less focused on product and more focused on process (p. 6).

Khaled (2018) observes that Serious Games often lack a reflective element. Instead they focus on presenting players with challenges that have clear solutions to be arrived at in safe environments. She finds this approach to be insufficient, particularly when it comes to, "games on subject matter more philosophically inclined or subjective in nature—a game about empowering individuals on how to escape the conditions of homelessness should not have correct answers" (p. 8).

This could not be truer for existential games, because—according to existential psychotherapy—the meaning we give to life is complex and uniquely personal. We find our own meaning. It therefore does not make sense to try and dictate answers about how we are supposed to live or connect, be, do or choose. It is more fruitful, instead, to stimulate contemplation and reflection of these matters, to raise questions and to design for open-ended, ambiguous, and unclear problems beyond measurability that prompt players to explore and possibly re-evaluate their own perspective. For designers of existential, transformative games, this means de-emphasizing an obvious, evaluating game structure and staying away from interpreting the value and meaning of gameplay actions for players, e.g., by using point systems or giving other clear indications of

right and wrong or good and or bad. Sicart (2009, 2013) made a similar argument in regards to designing games that prompt ethical contemplation. He states that, "those games in which agents just need to understand the procedural rules that determine the game state, without thinking about the actual moral implications of their actions, are deeply flawed in their ethical design" (Sicart, 2009, p. 199).

My argument for the potential of games to contribute to a meaningful life in an existential sense is further informed by the research of Olli Leino (2010) and Sebastian Möhring (2013). In his dissertation, Leino (2010) views *game* as interactive conceptual metaphor for "life" and argues for the similarities between "being in the world as humans" and "playing a game as player" (p. 11). Based on this metaphorical connection, Leino investigates the gameplay experience through an existential lens by taking departure from games' materiality. This materiality imposes a certain "gameplay condition" on the player, akin to the "human condition," with its Ultimate Concerns that is imposed on all of us by the existential givens of "life." Möhring (2013), building on Leino, also makes a case for the a-priori existential nature of games due to their spatiality and existential themes of struggle, war, love and failure. I concur with Leino and Möhring that there is a natural relationship between games and their engagement of salient aspects of the human condition through their existential structures and themes (Rusch, 2018). It has to be noted, though, that this does not make games automatically existentially meaningful to players. As I said before, "if games ubiquitously embody existentialism, this quality becomes invisible. Like the water is invisible to the fish. It doesn't lend itself to deliberate exploration or insight" (Rusch, 2018, p. 2). We still have to deliberately design for games that contribute to a meaningful life. These games have the potential to orient us towards, and possibly reconcile us with the Givens of Existence.

BUILDING ON EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY AND MYTH / RITUAL GAME RESEARCH

This is where this work goes beyond existing research and adds the perspective of existential psychotherapy, which is concerned with the purposeful investigation and contemplation of the Ultimate Concerns. By

borrowing from existential psychotherapy, its transformative goals and means of reaching them, existential questions and themes become the intentional driving force of the design, rather than merely being inherent in the a-priori nature of games.

Myth and ritual have been used extensively in existential humanistic and archetypal psychotherapy (e.g., Feinstein & Krippner, 1988, 1997; Hillman, 1996; May, 1991; Larsen, 1996), because they happen to be pervasive existential navigation and personal calibration tools. Previous research on the role of myth and ritual in games mostly explored their social, cultural, narrative, or aesthetic function (see Rusch, 2018 for an in-depth review of existing work). In my preceding article, I argued for investigating and leveraging the psychological and spiritual function of myth and ritual for existential game design. With the exception of noteworthy theoretical and practical design work by Whitney "Strix" Beltran (2012, 2013) that harnesses depth-psychology, specifically mythical archetypes, for identity exploration in role-playing games, this is an area that has as of yet remained under-explored in game design research. Here, I attempt to tie up to the discussion of *why* myth and ritual are fruitful inspiration sources for existential games by expanding on *how* we can create original mythical content and thus stimulate psychological resonance in players.

The Concept of "Resonance"

The notion of resonance in transformational game design (particularly learning games) is at the core of the book *Resonant Games. Resonant Games* (2018) was edited by Klopfer, Haas, Osterweil and Rosenheck, leading figures of the Education Arcade, a learning game research group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Despite its title, this work has little to do with the kind of resonance I am proposing here. For one, Klopfer et al. focus on learning games designed for young people in and around the learning environment of the American public-school system. These games are about scientific and mathematical concepts as well as real life problems. While existential issues could be counted as a "real life problem," existential game design—at least as I am developing this concept here—is not what MIT's Education Arcade is focused on. I am after *psychological*

resonance in the existential games I am talking about, which is something else entirely.

Based on the highly interdisciplinary research of psychiatrist Erik Goodwyn (2012, 2016, 2018), psychological resonance refers to a deep, unconscious recognition and activation of archetypal patterns through symbols and imagery. Psychological resonance is at the root of the same kinds of mythic, symbolic, and ritual ideas popping up time and time again all over the world, across all cultures. It is the key to understanding "what makes one ritual more likely than another to be repeated across generations?" (Goodwyn, 2016, p. 33). Psychological resonance is about *what* speaks to us (as humans) and *why* it speaks to us, on a deep, unconscious and universal level. Understanding and harnessing psychological resonance is key to designing transformative existential games because of their emphasis on awakening our authentic self, aligning us with what rings true for us, so we can identify our own pathways to bliss, uncoerced and to our own terms. More on psychological resonance later.

TOWARDS AN EXISTENTIAL, TRANSFORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

Identifying Experience Goals: The Shortcomings of MDA

It is safe to say that games created for an audience (in contrast to, for example, games that are purely (self-)explorative), at some point in their concept and prototyping phase, develop a goal for what they want to convey or evoke in that audience. They articulate and then triangulate around an experience goal. This notion of designing for an experience goal is at the core of one of the most wide-spread game design methodologies, the MDA Framework (mechanics, dynamics, aesthetics), developed by Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004). This methodology has been developed to guide designers through the process of prototyping, testing, and iterating by hinging on the *aesthetics* they want to achieve with their game, "the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she interacts with the game system" (Hunicke et al., 2004, p. 2). The key thought is that if you know what you want the player to experience, you can reverse engineer that into the game's *mechanics* that—by way of gameplay

dynamics (the emergent behavior of the system in motion)—will bring about this aesthetic experience. The MDA approach aims to keep the design process coherent and ensure that all the game elements contribute to a known, common goal. Any design issues that emerge can be traced along the continuum of mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics, which helps the process of iteration.

