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## The Mythic Scope of *Journey*

### A Comparative Assessment Concerning the Spirit at Play and Cybernetic Shamanism

Robert William Guyker, Jr.

#### Abstract

Video games yield some of the most immersive virtual experiences of *mythos* today. They render, conceive and engage in a shared heritage of symbols and images drawn from world stories, mythical tropes, creatures, and environments. Thatgamecompany's *Journey* has recently emerged as a concise expression of this impulse to keep myth innovative, and gaming evocative. Working towards unraveling layers of motifs, I will approach *Journey* as a cybertext and mythic text, drawing on works ranging from philosophical treatises, poetry, sacred narratives and shamanism for comparative analysis. My initial task is to establish the video game as a participatory rendering of the Hero's Journey, while then breaking the cycle into individual components of motifs, themes and mythemes to parse the discourse of *Journey*'s exposition. I then argue for *Journey*'s ongoing engagement with reimagining the gaming experience through a commitment to synergistic immersion in a myth-minded environment.

#### Keywords

mythology, hero's journey, narrative, *Journey*, motif, simulation, shamanism, video game

We are taken from the mother, chewed into fragments and assimilated to the world-annihilating body of the ogre for whom all the precious forms and beings are only the courses of a feast; but then, miraculously reborn, we are more than we were. (Campbell 1964 [1945], 162)

The task is simple: ascend. The path, however, is *Journey* (2012), thatgamecompany's most recent title described as 'an interactive parable.'<sup>1</sup> The single effort and its course have fascinated schools of philosophy, religions and sacred traditions since antiquity (perhaps even our oldest recorded ancestors). Plato espoused the eternal *ano hodos* (*Republic: 621c*) ('upward path') to celestial origins later echoed in Cicero (*De Re Publica*, 6.16)<sup>2</sup>; Confucian and Daoist philosophies speak of the Dao 道, or Way of humanity and of Nature; Shinto 神道 of Japan itself as the pathway of her ancestral spirits; the Navajo hold sacred the *Atiin diyinii* ('Holy Trail'); *marga* in Hinduism has many methods; Muslims embark on the Hajj, pilgrimage to Mecca – these are a mere glimpse into our perennial fascination with pathways and their destinations. As such, *Journey* is, in the Aristotelian sense, properly epic (*Poetics*, 1451a32-36; 1459a17-19) in theme, but mythic in reach. In its mode of simulation and representation, the game fulfills such a task within a concise enough session for a single sitting. Behind the evocative experience lies a storied game carefully articulating the archetypal events of the Hero's Journey. Put in other terms, it symbolically and metaphorically patterns itself on the human life-cycle (Sheffield 2013), from a civilization's rise and fall to the career of a new race of pathfinders. Although *Journey* is grounded in this root metaphor, it surprisingly is rewarding replay, for it is a gaming experience to be shared alongside a companion and, circulated as a story worth telling. Over the course of this article we will explore how many sacred traditions and their stories find cadence with *Journey*. Drawing on myths, mythemes and motifs such as Celestial Ascent, aspects of shamanism, the Hero Twins, the conflict with the dragon and the central mountain we will witness how *Journey*'s creators worked towards shaping an experience that holds to a common and universal storyline within the unique immersive modality of a contemporary video game.

## 1 Method and Procedure

Video games are a unique medium, they can do more than represent actions and events; they can also simulate them implicating the 'user' more so than any other medium. A plethora of images can be woven into a seamless syncretistic whole. Although these aims yield a game like *Journey* with mass appeal to a collective international audience, the experience (the game itself reminds us) can also be a deeply personal one. In part, I argue that it is due to *Journey*'s relatively open system of fragmented tale-types, symbols and images which offer entry in a wide range of interpretations based on what each person brings to and takes away from the experience. I will be pursuing a select

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1 See <http://thatgamecompany.com/games/journey/>; thatgamecompany (2012, Mar. 13) *Journey Launch Trailer*: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVFLq4OS\\_pU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVFLq4OS_pU)

2 "The way which leads to heaven" (Trans. Rudd, 2008)

few avenues of the mythic elements represented in the game world, demonstrating a reading of the game as ergodic literature (Aarseth 1997, 1, 179) and mythic text (Lincoln 2000, 150-151).

Figure 1: History of the Ancestors<sup>3</sup>



Table 1. Storyline of the Ancestors

Visions of Pre-History	Events Revealed	Motif(s)
<i>Vision 1</i>	-Maize (Corn) bestowal by Celestial Birds -Harvest/Harness of crop energy, weaving of cloth	Creation Story & Fire-theft, <i>poiesis</i>
<i>Vision 2</i>	-Craftsmanship, architecture, infrastructure and further innovations in maize/star energy (terminals and generators)	Innovations, Architecture, <i>techne</i> , First Culture Heroes
<i>Vision 3</i>	-Depletion of crops, rise of Tower(s) and Onset of Hierarchy	Tower of Babel
<i>Vision 4</i>	-Loss of Fabric (societal/communal), resource war -Draco-machines -Rise of Great Dragon	Schism, Armageddon, Eschatology
<i>Vision 5</i>	-Annihilation of the Ancestors -Birth of Hero Traveler	Out of Death, New Life; Transformation
<i>Great Vision 6</i>	Revelation of the Hero Journey, Twin Heroes, Confrontation with Dragon, Tower of Light (Ladder)	World Pillar
Embodied Vision 7	Final Ascent up the Twined Peak	-Axis Mundi -Celestial Ascent

Source: Tapestry Storyline of Events Partitioned into Episodes.

3 [https://getsatisfaction.com/thatgamecompany/topics/story\\_tapestry\\_art](https://getsatisfaction.com/thatgamecompany/topics/story_tapestry_art) . Retrieved September 6, 2013.

## 1.1 Ancestor's Story

For a foundational text, I will rely on the ‘Tapestry Story’<sup>1</sup> revealed through the visions with the Ancestors (tall white ephemeral figures of the cut scenes), and discovered in the wasteland as episodic hieroglyphs by the player. A depiction of the Tapestry (Figure 1) can be roughly outlined (Table 1) along with how the storyline effectively aligns with and diverges from traditional sacred histories found in our global village (Table 2). How a translation of these sacred traditions takes to the profane world of video games will especially be of interest for this study. Simply put: does syncretism and eclecticism of this scope work? What are the unique emergent qualities offered by the medium?

Table 2. Themes & Motifs Across Five Mythologies

Theme/Motif	Journey Tapestry Storyline	Chinese	Navajo	Greek	Black Elk Oglala Lakota
<b>Sacred Mountain</b>	Twined Peak	Mt. Kunlun	<i>Dzil Na'oodilii</i> Travelers' Circle Mountain	Mt. Olympus	Harney Peak, Black Hills
<b>Origin of Humans</b>	Star seed, soil and maize	Clay by <i>Nüwa</i>	From Maize	>Clay by Prometheus >Cadmos, Dragons Teeth >Stones by <i>Pyrrha</i> & Deucalion	Emergence: Brought to surface by <i>Iktomi</i>
<b>Ancestral Spirits</b>	Celestial Bird, Six Ancestors	> <i>Shenren</i> Holy Person, > <i>Xianren</i> Immortal Person, >Six <i>wu</i> -shamans of Mt. Kunlun	<i>Nilch'idine'e</i> Air-Spirit People <i>Haashch'eeh dine'e</i> Holy People <i>Ha'aznani dine'e</i> Emergence People	Ancestral Shades, Culture Heroes	Six Grandfathers
<b>Ancestral War</b>	Resource Wars	Yellow Emperor : Flame Emperor	Air-Spirit Conflict	Trojan War	Peace Pipe conflict

1 Jenova Chen supplied fans with a two-part tapestry of the ‘History’ and ‘Current Story’: [https://getsatisfaction.com/thatgamecompany/topics/story\\_tapestry\\_art](https://getsatisfaction.com/thatgamecompany/topics/story_tapestry_art); See Also Frank Bosman (2013, Feb. 5) *Journey – Narrative (Beginning, visions, ending)*. Retrieved October 31, 2013 from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UaBvdLB2O0>

