Chapter 6

Virtual Psyche in Play and Tending the Collective Unconscious: An Archetypal Psychology Perspective of Digital Games

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ABSTRACT

Knowningly or unknowingly, games manifest archetypal forces from the unconscious. Through play and fantasy, unconscious content of the psyche is able to express its deep longings. Hypnagogic landscapes of videogames provide immersive realms in which players enact psychological dramas. Game designers reside on a unique axis from which their work with the imaginary realm can create profound psychic containers. At this pivotal point in our culture, digital games hold tremendous influence over the creation of new myths, lore, and possibilities. This chapter investigates archetypal psychology concepts of Carl Jung and James Hillman for insight into 21st century realm of virtual play and its relationship to the collective unconscious. It focuses on how games provide a means for bringing individual and cultural unconscious impulses into consciousness through personification, pathologizing and meaning making within virtual play. It aims to introduce an alternative lens to bridge psychological dynamics with the video game design.

INTRODUCTION

Digital realms are unique vessels for the collective consciousness and unconsciousness of our times. As virtual realms are increasingly inhabited, not only is the phenomenological perspective of embodiment challenged, but also the psychological and evolutionary alteration of the individual to the collective and to the unconscious. The phenomenon of psychic life was previously held within the container of the physical body, but now there is a new vessel for psychic energy.

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“Just as the body has its evolutionary history . . . so too does the psyche” (Jung, 1912/1956, p. 29 [CW 5, Para. 38]). Is psyche evolving within virtual space? Are virtual games vessels for psyche? Do virtual games provide landscapes for the virtual soul to wander? Are designers the current-day alchemists who transmute matter into digital “spirit” and mediate access for the collective unconscious? Just as the notion of a virtual world is an evolving concept, so too is the notion of its role as psychic container.

This virtual landscape for psyche begs for interdisciplinary attention of archetypal psychology and game studies to understand the shared symbolic meanings, ritual, and myth within virtual human sociality. Edward Castronova in *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun is Changing Reality* (2007), observed “Whatever our deepest shared fantasies may be, we will be able to pursue them in cyberspace together, all day, every day, world without end” (p. xv).

Virtual storytelling and gameplay offer so much more than mere interaction of player with game: it’s a journey into rich psychical landscapes filled with collective unconscious content. For millennia, storytelling of dreams, myths, and fantasies has provided a vehicle for meaning-making, for informing the culture of the potential generative and destructive forces of archetypes. Now, through virtual games, these fictional realms are not merely passive but are dynamic and vivid encounters. Virtual designers yield more than a tale; through code, a dimension of immersion and transmutation of the unconscious occurs as players embody the role of enactment.

As gazes attend to images within virtual realms we are suspended between conscious and unconscious landscapes, caught in a binary world, between dream and reality. We are extended beyond the skin of our being into a collective drama – a form of a hypnagogic drama – along with crowds of other “dreamers” sharing the hero’s quest – spending psychic energy to fill a void, within the images of the virtual game. There is something very profound as people migrate into these realms. Media theorist Mark Hansen in *Bodies in Code: Interfaces With Digital Media* (2006) noted in virtual space the human being is “en- dowed with a collective dimension” (p. 85).

Knowledge or unknowingly, games manifest archetypal forces from the unconscious. Game designers reside on a unique axis from which their work and their relationships with the imaginary realm can create profound psychic containers. At this pivotal point in our culture, digital games hold tremendous influence not only over the gaze, attention, problem-solving skills, and collaboration of players, but most importantly, over the creation and engagement of new myths, lore, expectations, and possibilities (Castronova, 2007).

Three billion hours a week are spent playing digital games, and by October 2010, over 5.93 million years of gameplay time had been spent in one virtual game, *World of Warcraft* (2001), with over 12 million subscribers, according to game studies theorist and activist, Jane McGonigal at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) 2011 Serious Game Summit. She places the time frame in perspective by citing that the first human ancestors stood up 5.93 million years ago. With such magnitude of hours and players, one has to pause to consider what is occurring to draw so many hours of attention within mythic realms of virtual games. Archetypal psychologist James Hillman explained, “The power of myth, its reality, resides precisely in its power to seize and influence psychic life” (Hillman & Kerenyi, 1991, p. 90). Gameplay in mythic realms is seizing and influencing 21st century psychic life on an epic scale.

Jung indicated “The secret of cultural development is mobility and disposability of psychic energy” (1912/1956, p. 16 [CW 5, Para. 17]). With estimates of well over 3 billion hours spent per week playing digital games (McGonigal, 2011), there begs the consideration of the ensoulment of virtual containers and personified “psychic presences” evoked within the gameplay.