The MDA framework makes creating gameplay experiences sound deceptively simple. It is not. Apart from two people not having exactly the same experience when encountering anything—including a game—the difficulty already starts with clearly defining what kind of experience you set out to design for. Jesse Schell (2008) wrote:

> And this is the paradox of experiences. On one level, they are shadowy and nebulous, and on another, they are all we know. But as tricky as experiences can be, *creating them is all a game designer really cares about.* We cannot shy away from them, retreating into the concreteness of our material game. We must use every means we can muster to comprehend, understand, and master the nature of human experience (p. 10).

Many designers want to fast forward to making the game rather than staying with the abstract. Taking the time to really, truly grasp what it is that one wants to conjure in the possibility space of the game is terrifying. The philosophical engagement of the game's subject is not seen as part of making the game, perhaps because it involves a lot of thinking with little playable output to show for at first. If you're goal is to make a game, delaying the "making" part for the sake of a deeper understanding of its subject can be unsettling and anxiety inducing. It is thus frequently shortchanged. I want to create some room for this here and hope it will get designers' creative juices flowing.

Examining Existential Psychotherapy Goals to Inform Game Experience Goals

James Bugental (1990) referred to *existential psychotherapy* as "life-changing therapy." Existential psychotherapy is not about providing a cure; indeed, it rejects a medical model of mental illness where patients are treated to restore a previous status of health. Existential psychotherapy is about

achieving something the client never truly had before—e.g., an authentic sense of identity, deep connection, or sense of calling. This lack eventually started to present as an issue of varying severity, from discontent to crippling depression. Existential psychotherapy can be seen in juxtaposition to solution-focused therapies. Life-changing therapy goes below the surface of (fixing) symptoms to emphasizing self-awareness and targeting the root cause of a personal issue, which is assumed to be linked to one of the Givens of Existence (death, meaning, freedom of choice, isolation, identity). Existential psychotherapy also shall not be mistaken with psychoanalysis, where the therapist is the expert of a patient's problem and presents them with an interpretation of what their issue is. Existential psychology is often informed by humanistic psychology, a form of therapy developed by Carl Rogers in the 1940s. Humanistic psychology is known for its client-centeredness. This means it is non-directive: the therapist does not direct the client towards a particular kind of change or tell them what to do. Instead, the client is empowered to take the lead in the therapeutic process. Existential humanistic psychotherapy supposes that the client is the expert of their own experience and that they inherently gravitate towards growth, healing, and fulfillment of their potential. The therapist is there to hold space, help the client identify areas of growth, and to guide explorations of alternative ways of acting and being to overcome personal obstacles. The fact that Rogers (1951) used the term *client* instead of *patient* also points towards his bias against diagnosing and labeling people as sick. A client-centered approach requires the therapist to be authentic about their feelings in a session, and to have unconditional positive regard for the client. The client is met where they are, not with an assumption of who they are supposed to be (Rogers, 1951).

Applying existential humanistic psychotherapy principles to existential, transformative game design means that the game does not target the change of a specific symptom, behavior, or attitude. Instead, it aims to provide a possibility space to explore and contemplate the game's bigger themes based on what resonates with players at a given point in time. Goals of existential psychotherapy as described in *Counseling Theories for Human Service Practitioners* (Gladding, 2014) that can inform these themes are:

- Making clients sensitive to their existence.
- Calling attention to clients' unique traits and characteristics.
- Helping clients improve their encounters with others.
- Assisting clients in establishing a will to meaning.
- Encouraging clients to make a decision about both present and future directions in life. (p. 40)

These goals of existential psychotherapy are not game experience goals yet. It would be foolish of me to try and dictate these goals, because I would always only be able to give a limited selection of them. I believe existential psychotherapy can inspire many kinds of games that give rise to many, many different kinds of gameplay experiences that can contribute to a meaningful life. Instead, I aim to prepare the ground from which myriad existential game design ideas can sprout by discussing how existential psychotherapy goals and their underlying philosophical tenets can be critically and creatively engaged. I use a phenomenological lens for that, embracing introspection and subjectivity alongside further insights from existential philosophy. I am also focusing on more generally philosophical goals (rather than the ones that require specific engagement with a particular client), because they lend themselves more to a translation into game design. Games, after all, are designed for an audience, not customized for one, individual player.

Existential Psychotherapy Goal: "Making Clients Sensitive to Their Existence"

When I think of my own experiences, key factors of becoming aware of my own existence are: an increased focus on the here-and-now and possibly a bodily felt sense of what is currently going on with me or around me; a decrease of Ego and its silly, daily struggles for the sake of seeing a bigger picture; and a sudden glimpse of the finiteness of life that makes it feel more precious. Now, these are the things that come up for me when I contemplate this existential psychotherapy goal. Someone else may have different associations. But if it were me aiming to design an existential game, I would continue to ask: what are the situations or circumstances

that allow for these factors to be activated? Experiences of awe come to mind: the vast quiet of the Baltic sea on a summer evening; feeling tiny in a redwood forest; huddling under a blanket on the porch at 5am with my four-year old cuddled up beside me; listening to nature waking up around us; and watching the sunrise. In all of these examples, the experience is characterized by a tension between joy and grief—joy for the moment, grief for its fleetingness. This tension commands giving a moment full attention. There are no other goals to attend to, no conflicts to deal with. It is being in a state of *active being* rather than *being active*. In the context of a game, this means avoiding elements that will compete for a player's attention and that reinforce contemplation in subtle ways.

Game Example: Every Day the Same Dream

Journey has done a great job of evoking awe through its gorgeous environments and playing with the theme of impermanence throughout. A completely contrary example of a game that artfully plays with raising awareness for one's existence is Molleindustria's *Every Day the Same Dream* (2009). In this short, black-and-white, single-player game, you play as a man who is stuck in the daily, soul-crushing routine of a dead-end life with a dead-end job and seemingly dead-end marriage. Every day you get ready in the morning, leave the house, drive to work, and do work. The bleakness of the scenario is in stark contrast to the experiences of awe I referenced above. The radical absence of something is also a way to draw attention to it. What makes this game so existentially painful is the triviality of its content, particularly the events and choices that disrupt the daily routine: taking a different path to work, seeing a leaf fall, a cow in a field, or a homeless person. Those little deviations stand out because everything else is so dull and they raise the question: "How pathetic is my life? Where can I take a different path, before it's too late?" As such, *Every Day The Same Dream* also relates to the existential psychotherapy goal of encouraging clients to make a decision about their present and their future life directions. It does not make any suggestions about what kinds of decisions a player should make. It just points out what happens if you allow life to lead you, rather than the other way around.