<b>Dragon</b>	-Dragon(s) of Ancestors -Lesser Pit Dragon(s) of Travellers	<u>Zhulong/Zhuyin Gong gong</u> (Flood Demon)	<u>Binaayee</u> ’ League of Monsters	<u>Typhon/Python</u>	-
<b>World Parent(s)</b>	Heaven & Earth	<u>Nüwa</u> (sometimes with <u>Fu Xi</u> )	First Man & First Woman	<u>Pyrrha &amp; Deucalion</u>	Mysterious One & Earth
<b>Culture Bearer</b>	First Farmer, Weaver, Craftsmen Travelers	<u>Fu Xi</u> , <u>Shen Nung</u>	Coyote, First Man & First Woman	<u>Prometheus, Cadmos, Daidalos</u>	<u>Iktomi</u> , Black Elk
<b>Supernatural Aid; Talisman</b>	Scarf, Cryptogram	Healing Herb of six <u>wu</u> -shamans	Feather		Medicinal Herb
<b>Twin Heroes</b>	Travelers as Twins (born from sky and earth)		Monster-Slayer & Water-born (Son and grandson of Sun)	<u>Castor &amp; Polydeukes (Dioskouroi)</u>	-

## 1.2 The Hero’s Journey

Recent interviews with thatgamecompany’s co-founder Jenova Chen have demonstrated *Journey*’s overall story-structure and engagement with the Hero’s Journey or monomyth pattern, developed by the renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).<sup>1</sup> I have outlined the structure, charting points of correspondence between *Journey* and Campbell’s hero cycle (Campbell 1964 [1945], 245) (Table 1 & 3). I further demonstrate the cycle’s own affinity to rites of passage as studied by Arnold Van Gennep in his monograph. Knowing the in-built pattern of the Hero Journey serves as a point of departure into myth’s operation within the game world, while Van Gennep’s work illuminates ritual’s own contribution and relationship with myth and avenues of game-play. Just as Campbell did not see the monomyth as a rigid storytelling formula, the world of *Journey* also encourages wandering, exploration, perusal and *paidia* (See Caillois, 1961) (i.e., spontaneous play).

Figure 2: Hero’s Journey & Great Vision Tapestry<sup>2</sup>

1 Ohannessian 2012, para. 5: “What we did was borrowed the Hero’s Journey, Joseph’s Campbell’s work, and the three-act structure from filmmaking, the transformation of the character. So you get two players who will go through the transformation of life together.”  
 2 See [https://getsatisfaction.com/thatgamecompany/topics/story\\_tapestry\\_art](https://getsatisfaction.com/thatgamecompany/topics/story_tapestry_art) . Retrieved September 5, 2013.





Table 3. *Rite de passage*, Monomyth, *Journey* Three-fold Pathway

<i>Rite of Passage</i>	<i>Hero's Journey</i>	<i>Journey</i>
<b>Separation</b>	Departure	
<u>Preliminal</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Call to Adventure</li> <li>• Supernatural Aid/Helpers</li> <li>• Crossing Threshold</li> <li>• Wonder Journey → Belly of the Whale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start Play</li> <li>• Cloth/Star Symbol Talisman</li> <li>• First Gateway</li> <li>• [Pit with <u>Dracomachine</u>]</li> </ul>
<b>Transition</b>	Initiation	
<u>Liminal</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Road of Trials</li> <li>• Atonement</li> <li>• Apotheosis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Game Course (<u>agôn</u>)</li> <li>• Pure Light; [White Garb status]</li> <li>• Embodied Celestial Ascent</li> </ul>
<b>Incorporation</b>	Return	
<u>Postliminal</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magic Flight</li> <li>• Rescue from Without</li> <li>• Return Threshold</li> <li>• Master of Two Worlds</li> <li>• Freedom to Live</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celestial Descent to Beginning</li> <li>• [Revived by Ancestors]</li> <li>• Credits</li> <li>• (Re)Play (with foreknowledge of the path)</li> <li>• Freedom to Play Any Level (Nexus Hub)</li> </ul>

Sources: Van Gennep 1960 [1909], Campbell 1968 [1945], *Journey* 2012

### 1.3 Themes and Motifs

To assist in the comparative study of mythic elements, I have drawn from the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* by Stith Thompson who further expanded the pioneering Tale-type system of classifying folktales originally developed by the folklorist Antti Arne. Their collaborative efforts resulted in the A-T (Aarne-Thompson) system used to this day. Such a comparative tool enables the mythographer and folklorist to identify motifs and cross-reference them discovering more nuanced motifs and

their occurrences in other tales from around the world. Finding the nuances are essential, otherwise we end with too general a situation (e.g. ‘F0-199 Otherworld Journeys’, where we could arrive at more sophisticated motifs: ‘E721 Souls Journey from body’, or ‘D2121 Magic journey’ with subsequent delineations). For this study, we can then demonstrate the video game’s ability to render such motifs through simulation, representation and ergodics. This opens a level of analysis necessary to un-package the content and its shared patterns with particular traditional myths (See Table 2). I have cited motifs throughout the article and have compiled an index as supplementary material, leaving some motifs up to the reader for perusal.

Due to the dual modes of single-player and paired-player game play in *Journey*, I have found it necessary to draw on tales of both the solo path (exemplified through shamanic, poetic and philosophical texts of a common celestial ascent theme), and the paired path represented by the Hero Twin motif in particular (Navajo in detail, Dioskouric in some detail and others briefly mentioned), which itself could be classified as ‘AT 613 the two travelers’ or more comprehensively represented in Thompson’s *Motif-Index* as ‘T685 Twins.’ This tension between a shared and a private experience is, I suggest, integral to the games dynamic structure.

The aim of this study is not to be encyclopedic, but rather interdisciplinary and comparative in practice to create a space for further inquiry and application for video games as expressive vehicles of traditional lore and motifs and for the impact video games have on our inherited mythologies. There are many traditions that find representation in *Journey* that unfortunately may not be addressed here. However, I have attempted to be highly selective and monographic to address themes that are formative to the experience of the text.

#### 1.4 Simulation, Cybertext, Ergodics

Motifs in a video game are not stagnant artifacts, but are rather dynamic entities discreetly experienced in the video game world. In this regard, I suggest sustaining the integral quality of the game as a cybertext (Aarseth 1997, 21)<sup>1</sup>, which Espen Aarseth has defined as “a machine for the production of variety of expression” (Aarseth 1997, 3). These varieties invite an open system of approaches in which the user (Traveler), text (*Journey*) and machine (i.e. Playstation 3) form a reciprocal ‘feedback loop’. We may think of the motifs as ‘scriptons’ within Aarseth’s typology (Ibid., 62).

By asserting the game be approached as a cybertext, this implies that we set apart the video game medium in general as a unique configuration of the otherwise universal narrative sequences of

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1 Aarseth’s “Textual machine,” is of value to this study. It serves as a reminder of the unique position the user, text and machine feedback loop.

*Journey*'s exposition, employing Aarseth's formulation of ergodics. By ergodics, I follow Aarseth's term rather strictly, derived from the Greek *ergon* ('work') and *hodos* ('path') (Ibid., 1). With its open system of symbols and glyphs that invite perusal, a connection can be forged that *Journey* was designed to be treated as both ergodic literature and mythic text at once. He further states:

The successful ergodic work of art maintains tension and excitement while providing a path for discovery, a coming into focus of a didactic of the design and hidden principles at work in the work. (Ibid., 179)

As such, *Journey* may be approached as a text requiring traversal and navigation (literally and ergodically) that is in-formed through a mythological structure. A path of discovery arises in the revelation of episodes in the Ancestor's history, which eventually link up into a single wall (what I call the 'Great Vision' episode). A rectification of the text is achieved by actions performed by the player/user.

