Chapter 7
Vision Quest: 
Recreating the Mountaineering Experience through Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

One source for consideration in the quest to develop media that are truly educational and therapeutic is to examine activities that rely on a high and prolonged sense of physical and psychological coherence. The concept of sense of coherence can be broadly defined as a view of life that allows people “to consider their external and internal resources, to identify and mobilize them, to promote effective coping by finding solutions, and to resolve tension in a health-promoting manner” (Mayer & Thiel, 2014, p.1), and is related to Jung’s transcendent function—the removal of the separation between the conscious and unconscious mind (as cited in Campbell, p. 273). Paradoxically, enough, such an examination might profitably be directed toward activities such as extreme sports that, on their surface, appear to be primarily physical in nature.

INTRODUCTION

One source for consideration in the quest to develop media that are truly educational and therapeutic is to examine activities that rely on a high and prolonged sense of physical and psychological coherence. Sense of coherence can be broadly defined as a view of life that allows people “to consider their external and internal resources, to identify and mobilize them, to promote effective coping by finding solutions, and to resolve tension in a health-promoting manner” (Mayer & Thiel, 2014, p.1), and is related to Jung’s transcendent function—the removal of the separation between the conscious and unconscious mind (as cited in Campbell, p. 273). Its possible benefits to personal and social health are described by Rollin McCraty, who writes, “this state is directly associated with increased intuition, improved health and cognitive functioning” (n.d., p. 2). Paradoxically enough, an examination of how individuals can achieve psychological coherence might profitably be directed toward activities such as extreme sports that, on their surface, appear to be primarily physical in nature. The sport of mountaineering stands as
a noteworthy example of this—although alpinism requires a high level of physical fitness, it ultimately involves all four aspects of human health—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. During the days and hours a mountaineer spends in what is often an unforgiving environment, the alignment of these aspects achieves paramount importance. Obviously, the ability to approximate the sense of coherence essential for mountaineers would be beneficial to individuals in any setting. This, then, raises the following questions for research: by what mechanisms might we bring lessons from alpinism to what is becoming an increasingly urban population? Can interactive, media-based analogies be developed that reflect the physical and psychological techniques mountaineers use to maintain a sense of coherence? Drama-based video games, built on objective correlatives drawn between the direct climbing experience and a mediated reality, may provide avenues worth further exploration.

BACKGROUND

Interactive media attempts to recreate both the physical and emotional requirements of alpine sports have been limited. In video games, when climbing is built into the plot, it appears primarily as a type of stunt that must be performed, with one example of this being designer Naughty Dog’s, 2009 Uncharted 2: Among Thieves, which features glorious settings in the Himalayas and the mythological mountain setting of Shambhala, but uses the mountains as a device in the action platforming genre, with the character leaping from hold to hold as the plot requires Historically, mountaineering has been described as a literary sport, having been the subject of numerous critically well-regarded books such as Heinrich Harrer’s 1959 The White Spider, James Salter’s 1988 Solo Faces, and David Robert’s 1991 The Mountain of my Fear. To date, however, efforts to recreate the mountaineering experience through mainstream media, particularly digital media, have been both limited and generally unsuccessful. The majority of films that involve mountaineering have most often used climbing as an aspect of setting, with plot being driven by conflict other than the “man versus nature” frame that would be expected in the attempt to portray an ascent of a challenging peak. Of the few major productions that do at least place their characters in a mountain setting, many seem to find that climbing itself requires the addition of other risk factors in order to make the experience thrilling enough for a mainstream audience. Two egregious examples of this type of film include Columbia Pictures 2000 production, “Vertical Limit”, which drew this comment from “Three Film Buffs” reviewer Scott Nash: “In fact, if you ever have the choice of being trapped, halfway up a mountain, or of having to watch this movie, then I advise you to don that parka and long underwear” (2000, Dec.10). In this film, the mere ascent of K-2, probably the world’s most dangerous major peak, is deemed not to be challenging enough in itself, so characters are, by a plot device, required to climb while carrying jugs of nitroglycerine in their backpacks. Similarly, Tri-Star Picture’s 1993 “Cliffhanger”, drops a team of Uzi-wielding thieves into the mountains, where they discover a true mountaineer (played by Sylvester Stallone) and spend much of the time requiring him to scale dangerous cliffs without his shirt. While there have been several excellent films devoted to at least the attempt to recreate the climbing experience, these films, such as 2008’s “North Face” and especially 2004’s “Touching the Void” (discussed in more detail below), have been smaller budget, independent productions.

Other forms of media have not been particularly successful in capturing the climbing experience either. Even ostensibly objective media have difficulty representing the climbing experience. News coverage of accidents is frequently so garbled that climbers themselves have to interpret stories in order to
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