Every Day The Same Dream is an example of an existential game that shows

that we do not have to give players tons of compelling choices in order to facilitate contemplation of the responsibility we all have for creating the best or most meaningful life we can. The emphasis, I believe, should always be on giving players just enough to stimulate their own thoughts, to ask the big questions themselves, and take those questions or considerations into their real lives where their choices truly matter. As a general note, none of these musings about existential experience goals should be taken as directive. I believe the most powerful designs happen when their origins have been forgotten; when the ideas have been taken in and percolated and mixed with one's own experiences and become part of a bigger whole, a bigger worldview, and then emerge naturally as something you simply feel you have to express. This is particularly true for the next goal.

Existential Psychotherapy Goal: "Calling Attention to Clients' Unique Traits and Characteristics"

This goal has to be interpreted with a good portion of creative freedom. For one, playing a game with (more or less) pre-defined characters is different from exploring one's own traits in a therapy setting. Yet, we know that exploring identity is one of the strengths games have as a medium—by playing as someone else, we can get in touch with unconscious aspects of our personalities or explore how our values and beliefs map onto that of the character we are projecting ourselves onto (Gee, 2003). Due to their flexibility in character creation and enactment, there are big opportunities here in (live action) role-playing games, and thus they are being used more and more for purposes of personal development and self-inquiry by counselors, social workers, and spiritual leaders. Austrian game scholar, Katharina Mittelböck, (2018) wrote insightfully about role-playing games as personality development tools from a psychoanalytic perspective. The most fruitful identity exploration games do not make this function obvious; they tend to have some other focus.

Game Example: Bluebeard's Bride

The investigatory horror tabletop role-playing game, *Bluebeard's Bride* (Magpie Games, 2017), asks players to play as different aspects of the bride

character and as such has a strong component of exploring personality traits (or, to use the Jungian term: complexes). It is not *only* about that. It is how this identity exploration is embedded in the horror tale and how the game creates discussion between the players on how to respond to the various threats they encounter in Bluebeard's mansion that makes it a fascinating and evocative experience. Unsurprisingly, Whitney "Strix" Beltran, one of the game's designers and writers, has a background in depth and archetypal psychology—an approach to understanding the human experience by way of its unconscious aspects and psychological universals, i.e., archetypes. Beltran's (2019) talk on *The Power of Elegant Archetypes* in the Narrative in Games Summit at the Game Developers' Conference shows that she was clearly aware of how archetypal psychology informed *Bluebeard's Bride*—particularly the conception of the sisters as complexes that make up the bride's personality. Yet, the game owes its appeal to the creative rendering of these ideas in a story of abuse, oppression, and discovery. Depth psychology was a means to a creative end, not its point.

Existential Psychotherapy Goal: "Helping Clients Improve Their Encounters with Others":

Taken at face value and applied directly to game design without further inquiry, this existential psychotherapy goal could simply give rise to cooperative games. Such an approach, though, would completely miss the point and the deeper, existential theme at stake here: existential isolation. To improve our encounters with others, we have to improve our encounter with ourselves. Why? Existential psychotherapist, Irvin Yalom (1980), explains that behind existential isolation is the sentiment that, "we are all lonely ships on a dark sea" (p. 398). No relationship is lasting: either the other, or we, will die. There is no solution to isolation. What alleviates the anxiety and pain of our ultimate aloneness, is a deep, authentic connection with others that enriches our inner world by sharing in someone else's. The basis for such connection, though, is the acceptance of our existential isolation (Yalom, 1980). Yalom and colleagues (Yalom, 1980) conducted a study with successful therapy patients to understand which aspects of the therapy experience were the most helpful to them. Understanding the limits of intimacy ranked at twenty-third out of the sixty items. The

conclusion to draw from this is: to be able to open ourselves up to others—to see the lights of other dark ships in the sea, sharing in a similar situation of lonely dread—we need to confront and develop a certain tolerance for our isolation. Only then can our sense of isolation give way to compassion and empathy for others who participate in the same experience as us, rendering it somewhat less frightening. As Fromm (1956) put it in *The Art of Loving*, "paradoxically, the ability to be alone is the condition for the ability to love" (p. 88). These further existential and philosophical inquiries into the nature of isolation and obstacles to connection, as well as productive ways of addressing them, give much richer context and sources of inspiration for game design than the literal existential psychotherapy goal alone.

Game Example: Walden, a Game

Walden, a game (Fullerton and USC Interactive Media & Games Division, 2017) is a great example of a game evoking existential thought, particularly along the lines of contemplating solitude and connection. This is hardly surprising, as the player follows in the footsteps of American poet and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, who conducted an experiment of living a self-sufficient life in nature at Walden pond in the 1850s. The game spans Thoreau's first year in the woods. As the game website describes: "…as you strive to survive off the land, you are encouraged to explore the beauty of the woods and the pond, which hold a promise of a sublime life beyond your basic needs" (*Walden, a game* website, n.d.). This promise of a "sublime life" has a strong spiritual component of feeling connected to something greater—and more lasting—than oneself. By exploring the life-death-life cycle of one year, attention is further drawn to the light (i.e., life as a continuous cycle) rather than the bulb (i.e., a human life trapped in one body for a limited time).

Looked at it superficially, one might struggle to see how *Walden, a game* should help to improve players' encounters with others. Yet, it is very palpable how the game stimulates contemplation of the value of aloneness and—by way of inviting conversation with oneself and experiencing one's own, fleeting existence in the context of enduring nature and life all around—paves the way for true conversation and connection with others.

Walden, a game may not be an obvious interpretation of the existential psychotherapy goal of "improving client's encounters with others," but it is not the obvious that game design should necessarily strive for. Game design should strive for the creative and authentic rendering of its experiential essence.