### 1.5 Evocative Game Design and Poetic Gameplay

Evocation emerges from aesthetics, mediation and mimesis, which encompass the outer skin and art direction of *Journey*, i.e. visual content, soundscape, and musical score. The mythic architecture and geography of the game space are clues as to how its relatively simple storyline was able to achieve resonance both amongst the gaming community and beyond. Our main task here is to open up the material to its manifest traditional content. To retain the *experience* of the game on the visceral level, I will argue *Journey*'s shared cadence with shamanism, our species' oldest technique and pathway to the sacred realm.

### 1.6 Many modes, one action

I will be engaging with the motifs and myths of a select few particular cultures and their wisdom traditions, demonstrating how each represents the single action of ascension. While each medium conveys the congruent action, how each does so differs according to the nature of the texts mode of rhetoric and to the unique symbolic inflections pertaining to each culture. For example, philosophical treatises tend towards allegory, direct analogy and signs espousing the contemplative state, while poetic renderings give form through metaphor, allusion and fertilization of the imagination. Myths tend to consolidate, concentrate and intensify such approaches, while also mirroring back to their given cultures an image of the world and its ways. *Journey*, as a cinematic videogame (the mode of simulation, ergodics, immersion, and story combined), asks of the user to witness and participate in the action and to be in play – it thus, exists within its own unique

province and discourse, i.e. within the gaming culture. And yet from these seemingly disparate disciplines and traditions there underlie a common scheme, storyline and configuration expressed.

## 2 Co-creating Spiritual a Spiritual Game World

As a Traveler in *Journey*, the player begins *in medias res*, seated in meditation posture in a desert. Hints are given as to the subsequent steps with a brief, user-friendly, integrated tutorial of the basic controls of the game, which use the PlayStation 3 controllers Tilt to pan and traditional stick or direction pads. From there the action buttons are simply delegated to X/R1 (jump) and O (call). Although the controls are minimal, they are not lacking and match up with the overall feel of the game.

### 2.1 A Shift in Perspective: From Single- to Mutli-player

When the Traveler begins making his or her way through the stages, a new arrival may enter the game world. The being differs from all other zoomorphic cloths encountered thus far, for the new Traveler is not artificial, but human. (S)He bears a striking resemblance to the player's protagonist, dressed in a similar androgynous garb. Depending on the temperament of this new 'Other', they may very well demonstrate a knack for showing the ropes. But, as *Journey* seeks to metaphorically represent the comings-and-goings of life acquaintances, Travelers link up, and also diverge (N772). This is reflected in the list of fellow players revealed during the credits.

There are three main visual indicators of another player's rank: 1) Scarf length, indicating the span of time a player has stayed alive in game time, 2) patterned adornments on the cloak, and 3) a white garb, symbolizing growing similitude with Ancestors. These encounters can be slightly jarring to the neophyte Traveler, since it is the first experience of another human in an otherwise barren landscape of ruins inhabited only first by zoomorphic AI cloths.

Communication between Travelers is reduced to a single form of gesture: a musical calling that emanates a luminous cryptogram. There is much room left for the player to figure out as to the exact nature of the cryptogram, nonetheless the call-symbol will be revealed as a critical form of communication and search signal (akin to sonar, and echo-location). For the game development team this marked a transition in the kind of games they were known for: *fIOW*<sup>2</sup> (2006) and *Flower*<sup>3</sup>

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2 Thatgamecompany (2011, Feb. 18) *fIOW Trailer* Retrieved October 31, 2013 from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTVDSOnPLns>

3 Thatgamecompany (2011, Feb. 18) *Flower Trailer* Retrieved October 31, 2013 from:

(2009) debuted thatgamecompany's style of relaxing ambient *solo* gameplay with sweeping musical accompaniment. Such is the situation with *Journey*, with the significant addition of a multiplayer experience, made possible via the *Playstation Network*. In a larger sense, the subject matter from game to game shares a certain narrative of mythological inquiries: *fIOW* sent players into the depths of an inner cosmos of evolution, *Flower* had players ride the wind across pastures, and now with *Journey* there is the human-centered quest up to the celestial heavens.

The solitary experience can shift spontaneously as another Traveler happens to enter the game world; here is where the quest becomes interesting. *Journey* was subtly designed with a key principle: refiguring the experience of the 'Other'. What's more, it works towards re-visioning the *presence* of 'Other' in the virtual gaming world. In a recent article published in *The Escapist Magazine*, Jenova Chen, co-founder of thatgamecompany, declared that *Journey* is "a game about strangers," subtly designed to "look at that person as another human being" (Vanderwall 2013). One can hear a touch of the philosopher Martin Buber's words: "If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things" (Buber 1958). Jenova Chen and the development team seem to be mindful of this kind of principle, developing the game as a counterpoint to the long-standing "myth" of video games as violence-inducing and objectifying of fellow players (Vanderwall 2013). Instead, the world was developed to evoke emergent meaningful bonds (Sheffield 2013).

## 2.2 Beyond the Game: Player as Storyteller

In a multifaceted endeavor *Journey* has attempted to forge meaningful bonds by attempting to facilitate an emotional experience for users, which in itself has resulted in players telling stories about their rounds of play. Entire sites dedicated to the stories of playing *Journey* have come about from grass-root communities where fan art and cosplay are woven in with personal stories and commemorative screenshots of companions met.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the game is the raw source of experience, later mediated by storytelling that fluidly stays alive circulating among players and fans with more ease and rapidity than ever, in part due to our evolving online communities. Mythology can be felt and expressed from designers to players in a transaction of what we might call *e-cocreative* communities (Jenkins 2003). However, given that *Journey* is still a relatively young fictive world, I suggest we develop an understanding of its purport from the inside out, for it is first and foremost a gaming experience, and second an experience narrated.

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1oZnf3475c> ;

4 See <http://journeystories.tumblr.com>

### 2.3 Respawn, Rebirth, Reincarnation

When the player completes *Journey* in its sublime finale, one fascinating event occurs while the credits role. As a transfigured star, the Traveler is jettisoned back to the very beginning of the game. The hub station then enables the player to step into any stage of the game. At this point, it can be inferred, if not from prior events (e.g. list of travelers met), that any other Traveler met during an initial run of *Journey* was another human with possible foreknowledge of the terrain. Furthermore, if the player keeps an eye towards the sky, shooting stars can be observed. In other words, the online component has been seamlessly woven in. This subtle change to the games storyline in a way transforms the concept of ‘respawning’ into a form of ‘reincarnating,’ within the mythic world of the Travelers. Players become, as it were, keepers and storytellers of the virtual lore themselves. For the tradition amongst the Ancestor and Traveler is kept alive not by a highly sophisticated language, nor even through any verbal expression or articulation, but rather through visions, images and symbols: a visual canon. Player’s in this configuration complete what’s missing by voicing their experiences beyond the game (i.e. player as storyteller).

### 2.4 Numinous Players: Re-visioning the Other

Conventional means of communication and identity found in multiplayer games – i.e. messaging, voice-chat, and player-names – are curiously absent in *Journey*. Instead, players are left with a single chime that emits various melodic notes. The overt design by the developers seems to be a cleansing of language, for language is, by nature, a potentially divisive force (hence, the confusion of tongues). By radically reducing communication, players are situated in a more spiritual, ineffable modality that is markedly universal. It is as if the game urges players beyond words into a shared experience of the numinous, wherein language is playfully renegotiated. By reducing the nominal, textual and vocal elements of conventional gaming rhetoric, players move out of the realm of signs and into the more expansive and playful realm of symbols. Stripped of identity, orientation and even gender, Travelers collaborate with one another in a *participation mystique*. Rudolph Otto, theologian and scholar of comparative religion, sought a similar task reprising holiness in the study of religion noting that “For the ‘creature-feeling’ and the sense of dependence to arise in the mind the ‘numen’ [*wholly other*] must be experienced as present” (Otto 1923, 8-11). *Journey*’s ability to draw players together in a shared space reconfigures the apparatus of language and confronts them with an alien environment. By reducing convention, a new *felt experience* emerges.