Existential Psychotherapy Goal: "Assisting Clients in Establishing a Will to Meaning"

At this point, it may have become clear that there are no hard boundaries between the different existential psychotherapy goals and the game experience goals they can inspire. Raising awareness for one's existence already implies a contemplation of meaning. Drawing attention to unique traits and characteristics is an invitation to use them purposefully and act in alignment with them, which is strongly related to a life that is experienced as meaningful. Discussing some of these goals individually, however, allows us to tease out different emphases and nuances of existential thought, providing different entry points for the creative process. This last goal—establishing a will to meaning—is probably the broadest and most encompassing, and therefore also the hardest to grasp of them all. It implies two things: a) that one of the Givens of Existence with which human beings struggle is a perceived "meaninglessness" of life and b) that having a sense of meaning is important. Viktor Frankl (1956), an Austrian psychotherapist who survived the Holocaust, found meaning to be so central not only to our thriving, but to our survival (particularly under adverse circumstances), that he founded his own branch of existential psychotherapy based on the search for it: Logotherapy. Logotherapy (*logos* being the Greek word for "meaning") is exclusively focused on helping clients find meaning in life (in contrast to other existential psychotherapy approaches, that also deal with the other Ultimate Concerns discussed above). In his book *The Will to Meaning* (1956), Frankl identifies three categories of Life Meaning: 1) what one accomplishes or gives to the world in terms of one's creations; 2) what one takes from the world in terms of encounters and experiences; and 3) one's stance toward suffering, toward a fate that one cannot change. The first category quite literally is about creativity, in whatever form one chooses to express it: from gardening to raising children to painting or growing a business. Being creative is

meaning generating. The second category is about being deeply engaged in experiencing life and all that it has to offer, e.g., enjoying music, appreciating nature, and loving wholeheartedly. While fully engaged in life, the question of "meaning" does not even come up. The third category is attitudinal and describes the ability to find meaning in suffering. If life feels meaningless because one has lost a loved one, one can find meaning in the suffering one has spared the departed by surviving them. While the pain doesn't go away, it at least serves a purpose now.

In *Existential Psychotherapy*, Yalom (1980) discusses different secular activities that can provide meaning for human beings. First is self-actualization, realizing one's built-in potential, to become fully what one is supposed to be in accordance with one's own unique blueprint. Second is altruism, "leaving the world a better place to live in, serving others, participation in charity" (p. 431). Third is dedication to a cause, which implies a measure of altruism, but contains other aspects as well, such as contributing to something greater than oneself that will endure beyond one's death (death-transcendence) and connection to something more lasting than the personal lifespan (thus going into other areas of existential concern, such as overcoming isolation anxiety and helplessness). Finally, the hedonistic solution: "The purpose of life is, in this view, simply to live fully, to retain one's sense of astonishment at the miracle of life, to plunge oneself into the natural rhythm of life, to search for pleasure in the deepest possible sense" (p. 437).

It is important to note that the hedonistic way—making choices based on what promises to be more pleasurable, short- or long-term—is not in contrast to altruism or dedication to a cause. It allows for the option that some sacrifice or pain is necessary to arrive at something that is ultimately more pleasurable. The pleasure principle is good news, because it states that you can be altruistic or loving or creative or dedicated to a cause because there is something in it for *you*, and that's fine! You don't have to be a martyr to experience meaning in life.

Existential psychotherapy considers that the things that provide life meaning fluctuate over a lifetime. Goals change depending on context and developmental stage. Yalom (1980) states: "Life meaning must be viewed in a developmental perspective: the types of life meaning change over an

individual's life; other developmental tasks must precede development of meaning" (p. 460). Teenagers and young adults are more concerned with self-actualization and developing their identity than older adults, who have achieved a measure of success and self-knowledge and can now orient outwards, towards contribution to others, e.g., through teaching, giving back, mentoring, volunteering. Similarly, situations in which one source of meaning—e.g. raising children—becomes obsolete (because the children are now adults), require a reorientation towards a new source of meaning, e.g., finding other occupations to become fully engaged in.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MEANING AND VALUES

How does any of this translate into game design? The best answer is indirectly, which is why I can't give a game example here yet. The point is not to decide which avenues of meaning generation are the most promising for a certain target audience at a given life stage or circumstance, or to model games that blatantly suggest specific actions or pathways for players as ways to live more meaningfully. While creating games in which you step into the shoes of a volunteer for a humanitarian effort is probably not a bad thing to do (given you can make this an engaging game, not a preach-fest), it is most likely a far too literal (and narrow) interpretation to touch players profoundly. Let's dig a little deeper, beyond the surface of behaviors and actions to the source of *why* we need meaning in the first place.

Our perceptual neuropsychological system is wired so that it constantly organizes everything it comes across into patterns. It constantly seeks to make meaning out of chaos. When no patterns or meaning are to be found, it makes something up (Goodwyn, 2012). If that is thwarted—if the brain cannot make anything up for some reason—it sends a distress signal. We feel anxious and helpless. *Meaning*, in that sense, is "an anxiety emollient. It comes into being to relieve the anxiety that comes from facing a life and a world without an ordained, comforting structure" (Yalom, 1980, p. 464).

One way to deal with the anxiety of meaninglessness is to find a structure to cling to. As Raph Koster (2005) points out, this is quite likely one of the main reasons our brains love games: there are plenty of patterns to

find and chew on and to distract us from a much less transparent and well-ordered life. Games being designed artifacts have clear possibility spaces in which everything somehow tends to make sense. They can have a purpose and support the concept of *meaningful play* defined by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) as actions being discernable and integrated into a bigger whole. Meaningful play is more a structural concept than it is related to content. As long as player actions are discernable and integrated into the game structure, they are declared meaningful in regard to the goal, regardless of what that goal may be or what the game overall may be about.

Structure alone, however, is not the answer. If structure is self-serving, it can easily feel pointless. Also, while engaging with the structured experiences of games may provide meaning during the act of playing, it does not necessarily translate into the rest of life. The point here is not to create games that function as a substitute for meaning elsewhere, but to create games that contribute to meaning in other areas of life. What we are looking for, thus, is not to give players a structure per se. In the existential transformative game design framework, we are looking to ignite a spark that prompts players to create their own structures. The building blocks for these intrinsically motivated, meaningful structures are values.

Yalom (1980) has provided a standard anthropological definition of *value*, "a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the 'desirable' which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of actions" (p. 464). In other words: values tell us how to live. We can organize and structure our lives around values. As human beings, we search for meaning because we need direction and guidelines to live by. We long for "overall perceptual frameworks and a system of values on which to base our actions" (Yalom, 190, p. 464). Myth and ritual have served as important modalities to uphold values and lend cohesion to society and the individual psyche. But these forms do not permeate society the way they used to. Larsen (1996) states that myths—once corner stones of collective meaning making—have become disintegrated and replaced by science, laws, religious doctrine and social customs. In the same vein, Rollo May (1991) explains:

> Myth making is essential in gaining mental health, and the compassionate

> therapist will not discourage it. Indeed, the very birth and proliferation of psychotherapy in our contemporary age were called forth by the disintegration of our myths (p.15)

With the decline of social structures, like myths and rituals, that upheld certain values, we were left more and more to our own devices and became increasingly lost. That does not necessarily mean we have no values. That is only true for some people. For others, it might mean that they have (unconscious) values that do not serve them. Since any meaning and guidance is better than none, we eagerly pick up values as if they were germs at the airport. Especially when we are very young and do not know we have a choice. Hence, many values and beliefs we live by are part of our family history, they are the make-up of our personal mythology (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988). We may have had grandparents who lived by the credo that if you didn't constantly produce something, you were worthless; or a dad who held the belief that money was dirty; or a mom who thought life was out to get you so you could never let your guard down. It is easy to see how values and beliefs such as these can be absorbed unconsciously by a young mind and later get in the way of living fully. Whether we experience the existential dread of living a value-less life or are tortured by living by values that are sabotaging us at every turn, values are the key to living meaningfully and with integrity and to navigate the unique "Forest Adventurous" (Campbell, 2004, p.xxvi) with grace and in alignment with our true self.

At the core of the existential psychotherapy goal of "establishing a will to meaning" is thus to help clients discover their own compass, their own value system. Regarding how to go about this, the "life-meaning generating secular activities" stated above—self-actualization, altruism, dedication to a cause, hedonism—are pretty much as far as we get by looking at existential psychotherapy. As Yalom (1980) points out in his chapter on psychotherapeutic strategies to deal with meaninglessness:

> I shall review the literature dealing with clinical approaches to meaninglessness but will first note that it is an impoverished literature. Aside from a few scattered clinical notes describing exhortative techniques and some superficial techniques offered by Frankl, the literature is mute (p. 470).

He goes on to muse that "perhaps meaninglessness is such an inherently baffling issue that it defies the development of successful technology" (pp. 470-471).

The key take-away for game designers from the existential psychotherapy goal of "establishing a will to meaning" is thus a very high-level and abstract one. It can guide our thinking towards making games that help players explore their own values and beliefs, in how far they are aligned with their true selves and what that might mean for the decisions they have taken and might want to take in the future. But how should we accomplish this? I propose a close investigation of myth as the next step towards an existential transformative game design framework.

ORIENTING TOWARDS VALUES AND MEANING THROUGH MYTH AND RITUAL

Stuck with the baffling question of meaninglessness, some of the key figures of existential psychotherapy turned towards myth as a thousand-of-years old provider of meaning to humankind. There, they joined forces with depth and archetypal psychologists (e.g., Jung, Hillman). I find it highly satisfying (and encouraging for game designers) that when clinical approaches fall short, art is called upon! Art and science are two sides of the same coin. Together, they become real currency to purchase understanding of the human soul. May (1991) writes:

> A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence. Whether the meaning of existence is only what we put into life by our own individual fortitude, as Sartre would hold, or whether there is a meaning we need to discover, as Kierkegaard would state, the result is the same: myths are our way of finding this meaning and significance (p. 15).

I have argued previously that myths—understood as stories that spring "from powerful and mysterious inner processes" (Bonnet, 2006, p. 4)—bring us back in touch with ourselves (Rusch, 2018).

> (...) myth establish communication between our thinking selves and our feeling selves. When that communication is broken, we are out of sync with our purpose and who we truly are. Life—despite achievements—feels

> lackluster at best and meaningless at worst because it lacks congruency. (…) When the right myth comes along, it speaks directly to the unconscious through its archetypes, symbols, and metaphors. Living mythological symbols may be thought of as "affect images" (Campbell, 1972, p. 89) that bypass surface analytical cognition and talk directly to the deeper intuitive and emotional layers of intelligence." (Horton-Parker and Shelton, 1996). (Rusch, 2018, p. 3)

We can easily trace the parallels between the function of myth and the meaning-generating activities discussed in regard to existential psychotherapy. Both suggest that a deeper connection to the self (and its true values) aids in self-actualization. Self-actualization paves the way to greater engagement in life and more authentic connection with others. The overall striving towards growth that is inscribed in the hero's journey, for example, eventually leads to self-transcendence and altruism, expressed as the return to society with a boon, after having slain the dragon of one's ego.

In short, there are many indications that the island of myth is a promising place to explore towards the goal of creating games that contribute to a meaningful life. A key take-away for existential transformative game design is that the process of transformation occurs through resonance, not coercion. As I have stated elsewhere:

> When a myth resonates—when we recognize ourselves in the little girl with the matches, that lights one after the other in the bitter winter cold without ever receiving sustaining warmth until we're all burnt out and internally dead—we wake up to our inner voice, we start paying attention and we begin to wonder: "what if….?" This is the magic that sets transformation in motion. As C.G. Jung put it: "The auditor experiences some of the sensations but is not transformed. Their imaginations are stimulated: they go home and through personal fantasies begin the process of transformation for themselves." (Bonnett, 2006, p. 27) (Rusch, 2018, p. 4).

I have further argued for harnessing myth for games. Two key reasons that bear repeating are: first that games are popular, while (overtly) mythical stories have become less so. Second, games as a medium lend themselves to an experiential exploration of myth and their values and beliefs. Campbell (2004) 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" (p. 6). While Campbell is speaking of games metaphorically in this quote—a mental game of pretending this or that—we can just as well take him literally and create actual games that allow us to act upon the pretense and thus explore it more tangibly. For a fuller and more thoroughly referenced discussion on the virtues of games as a vessel for the mythical, please see Rusch, 2018.

CREATING NEW MYTHS FOR EXISTENTIAL, TRANSFORMATIVE GAME DESIGN

Leveraging myth for existential transformative game design could be productive. The question that begs answering is: how can we generate new, psychologically resonant myths? This requires a little detour through the bumpy terrain of psychological resonance.