## 2.5 Simulacra, Contemplation & Shamanism

Sacred traditions from around the world tend to agree on the general directive of the soul in a state of contemplation (Eliade 1979., pp. 477 & 482). The single driving action of *Journey*: traveling to and ascending the Twined Peak, finds echoes in many wisdom traditions and tales as the soul’s journey (D2120, D2135, E721). Drawing on celestial ascent as a metaphoric vehicle of the vision quest, purification and contemplation we may examine the *ascent* or *anos hodos* (‘upward path’) from two major branches: philosophical discourse and shamanism (See Table 4).

Table 4. Celestial Ascent Storyline over Five Texts

<i>Journey</i> (Traveler’s tale)	Chariot Allegory	Cave Allegory	<i>Yuan You, Far-Off</i> Journey	Black Elk’s Great Vision
Sand dunes, facing Sun (East?) Bound Game Path	Sensible Realm Upward Path	Underground Dwelling Road to Upper World	Grieved by worldliness Heaven Bound	Fallen ill Path up into Clouds
Flight gained from celestial energy, winged cloak Fabric Creatures & Draco-machines	<i>Psyche</i> as Chariot pulled by winged horses, feathered soul Procession of Zeus, gods and daimons	Forced Ascent Celestial Bodies	Chariot pulled by Eight Dragons Pure Ones <i>zhenren</i> & Immortals <i>xianren</i>	Spotted Eagle as Guide Thunder-Beings
Meeting the 6 Ancestors Final Realm of limitless energy Summit of Twined Peak	Intelligible Realm	Upper World	Realm of Primal Spirit	Meeting with 6 Grandfathers Rainbow Gate World Mountain (Harney Peak), world hoop(s)
Pure Light	<i>Hyperurania</i>	Behold the Sun, source of time/season-cycles, illumination	Purity, vision of Nothing	
Star Descent (Re)Start Game	Shooting Star ( <i>Timaeus</i> & <i>Rep.</i> ) Metempsychosis	<i>Katabasis</i> , Descent Return to Cave	Great Beginning	Return guided by Spotted Eagle Return to Tribe with Herb

### **Plato’s Allegories of Ascent**

In his *Dialogues* the Athenian philosopher Plato (c.427-347 BCE) was prone to use allegories and myths to express what could not be arrived at directly through straight, argumentative discourse (*logos*). Instead, he relied on *mythoi* and, hesitantly, allegory (his *hyponoia*) to impart core concepts such as the intelligible realm of forms (*eidos*) and ideas. He often composed them as tales of ascension. The Allegory of the Cave from the *Republic* (*Rep.* 514a–520a), centers on a prisoners journey to the sun (previously formulated as the source of good) (Ibid. 508a-509c), and subsequent

return to the cave. A true philosopher could achieve elevation to (and expedient recollection of) the intelligible realm and the Good (*agathon*) through knowledge, contemplation and the shedding of the gross body and the cultivation of the wingéd soul (*psyche*).

In *Phaedrus*, Plato's Socrates likens the soul (*psyche*) to a winged chariot with a good and bad horse (*Phaedrus*, 246a-b). Cultivating the good horse compelled the chariot aloft until it reached the intelligible realm of the divinities (*theoi*), ideas and forms (*eidos*). Within *Phaedrus* Plato goes on to theorize the process of *metempsychosis* (*Phaedrus*, 249a-b), which he demonstrates throughout the *Dialogues*, such as the closing sections of the *Republic* (621b) (e.g. 'Myth of Er') and within *Timaeus* (43d-c), likening the soul's birth and assignment to a shooting star. For Plato humanities original nature and origin dwelt in a celestial ancestry, wherein the individual must find accord with the rhythms of the universe (*Timaeus*, 90a-d). Within Plato's discussion of the winged soul of *Phaedrus*, lies correlative material with *Journey*, offering a philosopher's rendition of our central motif: celestial ascent. However, in *Journey* the player is the animating principle, the soul of the Traveler who puts forth the effort and *agôn* ('struggle') (*Phaedrus*, 247b).

### **Shamanism and the Holy Peoples**

An older spiritual tradition that has rippled down through philosophical schools like Platonism and into *Journey* is shamanism. Mircea Eliade defines a shaman as "a man [person] who has immediate, concrete experiences with gods and spirits," in efforts to achieve a *healing* (Eliade 1979, 88). Eliade further states:

Healer and psychopomp, the shaman is these because he commands the technique of ecstasy – that is, because his soul can safely abandon his body and roam at vast distances, can penetrate the underworld and rise to the sky. (Eliade 1979, 182)

Christina Pratt elaborates on Eliade's 'narrow' definition, amending the shaman's unique attainment of *not only* 'spirit flight' in the spirit world, *but also* attaining the ability to embody spirits to administer healing in the physical world (Pratt 2007a, xxii). The clearest cinematic moments that are markedly shamanistic in *Journey* are the Visions where the Traveler comes in contact with celestial beings (Ancestors).

Shamans in ancient times and in living traditions today often were (and are) keepers of myth as *sacred narratives*. Through the handed-down myths shamans establish a lineage, for initiates enabling them to keep a direct connection with the ancestral realm. In this regard, the Ancestors of *Journey* fulfill the role of the Holy People found frequently in shamanic traditions, that is, initiating neophytes into the source, course and destiny of life, while the Traveler(s) as neophytes keep the tradition alive through participation in the rite. A critical feat of the shaman is his or hers ability to experience the invisible realm (usually through flight), return back into the visible realm and



formulate the experience into a transmittable healing module, be it oral storytelling, myth and ritual – i.e. creating a visceral road map of the spirit world and naming its denizens.

For example, in Chinese tradition there exist various degrees of celestial or holy persons. Two such beings often encountered in mountains (F460) are the *xianren* 仙人 immortal person, prone to flight, and *shenren* 神人 holy/spirit person. A third being is the *zhenren* 真人 realized person, a romanticized peak individual of ancient times. Often conflated with the *shenren*, the *zhenren* was one who coursed through life in accord with the Tao, able to “climb the highest places and not be frightened” (Watson (Trans.) 1968, 77). One famous tale of a run-in with a *shenren* of Mount Guye occurs in the Taoist text the *Zhuangzi* (c.300BCE):

With skin like ice or snow, gentle and shy like a young girl. He doesn't eat the five grains, but sucks the wind, drinks the dew, climbs up on the clouds and mist, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond the four seas. By concentrating his spirit, he can protect creatures from sickness and plague and make the harvest plentiful. (Ibid, 33)

This remains one of the few instances where a *shenren* is described in detail, garbed in the fabric and language of myth. Inhabiting a mountain, the *shenren* as well as their close relatives the *xianren* contribute to our engagement with Sacred Mountain motif explored more fully later (5). From pure aesthetics the Ancestors of *Journey* take on a similar appearance: adorned in white garments, haunting a sacred mountain (F460.1.4.1), but with a more careful reading the *shenren*, like the Ancestors seeks to preserve, guide and vitalize life-cycles and agriculture.

In a different strain of Chinese tradition is the shaman-based poetry of Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period (475 BCE to 221 BCE) with his anthology the *Chuci* or *Songs of the South*, compiled in the later Han Dynasty by Wang Yi (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE). Featured in the anthology is a particular poem *Yuan You* (“Far-off Journey”) which gives a detailed poetic rendering of both shamanic ecstasy and celestial ascent.<sup>1</sup> In sum, the narrator's soul partakes of an out-of-body experience (E721), visiting mythical sites (e.g. Hanging Gardens of Kun Lun) and beings (*zhenren*), and Feathered Men (*Yuan You*, ln. 71. (Trans. Hawkes); See also Hawkes, 2011, 201)<sup>2</sup> on the Hill of Cinnabar. One stanza reads:

I honoured the wondrous powers of the Pure Ones [*zhenren*],  
And those of past ages who had become Immortals [*xian*].  
They departed in the flux of change and vanished from men's sight,

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1 Although the entire poem may not be addressed here, I encourage the reader to engage in a reading of the *Yuan You*, alongside a session of *Journey*.

2 Hawkes offers commentary that treats the Feathered Men as a title for a ‘Taoist Adept’, while the cinnabar is near synonymous with alchemy. Here, I suggest, we may also glimpse shamanistic undertones.