Psychological Resonance

It is one thing to argue that mythology as we know it is a powerful agent of change, but this comes with the benefit of hindsight. Erik Goodwyn (2016) states: "resonant stories and expressions are easy to think, easy to remember / hard to forget, and that is why they are recurrent motifs (p. 37). He explains:

> Psychological resonance is defined as a characteristic quality that can be applied to any image or narrative, that describes its mental 'stickiness', its tendency to spontaneously emerge, and / or its intergenerational staying power. (...) Formally, I define highly "resonant" expressions as those which are
>
> 1. Highly resilient across generations of transmission, especially oral transmission.
> 2. Resistant to cultural efforts at eradication.
> 3. Spontaneously and independently emergent cross-culturally despite large distances in time or space. (p. 37)

This definition of psychological resonance has an *empirical* basis and as such can only be applied to the ideas and images in myths and rituals that

have stood the test of time. This may be discouraging to game designers, but then again, creatives can never quite know whether what they are doing will have any kind of staying power. What is a bit more troubling, though, is that the psychological resonance of myth and ritual was usually not the work of a single author. Psychological resonance of myth and ritual is achieved through a process of *cultural transmission*. According to Goodwyn (2016), "'cultural transmission' is not a mere carbon-copying of stories, rituals, and belief systems across generations, but a complex process that is influenced by universal psychological principles" (p.33).

Cognitive anthropology teaches us that there are systematic biases in the way we humans think. Some concepts are cognitively optimal, meaning they are easier for us to think than others. We gravitate towards the easy ones, even if we know better. Due to these biases towards certain concepts, some cultural representations are also more likely to persist than others. Recurrent motifs are thus attractor points, to which deviations are self-corrected in subsequent transmissions. If some ambitious storyteller wanted to lend an existing tale their own spin and their creative tweaks were not compatible with what's intuitive for people to think—what rings true on a deeper level—the story gravitated back to its previous attractor points. (Goodwyn, 2016).

In other words:

> Those resonant images, stories, and rituals will tend to have the curious property that even though they have been created and modified by individual humans at various points, the criteria by which they survive generations are not. Such resonant expressions are therefore neither entirely created nor entirely given, but a combination of both (Goodwyn, 2016, p. 36).

Unfortunately, we do not have the time or power to conduct longitudinal playtests over hundreds of years, with thousands of people, to iterate our creations towards empirically measurable psychological resonance. That does not mean our undertaking of creating existential, transformative games is doomed, though.

I want to posit two hopeful arguments that we can design for psychological resonance. First, Goodwyn (2016) states that resonant expressions, "can

be thought of as 'utterances' of the collective element of the psyche" (p. 36). If this element of the psyche is "collective," we ALL have access to it, individually. What gets in the way is our personal stuff, muddling up the pool. The symbols and concepts that are uniquely ours are floating around in there together with the human universals. When we fish for creative, resonant expressions, we can't know what we're dragging up. But just because we don't know, doesn't mean we're failing. We might just as well have hooked the big Kahuna of collective imagery (leading to a very resonant game), as the crummy, old shoe that symbolizes a quite particular childhood embarrassment (leading to a vapid experience for others). To become clearer in regard to what is twitching on our line, and whether it's worth keeping or throwing back into the depths, we can do a search for similar imagery in mythology, folklore, and other symbolic communication. If our "catch" pops up elsewhere and has a meaning there that matches what it means for us, chances are we are onto something that transcends the purely personal. In *The Neurobiology of the Gods*, Goodwyn (2012) investigated the neurobiological basis of recurring, mythological imagery such as gods /goddesses, animal spirits, or even landscapes. He discussed a whole list of pervasive archetypes in a manner that makes it clear to understand how they are anchored in our perceptual system and brain circuitry. My two main takeaways from this read are that it is by no means arbitrary why certain images pop up across cultures to symbolize similar things and an understanding of what prompted these images to arise—e.g. the mapping of FEAR and SEEKING brain circuitry on the imagery of the snake-can guide the creation of new ones. We can then further distinguish "shoe" from "Kahuna" by referring to key criteria of psychological resonance. But what are the criteria of resonating images? Goodwyn (2016), drawing extensively on folklore studies, provides us with a list:

> I propose that the most resonant expressions are likely to have some or all of the following:
>
> 1. Minimal counter-intuitiveness (Barrett 2007), meaning that they have only a few unusual or strange elements and so stand out, rather than have too many or too few counter-intuitive elements. Examples: talking animals, flying carpets, dragons (...)
> 2. Emotional evocativeness (Panskepp 1998). Examples: stories

> involving basic human attachments, or evoking basic emotional responses such as fear, anger, lust, and so on.
>
> 3. Sensual vividness, with a tendency towards extremes. Examples: castles of gold, mountains of crystal, brilliant lights, absolute darkness, and so on.
> 4. Indeterminacy of time and space. Examples: "long ago in a far-away land"—evocative of an oceanic feeling.
> 5. Biasing toward middle-level categories. Examples: "sword" rather than "weapon" (too abstract) or "quillioned pattern-weld blade with Brighthampton scabbard and cross" (overdetailed)
> 6. Low complexity of characters and motivations. Examples: the most beautiful in the land, the king, animal gods, the thief, the beggar.
> 7. Rhythmic and prosodic/musical elements. Examples "magic mirror in the wall."
> 8. Simple plots with reversals and / or irony. Examples: nothing is as it seems, plot twists, the slow animal beats the fast animal, and so on.
> 9. Apparent interconnection of events. Examples: things always occurring "just in the knick of time", and so on.
>
> Non-resonant expressions will be: overly counter-intuitive or overly mundane, emotionally detached or frustrating, sensually vague or abstract, specific in time and space, contain over-specific or over-general categories, be internally complex or ambiguous, will lack any rhythmic or poetic qualities, will lack a clear plot (...) (pp. 37-38).

It is important to stress that this criteria list of psychologically resonating imagery should not be taken as gospel for game designers—it is just something to keep in mind when aiming for a "mythical feel." Looking at the game *Journey*, however, with this criteria list in mind explains a good deal of its thus far quite established "stickiness." It is also a list that lends itself well to games as a medium in general, with their focus on action rather than character's inner motivations, basic motivations, or potential for sensual vividness.

The second argument for why we do not need to despair at the fact that psychological resonance requires cultural transmission is that we don't have to interpret, or aim for it, as an absolute. It is a phenomenon that in people's individual experience comes in degrees: something can resonate

more or less. It is only the empirical version of it that sets the standards very high to achieve without the mechanisms of cultural transmission. We all know from our personal experiences with books, movies, graphic novels, games, etc., that we can handle (and often appreciate!) when an author's personal, idiosyncratic voice comes through. This is easy especially if we are tuned in to their frequency and ready to receive the message.

Finding New Myths in the Unconscious

Now with all of the above in mind, *how* can we create new myths? The following is concerned with a high-level discussion on the creative process conducive to mythical themes, resonant expressions, or symbolic communication and consequently existential, transformative games. It is not—at least in this paper—bothered by details of how to translate that into concrete narrative design or game mechanics.