Leaving a famous name that endures after them. (Hawkes (Trans.) 2011 [1959], p.195, ln.25-28.)

We have similar imagery depicted in the relationship between Ancestors and Travelers in their shared legacy. Such sentiments, however, were and are grounded in very human experiences across the world, as any individual may feel when remembering the deceased in deep reflection.

### ***The Six Ancestors***

*Journey* presents a very specific quantity of six Ancestors. What might we make of this? Perhaps it can be ascertained with the following analogues: In the mythological text *Shanhaijing* (a text discussed in more detail below), we have a brief passage mentioning the six shamans atop the Kun Lun Mountains: “East of the Beast-Facing-East are the wu-shamans Peng, Di, Yang, Lu, Fan and Xiang, who bear the corpse of Yayu, each holding the Never-Dying Herb to revive him” (Trans. Strassberg 2002, 193). In a similar shamanic strain, the Lakota Souix Holy Man and Healer Black Elk shared one of the most comprehensive accounts of a vision,<sup>3</sup> In the account Black Elk describes in detail a meeting with the Six Grandfathers (representing the six sacred directions) in a vision set to initiate him into a direct ancestral lineage as the healer of his people (he himself becoming the sixth embodying his doppelgänger). The user of *Journey* encounters six Ancestors, who congregate to rejuvenate the fatigued Traveler atop the snowy heights before launching him/her into a cinematic celestial ascent to the final climb of the Sacred Twined Peak. The similarities are suggestive, placing *Journey* in deeply evocative engagement with an old sacred path laid down since our species’ first breakthrough into the invisible, spiritual, mythological and virtual realm.

### **3 Ritual: Recurrence and Transmission**

As I alluded to earlier the work of the renowned scholar of world mythology, Joseph Campbell, played a formative role in the patterning of *Journey*. One need just listen to Austin Wintory’s musical scoring to understand how multifaceted Campbell’s work impacted the production of *Journey*. Drawing influence from Campbell’s research main book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1945) and inspiration from *The Power of Myth* (1988), Chen duly noted the scholar’s ability to reveal the Hero Journey Cycle’s proliferation amongst world mythologies.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, *Journey* readily expresses a milieu of cultural symbolic forms.

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3 First attested in Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), 17-36, and later in a raw and complete compilation in R.J. DeMallie’s *The Sixth Grandfather* (1985), 111-142.

4 J. Chen (personal communication, April 8, 2013)

### 3.1 Simulated Rite of Passage

Campbell's basic Hero Journey sequence of *separation-initiation-return* was heavily influenced by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep's work on ritual patterns. In Van Gennep's classic work *The Rites of Passage* (1960 [1909]), he analyzed the impact that ritual had in inducing states of *liminality* (from the Latin *limen*) or threshold experiences that guide individuals during moments of transition through the course of life. Deemed *rites de passage*, Gennep further partitioned them into three main strands: rites of separation, rites of transition and rites of incorporation, or preliminal, liminal and postliminal respectively. Usually a talisman, sign or adornment is given to the initiate (as traveler) as they undergo departure (Van Gennep 1960, 37). Campbell's innovation was in translating the ritual pattern back into myths of the hero, reporting their proliferation. *Journey* takes the next step and translates the ritual/myth cycle into participatory media – i.e. offering a *limes* ('pathway') to the divine. Hence, it can be theorized that the Traveler's experience is that of participating in a ritual specifically rendered as a shamanistic initiation (Prologue-Tower), which is consummated by the Great Vision and Celestial Ascent (cinematic climax).

## 4 Molding a Myth-minded Game World

Classical mythology, especially in its Homeric inflection, has influenced the video game medium since its 1972 domestic inception as the *Magnavox Odyssey*.<sup>5</sup> Prototypical structures like the labyrinth of Daedalus have provided a template for cunning level-designers with a Thesean user-ship. Our latest technological achievements allow for hyper-real miniature cosmos to be constructed and explored. Myths can now be coded and rendered in action within a virtual space of fluidity, immersion and (most importantly) play. Conversely, myths do not always point to a desirable truth, but to hard realities of limits – i.e. game rules. In other words, they can impose structures as much as reveal vistas of the imagination.

### 4.1 A Definition of Myth

Before proceeding any further, a definition of 'myth' may be in order. It can be a polarizing term ranging from profane disproven theories (mere fictions) to sacred and/or authoritative insights. *The American Heritage Dictionary 5<sup>th</sup> ed.* (2011) defines myth as:

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5 The first commercial home video game console being *Magnavox Odyssey* (Atari, 1972)

1. A traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society.

To provide an apparatus for the function of myth and its use in *Journey*, I suggest we consider Jaan Puhvel's circumambient approach to the content:

In myth are expressed the thought patterns by which a group formulates self-cognition and self-realization, attains self-knowledge and self-confidence, explains its own source and being and that of its surroundings, and sometimes tries to chart its destinies. (See Puhvel 1987, 2)

Myth attempts to straddle the tension between immanence and transcendence, hence such occupation with metaphor, metaphysics and the virtual. One might also think of the challenges faced by the shaman in trying to communicate an ecstatic experience - often this is when a myth enters in as *a plastic expression of an extraordinary experience*. Networked together into whole systems, myths form mythologies, becoming near synonymous with 'comprehensive worldviews' or *Weltanschauung*. As such, they often become so deeply entrenched in a culture that they may no longer be referred to as 'mere myth' consciously within the group, but rather sacred truths, narratives and histories (See Lincoln, 2000).

## 4.2 Myth in the Game World

Myth, within J.Puhvel's above perimeters, finds its place in *Journey* as the sacred history of the Ancestors *and* as an image of the world for Travelers to seek meaning in the inherited wasteland. It enables Travelers to reconcile the ruined material culture, with a continuum steeped in bygone lore. Following Maria Beatrice Bittarello's recent argument for the confluence of the mythic and virtual realms (See Bittarello 2008, 252-253), I suggest we consider *Journey*'s world akin to such a typology, that is to say, approaching the game world as a plane wherein "*ordinary actions [occur] in an extraordinary context*" (Ibid. 259). A significant addendum would be that *Journey* exercises a tight synthesis of the mythic and ergodic, wherein users fall into accord (and perhaps even intimacy) with each 'Other' via co-questing. That is to say, a pathway and plotline is more consciously mapped for user-experience. It should also be reiterated that Traveler(s) play out, or simulate the myth as lived reality, while users are once-removed in a place of tension as 'observer/participant' of/within the Traveler culture. This, I would add, is a significant innovation of the video game medium and virtual spaces in general: they allow the dynamics of myth to be observed, felt and played with by the user within emergent complexity.

### 4.3 Metaphor of a human life-cycle & Mythological Systems

The pathway on which the monomyth, and *rites de passage* unfold, I suggested earlier, operates on the human-life cycle metaphor in *Journey* (See Ohannessian 2012, para. 11; See Sheffield 2013). In this aspect, the game path grapples with very primal, archetypal patterns that have been handed down through various cultures' myths. By heeding the primacy of the organic model in the otherwise synthetic game world, the developers of *Journey* seem to further implicate Aristotle's notion in his *Poetics* that a story (*muthos*) must be conceived in similitude to a single living organism – that is to say, its unity of action must be in sync with the whole and its parts over a three part sequence (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1459a 17-20).

It has recently been proposed by Michael Witzel (2012) that the storyline and its affinity with the human life-cycle may be traceable to a much older innovation in story composition dating to about 40,000 bce. He suggests an insight was reached, namely by shamans, that our human life-cycle correlated with the life-cycle of the cosmos to form a “narrational scheme,” with comprehensive explaining power. Mythologies (creation myths to eschatological myths) form(ed) the path of root metaphors, symbols and images to express such cycles from the outset. In sum, the storyline helped our early ancestors come to terms with the conditions of existence: birth, life, death (and in some cases rebirth, reincarnation or metempsychosis).

### 4.4 Mythic Arcs and Elements of the Ancestors & Travelers

As the Ancestor's history attests (*Visions* 1-5), generations have their own life-cycles, but since the user lacks reference to a specific quantity of time or duration, the ancestral realm truly exists in a *mythic* epoch partitioned only arbitrarily by episodes. We learn that the Ancestors started out as peaceful, agriculture-based peoples, but succumbed to power, corruption, violence and war resulting in the rise of great draco-machines (e.g. *Visions* 3-5; B11.2.1.2). Following Aristotle, we could phrase it as a shift from history to epic: from the *narration of a period of time* to the *simulation and/or representation of a single action* (*Poetics* 1459a 20). In other words, the *Visions* narrate the history of a particular succession of ages,<sup>6</sup> while the career of a Traveler rests on a universal path. Together, they form the intimations of a near entire mythological system. Woven into the Tapestry, Murals and landscape are salient symbols, gestures and customs that help define a mythic space:

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6 *Visions* 1-4 follow a succession similar to A1101 'The four Ages of the world', which is often seen as a decay from gold, silver, bronze and iron. The loss of a “Golden Age” (A1101.1) occurs with its attempted retrieval. The Ages are vividly described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1.89-150.

### ***Astral Symbol***

From the Confluence Myth 1, we learn that star energy was harnessed by the symbols (the stars are literally the symbols), which seed the soil yielding cornfields (*Vision 1*). Through the invention of weaving, and the embroidering of the symbols, the early ‘Artisan’ Ancestor was then able to complete the work of making the celestial energy a viable terrestrial resource. Mythologically, the Astral Symbol serves as a reminder to Travelers of their origins in the Heavens (i.e. Plato’s ‘celestial ancestry’), while practically serving as a beacon for communicating with fellow Travelers. Earlier I suggested the stars function operates similarly to the Platonic cosmos, as those players who reach the end embody a descending star.

### ***Fabled Fabric***

The fabric both serves as the courier of loaned celestial energy, a bridge between buildings, and the one-piece garment worn by Travelers and Ancestors. This introduces a suggestive allusion to the value of fabric as a symbol of yoking, weaving, and binding, lending itself to the notion of audio and visual *poiesis* or poetics. For as the game itself demonstrates, the fabric becomes energized by touch between Travelers, and itself charged by the vocative emanation of the Astral Symbol by the Traveler. Throughout the game, the fabric also functions as a bridge and ladder. Here, we may return to our discussion of shamanism, since the motif of the bridge/ladder factors into the entire orchestration of rites and metaphoric means of celestial ascent (Eliade 1979, 483). However, as the cinematic celestial ascent takes place, the Traveler loses his or her scarf (V81.2), perhaps suggesting the relinquishing of temporary celestial empowerment for an experience of the divine source directly: celestial embodiment, i.e., apotheosis.

Whether in the prehistory of the Ancestors or the game-time of the Traveler, the fabric remains constant as a symbol of *poiesis*, or a fabricating and weaving of code into song or myth. Simply put, the world is brought to life by creativity. Each note a Traveler/Ancestor) sings animates the fabric, activating the old murals and grave markers.

### ***The Way of Song***

The multimedia experience needn’t remain stuck on the visual aspect of *Journey*, our symbolic reading of the fabric echoes in *Journey*’s soundscape. Since we are dwelling in the parlance of mythology, it seems necessary to give credence to the art of poetics, song, and Oral Tradition for they are some of the major modes cross-culturally of how myths get handed down. A prime example is the Aboriginal sacred practice named ‘songlines’, (dream-tracks) of Dreamtime, a state where the Ancestral realm and its beings commune with present day Aborigines. The peoples ‘sing the land’ as a form of ancestral worship and traverse the dream-tracks laid down by said Ancestors during creation as they themselves sing the land into existence (Chatwin 1987; Pratt 2007b, 149). In Homer’s *Odyssey* 8, we get a glimpse into a similar arrangement in the bard’s power founded on the

gift of “the Muse [who] taught the *paths of song* [*oimas*]” (emphasis added) (Trans. Murray 1945. *Odyssey* 8.481-482). The Muses, being the daughters of Mnemosyne (‘Memory’), come to the bard seeking to propagate the way of the Immortals and Ancestors. And so in *Journey*, players sing the land back into existence, guided by their Ancestor’s dictations. Similarly, Horace, in his *Ars Poetica*, states “In song oracles were given, and the way of life was shown” (Trans. Fairclough 1970; Horace *Ars Poetica* 403-404)<sup>7</sup>. Song has remained a way of saving the past from being forgotten, that is, letting it fall prey to Mnemosyne’s opponent, Lethe (‘Oblivion’, or ‘Forgetfulness’).

### **Maize: A Symbol of Transformation**

One of the early salient visual motifs of the murals and tapestry of the Ancestor Myth (Visions 1-3) is the imagery of maize or corn crops. Stylistically, the entire tapestry and wall murals speak to motifs found in world art from sand paintings and woven blankets of the Navajo to the Överhogdal tapestries of the Viking Age to the mimetic allusion to 8-bit graphics – i.e. visual syncretism. And like these traditional pieces of folk art, the mural reflects the myth that the Travelers are *born* into.<sup>8</sup> By this, I mean that the narrative of *Journey* does not set in, nor become self-revelatory until the Visions of the mural/tapestry storyline coalesce with the user’s path.

Further, the maize literally offered sustenance, energy and fuel for industry. Simply put: it transformed the Ancestor’s way of life. As mentioned above, the Ancestors capitalized on the fabric to harness the astral energy called forth by song.<sup>9</sup> The iconography and its narrative implications suggest that attention should be given to the crops deeper significance. Here, we may turn to cultural myths to flesh out its symbolic value.

Among the Navajo (Diné) peoples of the Four Corners area of Southwestern North America corn or maize<sup>10</sup> frequently recurs as a symbol of fertility and new life.<sup>11</sup> Within the context of the Traveler(s), the internal myth of the mural/tapestry functions as a cautionary tale, a history of the Traveler Peoples revealing a stratagem on how to ascend by way of the crops’ energy source and the fabric. The allusion to corn also indicates a deep engagement with the cyclical aspect of nature when viewed through the perspective of agriculture: the seed must die to the earth for transformation to occur and new life to emerge. Such knowledge often revealed through mystery

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7 “Dictae per carmina sortes, et vitae monstrata via est.”

8 For a fascinating grass-roots interpretation of the mural see DAISHI’s Thread: *Lore Theory*  
<http://www.thatgamecompany.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=10957#p10957>

9 One may think literally of corn in the form of Bio-ethanol as a fuel source.

10 “Corn in Navajo Traditional Life” (2013). *Twin Rocks Trading Post*. Bluff, Utah. Retrieved from  
<http://www.twinrocks.com/legends/72-corn-in-navajo-traditional-life.html>.

11 It is also worth acknowledging the greater significance the Maize (Corn) Mythologies on Native American traditions beyond the Navajo. See Redish, L., Lewis, O. 2009: “Native American Maize (Corn) Mythology.” *Native Languages of the Americas*. Retrieved from <http://www.native-languages.org/legends-corn.htm>

cults and parables seems to recur throughout the storyline of the Ancestors history, that is, a predilection with birth, life, death and rebirth – or the manifold emergence of the life-cycle metaphor. For example, what was the crop field for the Ancestor's became the graveyard for the Travelers.

On an immediate level the symbol of the maize and its predilection with transformation seem to suggest a commentary by the game developers, challenging the 'myth' (pejorative) of video games as violent and escapist. In a forthcoming article on the significance of maize mythology within Native American culture and the crops reception in myth over time, Paul G. Zolbrod argues that the progression from hunter-gathering to agriculture marked a shift in the mitigation ('sublimation') of violence (*in press*). In a similar gesture and trajectory might the rhetoric of *Journey* allude to a similar complex of symbols on which maize is yet again used as a subversive tool? Perhaps more acutely: are we ready to give video games and their developers authority to defend the medium via the medium?