Campbell (2004) states, "Myths derive from the visions of people who have searched their own most inward world" (p. 24). In *Creative Mythology,* Campbell (1991) unpacked that thought further, emphasizing the importance of tuning in to our own experiences for the creation of new myths:

> In what I am calling 'creative mythology' (...) the individual has had an experience of his own—of order, horror, beauty, or even mere exhilaration—which he seeks to communicate through signs; and if his realization has been of a certain depth and import, his communication will have the value and force of living myth—for those, that is to say, who receive and respond to it of themselves, with recognition, uncoerced (Campbell, 1991, p. 4).

The key to new myths, thus, is through deeply felt and examined experience. It is not enough, though, to provide a mere account of events and happenings. Note how Campbell plays on the concept of psychological resonance when he speaks about those who receive and respond to the experience "with recognition, uncoerced" (Campbell, 1991, p. 4). We have already established that this kind of transformative resonance of myth is due to myth speaking the language of the unconscious. That means the experience needs to be creatively rendered, or transformed, through our imagination into symbol and metaphor. Our task in existential

transformative game design, thus, is to reconnect with our experiences as understood and grasped intuitively by our unconscious mind. Entering the unconscious is not without risk and should not be undertaken lightly. There is a reason why parts of us end up there and dwell in the darkness. The unconscious is powerful and there is no way to foresee what might emerge. Once you open that gate, it can be hard to close it again at will. Have a friend who is experienced with inner work, or a therapist, at hand, in case things start to feel overwhelming. For one, dialogue with the unconscious will most likely surface the conflicting forces at work within ourselves. As Johnson (1986) notes:

> Who isn't plagued most of a lifetime by this duality of life? Masculine and feminine voices within, duty or desire, good or evil, this choice or that choice, follow my heart or follow my mind—we can go forever reciting the pairs of opposites that express the *yin* and *yang* of life (p. 38).

By exploring our different, competing inner parts—voices, viewpoints, goals, motivations, beliefs, and values—we are searching for meaning, purpose, connection, and unity within and without. By listening in on our inner workings, we are doing the inner work of "making sense" and actualizing our potential. Self-knowledge and conscious awareness of the patterns and energies that guide our decisions and behaviors, and underlie our moods and feelings, is the pre-condition to living authentically and with integrity. We know from the sections above that this is a key goal of existential psychotherapy and has long been the function of myth. It stands to reason that undergoing this process of self-inquiry for ourselves and using it to fuel creative expression facilitates setting transformation in motion for others through resonance. Hence, this is as much creative work as it is a personal growth process.

I want to be clear though: I am not saying that the way to profound and transformative games is through self-indulgent soul searching. Game design can be a therapeutic process for the designer, but this is not the point here. With the goal of creating games that contribute to a meaningful life (for players) in mind, we must make judgment calls about which themes, experiences, or conflicts lend themselves to more universal perspectives, and which ones are "just us." Games based on the latter can still be highly valuable for others, resonate strongly, and potentially induce

personal change. They are not, however, the kinds of games I am focusing on in this particular work. The stuff of myth is interpersonal.

Dreams and Active Imagination

So, how do we tune into the frequency of the personal and collective unconscious? Over the last decade, I found guidance to this in various sources both for creative work (Bonnet, 2006; Cameron, 2002; Conner, 2008) as well as psychotherapy (Goodwyn, 2018; Johnson, 1986; Moss, 1998). The two key strategies that pop up repeatedly are dream analysis and active imagination. This, of course, goes back to C.G. Jung (1997; 2002), but has been further developed by more recent therapists and researchers (Feinstein & Krippner 1988, 1997; Goodwyn, 2018; Johnson, 1986; Moss 1998).

While there are critical voices who want to dismiss dreams as merely "mind fluff" without any relevance to our lives, Goodwyn (2018) presents extensive evidence from clinical practice and psychology research that dream-imagery is non-random and that dreams transform our unconscious thoughts into a rich, symbolic language. Learning how to understand that language provides access to the unconscious thoughts, increases self-knowledge, and fosters personal growth through psychological integration. The simplest way to understand a dream is to use what Goodwyn (2018) calls, "The Number One Dream Hack." He recommends slotting the content—X—of any dream into this sentence, "The meaning of this dream is that you are living your life *as if* X" (p. 20). The phrase "as if" cues us into the metaphorical nature of the dream so that we don't try to understand it as literal events or memories. Our dreaming minds are veritable geniuses of condensing complex experiences, themes, and emotions into imagery and symbolism. Dreams can tell us quite directly what they want from us or what they are all about.

> When we are interpreting (...) we must be careful to be as naïve as possible, to have no prejudices in connection with the associations. Take the thing literally, concretely. How would you describe a mouse to someone who has never seen one? It is a tiny grey animal, hardly seen in the daytime, which disturbs one at night with disagreeable little noises; they eat all kinds of

> things and one must always be careful that they don't get at the good things in the kitchen (Jung speaking in McGuire, 1984, p. 535).

When working with a dream, we shouldn't go straying from what is there because then anything can mean anything. Whatever your dream image, explore its properties and behaviors to understand what it means, and why your unconscious fed you this image and not anything else. I recently dreamt of a magician who was performing astonishing tricks. If I wanted to see more of those tricks, he said, I needed to give him change. I have been studying the Tarot for many years (drawing mainly on Jodorowski's work (2004)) and there the magician represents a person's talents and potentials. This interpretation of the magician resonated with my experience of him in the dream. In the dream, the "change" the magician asked for were literally coins, but the metaphorical meaning – and what the dream told me about my real life – was that if I wanted to tap into the magician's magic, I had to change. In other words: to find my own magic, I had to stop holding back and tap into my potential. This example further goes to show that we should "stick to the image," as Jung strongly suggested.

It is further important to note that in order to understand a dream, we need to see it in the full context of a dreamer's (conscious) life. There is no (reasonable) way to interpret a dream from a set of ready-made dream symbols. Whatever pops up in a dream is our mind trying to make sense of a current situation: something that is going on in our lives right now. Even if we dream of a childhood memory, it is a commentary on something in the present. Identifying what that is will help reveal why our mind reconstructed that memory for us. When we work with our dreams, we must look at the whole picture, not just individual elements in the dream. Goodwyn (2018) proposes a list of nine dream characteristics whose exploration can help to make sense of a dream (as an extension to the one sentence dream-hack):

> 1. Resonance: (...) this principle tells us just how resonant this particular dream is, and how deeply it goes into universal themes. It tells us how "big" this dream is.
> 2. Context: recognizes that dreams do not happen in isolation, but in the context of a dreamer's current life situation. (...)