#### 4.5 Hero Twins in Quest

Playing *Journey* with a companion opens the experience out from the Hero's Journey to that of Heroes Journey, or more eloquently put: the quest of the Hero Twin's. Twins in quest is a prolific motif (AT 303, A515.1.1, T685), holding tremendous value in particular for Native American traditions. The Cherokee tale, Selu the Corn Maiden, is one such case that brings together the motifs of birth/death, maize and the twins (Ferguson, 2001). The twin brothers born of Corn Maiden seek out violence against their mother who then offers herself as sacrifice, becoming the first maize bestowed on humans. There are significant parallels between the Hero Twin storyline of *Journey* and the career of the Mayan Twins Hunapu and Xibalbanque. In sum, the twin's fathers One Hunapu and Seven Hunapu (also twins) play a lethal game with the denizens of the House of Death, Xibalba, ending in their sacrifice. Hunapu and Xbalanque descend and ultimately defeat the Lords of Xibalba through the artistry of transformation, thus saving their fathers (Tedlock 1996, 91-142). Culturally, the Mayan twins came to symbolize maize itself. We also have the famous Divine Twins of the Navajo, who offer a compelling analogue with *Journey* that can be developed in some detail.

##### ***Diné Bahane' and the Navajo Hero Twins (Naayee Nezghani & Tobajishchini)***

The *Diné Bahane'* (Navajo Creation Story) features one of the richest epics of a people's emergence from a primordial chthonic domain to a sophisticated human society. It is important to acknowledge that their story is alive and well today as a living oral tradition, albeit regrettably elders struggle to pass on the traditional stories to younger generations. Paul G. Zolbrod provides one of the fullest accounts committed to text, preceded only by Washington Matthews' *Navaho Legends* (1897). In



the Fifth World of the Emergence cycle, we have the myth of the Hero Twins born to vanquish the Monsters (*Binaaye'*) plaguing the community. The myth, as recorded in the joint effort of Jeff King, Maud Oakes and Joseph Campbell in *Where the Two Came to Their Father* (1943), offers valuable contextualization to the legends used in war ceremonials performed for young Navajo men in preparation for serving during World War II specifically. Campbell would later go on to use the Navajo Twins as exemplary models several times throughout *Hero* (Campbell 1945, 69-71, 93, 131-133).

The affinity of the heroic life of the Navajo Twins and two Travelers in *Journey* prompted my initial research. The visual presentation of two seemingly identical figures on a dune facing towards a mountain and sun was nothing short of a mythic image. Like the Navajo Twins, Traveler's of *Journey* heed a call to ascend a holy mountain. And like the Navajo legend, Travelers are guided by the wind (Navajo: *Nich'I* Wind-spirit). Instead of relying on invisible walls, or objects to block players, the use of wind suggests a subtle presence or animated principle guiding players – a simulated spirit as it were. In the legend *Nilch'I* accompanies the Navajo Twins throughout their quest to the Father, *Johanaa'ei* the Sun, much like in *Journey* where wind both helps (and challenges), but is nevertheless a major factor to the simulated atmosphere.

A key theme woven throughout *Journey* and the Navajo legend is the deferment of identity, and the aid of a talisman. The attainment or revelation of identity is postponed until the end of both quests. However, the talismans of Travelers *and* the Navajo Twin's remain critical as symbols of ancestry: the talisman given to the Traveler(s) is actually a star, pointing to their celestial origin, while the Navajo Twin's talisman (given to them by Spider Woman) heralds them as *divine* sons of *Johanaa'ei* Father Sun who heed the call to travel the *Atiin Diyinii* Holy Trail (Zolbrod 1987, 197). To earn their titles (as Monster Slayer and Water Born) the Hero Twins must endure four trials before entering *Johanaa'ei*'s dwellings: 1) Pass the Clashing Rocks 2) Cross the Cutting Reeds 3) Cross between the tearing Cactuses and 4) Cross the Boiling Sand. When they earn the meeting with their father *Johanaa'ei* the Sun, they gain identity and look down at the earth from aloft:

Centered between those peaks you can see *Dzil no 'oodelee* the Traveler's Circle Mountain. Our home is very near to that place [...] And down there you can see the limits of the world that our people made after they fled the rising waters inside the earth, long before the monsters were born who have brought fear and disorder into our lives. (Ibid., 214)

As initiated young warriors, the Twins are fitted with armor and weaponry to combat the monsters for the remainder of their heroic cycle (A531).

### ***Hero Twins of World Mythology***

Beyond Native American mythologies, Divine or Hero Twins span many traditions (A515.1.1, T685). Although they appear as two individuals, Hero Twin myths often function as pedagogical

stories of the two aspects of humanity, a dyad working as a single unit. Consider such pairings as the civilized Gilgamesh the animal-man Enkidu in one of our oldest written stories (and co-quests) the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, or the Greco-Roman Dioskouroi Castor and Polydeukes (Latin: Pollux), and the extended Indo-European relatives the Ashvin's of Vedic tradition (West 2009, 186-191).

Recalling a central image of the sun *Journey*, the Divine Twins are very often sons or grandsons of the Sky God (A210); we have seen this with the Hero Twins of Dine Bahane', but also in the twins Castor and Polydeukes/Pollux whose shared title Dioskouroi translates as 'Sons of Zeus.' Most versions (Apollodorus 3.10.7 & 3.11.2) only have Polydeukes as the son of Leda and Zeus (guised as a swan) (Puhvel 1987, 141)<sup>12</sup>, while Castor was born of Leda and Tyndareus. Together the Dioskouroi were known as saviors at sea, assisting sailors by calming the sea and tempests. This is further attested in their serving as crewmembers with Jason and his crew aboard the *Argo* in their own mythic careers. They eventually became installed as the constellation Gemini ('Twins') as Polydeukes pleaded to Father Zeus to heal his near-fatally wounded mortal brother, offering up first this divine stature to die with (*thanaton syn*) Castor, instead Zeus allowed Polydeukes to split his immortality with Castor as they both alternate between the heavens and the subterranean (See Ovid's *Fasti* 5.715-720; Pindar's *Nemean Ode* 10.49-90; Homeric Hymn 33: Sons of Zeus). They are, in this regard, a fitting pair in our exploration of Hero Twin mythology.<sup>13</sup> On a practical level, the struggle of long quests can be mitigated with a fellow companion (e.g. the strength of guild quests versus going lone-wolf in Massively Multiplayer Online games and other online multiplayer genres). Along this tradition *Journey* offers a participatory Dioscouric experience, ancestry from Celestial Birds in the Myth of the Ancestors (ornithomorphous hierogamy), and both an apotheosis and a re-installment as celestial bodies.

#### 4.6 Confrontation with the Dragon

Companions come in handy when facing a dragon. The act of slaying is often required when the Hero confronts the great beast, but *Journey* adds a unique twist to this episode: emphasis on *nonviolent* solutions. The fall into the underworld places the Traveler(s) in an encounter with a subterranean dragon equipped with a search-light. *Journey* could easily have followed the well-established timeless formula, Hero-Slays-Dragon, depicted across many Indo-European, Ancient

12 Puhvel coins the term *ornithomorphous hierogamy*: the sacred marriage between a divinity (as bird) and a mortal, often tied to the birth of a hero.

13 What I find particularly compelling is the Dioscouric myth's prevalence as an emergent motif within *Journey*, especially as the white garbed, 'deified,' players assist lesser ranked players. The Dioskouroi as soothers of the sea compliment *Journey*'s calming gameplay - a signature of Thatgamecompany's titles. Also, the Twined peak as a symbol of the twins help orient the player's path, much like the astral twins (Gemini) for sailors.

Near East myths and even beyond into the mythologies of the world (B11.11). The motifs ubiquity and lineage usually traces back to a Sky God battling a Cosmic serpent, or Order : Chaos (A136.1): Indra : Vrtra, Marduk : Tiamat, Set : Apophis, Zeus : Typhon, Apollo : Python, Thor : Midgard Serpent, Baal : Yam, God : Leviathan down to the age of demigods and heroes (B11.11): Cadmus : Serpent, Heracles : Hydra, Bellephrontes : Chimaira, St. George : Dragon, Sigurd : Fafnir, Beowulf : Wyrm and even Far East Asia with Japanese Susa-no-wo : Yamato-no-orochi, and Chinese Yu the Great : Gong-gong - *Journey* could have easily taken this path. However, in a shift in the combat motif, the Traveler(s) outwit the dragon by evasive tactics rather than combative. Thus: Hero-evades-Dragon formula.<sup>14</sup> This divergence suggests a different approach to the dragon as a factor in the Hero Journey.