> 3. Characters: recognizing what characters in dreams represent, either as aspects of a dreamer's own mind/life experience, or as symbols for relationships (...)
> 4. Setting: from abstract to familiar, the setting tells us much about the dreamer's current life situation and overall emotional quality. The details of the setting tell us more precisely *what* these things are.
> 5. Scope: the overall narrowness of vision vs. expansive, comprehensive view, the scope tells us a lot about the state of the dreaming ego and just how well s/he is connected with his/her life situation.
> 6. Storytelling: recognizing the narrative aspects of a dream adds context and meaning by putting together events in a particular order. Asking "why *this* order?" opens the door to better understanding of the dream.
> 7. Conflict: the overall level of conflict tells us a great deal about how the dreaming ego is relating to the rest of the mind and to the waking world. High levels of conflict, and looking at the specific imagery used in the dream often show us aspects of internal conflicts previously unnoticed.
> 8. Intensity: besides conflict there is overall intensity, turmoil, and general "storminess" or emotional force. This can tell us the overall level of creative / destructive energy going on at the time of the dream.
> 9. Integration: this final factor involves the over-arching connection between dreams that occurred over a long period of time and how the dreamer is or is not changing to meet new challenges (p. 62).

Exploring and understanding our dreams in this manner can provide us with rich, creative fodder. Even if the dream doesn't translate directly into a game idea, paying attention to dreams attunes us to our inner world, its imagery, and its symbols. This strengthens the communication channel between "upstairs" and "downstairs." Insights and intuitions will then come more easily, and frequently, until conscious and unconscious mind collaborate in effortless and playful exchange, giving rise to potent, resonant expressions that we can use in our creative work. The other key strategy to coax unconscious material to the fore and tap into collective elements of the psyche, is active imagination. Originally developed by C.G. Jung between the years 1913 and 1916 (see Jung, 1997), active imagination

is a practice in which you enter into a conversation with the different parts of yourself while remaining fully awake. It is like meditation in that it is best conducted in a relaxed, receptive state in which the conscious mind can let its guard down to allow unconscious material to bubble to the surface. In active imagination, the conscious mind takes the backseat and acts as an observer to the workings of the unconscious. Plot developments are not brought about forcefully, but rather coaxed through questions that the unconscious provides answers to. It takes practice to hold this balance between dreaming and waking. It is not uncommon for active imagination to turn into a, "mythical adventure, a journey into the archetypal realm" (Johnson, 1986, p. 152). Like in dreams, whatever comes up is not mere fiction, but a symbolic representation of a present real-life theme or issue.

For both dreamwork and active imagination to be most productive and fruitful, certain conditions must be met. For one, we must signal to the unconscious that we are in "reception" mode. For active imagination this can be done, e.g., by going to a special place where we can be undisturbed, putting on a special piece of clothing such as a special jacket or scarf, lighting a candle, or clearing the clutter from your desk. Any *consistent* signal that you want to access the unconscious will help you ease into the right mindset. That means that ideally, you show up for this work every day at the same time and place. Next: set your intention. This even works for dreams! Throughout their 12-week program to discover one's personal mythology, Feinstein and Krippner (1997) propose dream incubation as a source of inner wisdom. To coax meaningful dreams, they suggest the following:

> With a tape recorder or a journal and pen next to your bed, write in your journal, slowly and mindfully: "I will sleep soundly and peacefully tonight while having a dream that sheds new light on (...). When I awake, I will recall my dream." Then, with deliberation, repeat several times before falling asleep, "I will have a meaningful dream, and I will remember it." If you don't recall a dream the first night, repeat the process each night until you do (p. 92).

Intention setting for active imagination can be supported by having a specific question or theme to explore. Conner (2008) suggests prompting questions like "what do I want?", "what relationship is bleeding?", and "what sends my stomach into knots" (p. 92).

It is important that to harness the full creative benefits of dreamwork and active imagination, they cannot remain on the level of passive fantasy or mere daydreaming. The unconscious needs to know we are willing to *do* something about the insights it gives us. Like the parent who gets tired of telling their kids the same thing repeatedly, you need to show the unconscious you give a damn. Johnson suggests performing a ritual that acknowledges the messages it sends us. These rituals don't have to be elaborate. The elements they use can either be directly inspired by the unconscious imagery or simply be a mindfully performed action intended to honor the insight, e.g. preparing and sipping a cup of tea. Ritual, in this sense, is "symbolic behavior, consciously performed" (Johnson, 1986, p. 102). For example, after my dream of the magician who had asked me for change, I buried a small bill at a special place in our garden and "watered" it with a sip of coffee. Symbolic actions such as these make the unconscious feel acknowledged and more likely to cooperate in the future.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This is as far as the journey towards an existential, transformative game design framework goes for now. We investigated how we can create games that contribute to a meaningful life through the lens of existential psychotherapy. We started with a discussion of the concept of transformational game design and proposed an approach that emphasizes intrinsically motivated, uncoerced change as an alternative to a transformational games model that determines the kind of change the player should be subjected to. We argued that by broadening our idea of games' transformational potential, we could purposefully design for profound experiences that impact players deeply, lastingly, and on their own terms, facilitating players' personal growth and their coming to terms with the Givens of Existence: death, meaning, identity, isolation and freedom of choice. By exploring salient goals of existential psychotherapy, particularly those revolving around "meaning" and "purpose," we aimed to spark ideas for existential games. This led to a discussion of the function of myth to provide guidance for people's lives and how we, as game designers, could go about harnessing the power of myth for games that impact players by way of psychological resonance. Since myth, with its imagery and symbolism, speaks the language of the unconscious, it stands

to reason that this is where we need to go if we want to generate new myths. As techniques to access the unconscious as a creative source, we proposed dreamwork and active imagination.

A future step on this journey is to explore the power of symbolic enactment inherent in gameplay. This is going to entail a close look at ritual used in experiential psychotherapy to understand why and how symbolic actions can act upon us like "magic" and what we have to consider if we want to harness this power for games. More of that, though, in another paper. It is my hope that the ideas presented here inspire more games that contribute to a meaningful life, thus expanding what games can be and broadening our conception of their transformational power beyond measurability.

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