### **Torch-Dragon**

We find, instead, much in common with its Far East Asian breed, particularly of Chinese mythology. For the player is accompanied by the dragon even during the Celestial Ascent, which seems to illuminate the motif of the dragon surrounding the sacred mountain (AT303, B11.3.2; B11.4.1) There are intriguing parallels between the wide array of dragons of Chinese myths and the general nature and demeanor of the dragons in *Journey*, but the most compelling seems to be one in particular: Zhulong 燭龍 Torch-Dragon. Zhulong was said to reside on Mount Zhangwei according to the important ancient mythological text *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Classic of Mountain and Sea) of the 4<sup>th</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> century bce (Strassberg 2002). Qu Yuan's *Tian Wen* 天問 (Heavenly Questions) of the previously referenced *Chuci*, features the dragon also known as Zhuyin 燭陰, Torch-Shade. Within the poem there is a key line connecting the sun and Zhulong.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Wisdom of Yin**

Within *Journey*, a Zhulong-like creature fiercely imparts the wisdom of *yin* 陰 (the same character for *yin* 陰 is found in the alternative name Zhuyin 燭陰) of Taoism's essential *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. One could then arrive at the following interpretation: the dragon functions as Zhulong/Zhuyin, teaching the Traveler(s) the art of cultivating *yin* 陰); essentially, how to integrate the wisdom of the depths. From within the game it seems to point to a greater lesson ritualized and handed down by the Ancestors. Namely, how to avoid the calamity of *Vision 4*, itself seen as the backlash of letting the shadow, or the unconscious go unacknowledged. In Jungian psychology, it would be known as a catastrophic *enantiodromia* within the collective psyche – a violent reversion to the Shadow opposite. What was the rise of the Great Dragon in the Ancestor's chronicles is discovered in the

14 We aren't entirely bereft of this type of dragon, however, since it does erupt from the ground like a massive worm, which could be a play on the Old English term for dragon: *wyrm*; Old High German: *wurm* (Watkins 1995, 522).

15 *Tianwen* ln.44: 'What land does the sun not shine on and how does the Torch Dragon light it?' (trans. Hawkes, 2011).

depths by Travelers. Only now the confrontation finds sublimation in the ritualized life-course of the Traveler – the societal wounding as become a place for learning hard truths and healing.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4.7 Twined Peak and the Sacred Mountain

The sacredness of mountains (F132; F460; V1.6.1.1) is well accounted for in world religions and sacred traditions. One need just mention such stations as Mount Sinai of the Hebrew Bible, Mount Tabor, St. John of the Cross's Mount Carmel, Mount Meru abode of Lord Brahma and the Devas, Mount Olympus of Greece, Mount Fuji of Japan and the Kun Lun Mountains of China. These peaks have not only served as vitalizing centers to the spiritual life of their native peoples, but have also continued to stir the imagination generating and inspiring folk tales and mythical narratives shared world-wide. In mythological terms, the central mountain can function as the *axis mundi* (A875.1.1) where the human and divine meet. Consider the poet Hesiod's (c.700 BCE) *Theogony*, bestowed on him atop Mt. Helicon by the Muses, daughters of Mnemosyne ('Memory'). In this regard, the mountain is the locus of transformation and also where transformative achievements of human expression receive boons from the divine.

#### 4.8 Journey's Universal Mountain: Monolith as Monomyth

Amongst the sacred mountains of the world's traditional stories we have briefly accounted for, *Journey's* Twined Peak is quite unique in one essential area: its virtual non-locality. This is in part due to its remediation through a virtual space, and further recapitulates the universality of the games rhetoric. As we have seen in the great vision of shamans such as Black Elk, the central mountain of the world has been proclaimed and mediated into the videogame (Eliade 1979, 269). In a real sense, the emotional impact of Travelers ascending the Twined Peaks is a fascinating rendering of a spiritualized nonlocal center-peak: a monomyth about the monolith.

##### ***Mountain as Symbol of Humanity***

The Twined Peak of *Journey* is as much philosophical as it is mythological. It elusively remains in the background as a form to be contemplated. Furthermore, it serves a high mimetic function as a mirroring of the graphic illustration of the Twins (F523). This is even more apparent in the mural of Ancestors, where each is angled towards one another echoed further in composition of the Twined Peak (M301.15). In other words, the Travelers and Mountain share an association. And rather than

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16 The symbol of the dragon/serpent has often come into association with the healing arts (e.g. the staff of Asclepius), aspects of shamanic rites of initiation with the various manifestations of the Rainbow Serpent amongst the Aborigines of Australia (See Pratt 2007b, 390-91).

the fate of the Ancestors, who sought after artificial and technological means severed from origins, the new destiny laid out before the Traveler is a reinstatement of origins, that is to say, a return to the *axis mundi*. That the Twined Peak is presented as two Ancestors or Travelers also suggests that tending to person-to-person relations even of divine origin.

Confucius's philosophy played a significant role in formulating the story structure of *Journey* (See Ohannessian 2012, para. 11), itself espousing the fundamental worship of and reverence for ancestors.<sup>17</sup> If there were one teaching of Confucius's five virtues (*ren*, *yi*, *li zhi* and *xin* (humaneness, righteousness, propriety, knowledge and integrity) *ren* 仁, humaneness, may be the most appropriate. In both meaning and purport, *ren* shares a close relationship to the character for person/people (*ren* 人). *Ren* 仁 fundamentally addresses a deeper philosophical quality to our relationship between one another than simply *ren* 人, people. Through this lens we no longer regard others and ourselves as separate, but more profoundly unified through a common inborn nature individually, and as a society. We may reiterate Buber's transformation of "other" from *you* to *thou*. In a mythological or symbolic level *Journey* conveys such a tenet. The character for person(s) (人) consists of the simple strokes *pie* 丩 and *na* 讠. One could say that the character represents the resting of the two strokes. The connotation being reliance on fellow peoples, with *ren* 仁 elevating this reliance to a single project: humanity's path towards Heaven's Mandate. In cultivating this particular quality, *ren* 仁, humaneness, or *humanitas* may emerge. *Journey* plays this virtue out visually by representation, viscerally through simulation, and practically through ergodics. Hence, the storyline may read: two persons (人) working (Greek: *ergon*; Chinese: *gong* 工) it out together as shamans/mediums/healers (*wu* 巫) along a pathway (Greek: *hodos*; Chinese: *Dao* 道) (See Aarseth, 1997, 1; Turner, V.W. 1982, pp.30-32; Harbough, R., 1998). Thus, a synergodic<sup>18</sup> cybertext: how to be co-operative cybernetic shamans.

## 5 Conclusion: Implications and Outlook

### 5.1 Mythopoetics and Game Design

I have intimated how the video game medium, as represented through thatgamecompany's *Journey*, is capable of expressing and modeling substantial mythic worlds drawn from a ravine of world narratives and motifs. The key is having game developers who have a synoptic vision, bringing

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17 J.Chen elaborates on Confucius's 'Six Stages of Life,' (*Analects* 2.4) and how they were woven into the Three-Part story structure.

18 Here, I loosely define it as: A pathway emphasizing the cooperative efforts of two or more users, which yields unique emergent factors formative to the work.

forth content from mythopoetics.<sup>19</sup> In Aristotle's *Poetics* he argued that epic was a distinct genre from tragedy in that it could handle a system of myths, within the trajectory of a single guiding action or theme. Video games are of such a capacity, however, they not only represent their action through *mimesis* (with a passive audience/reader), but allow *user-ship* and agency to embody action within a world. Here, I have drawn on Aarseth's theory of ergodics and the cybertext, which offer substantial theoretical framework and potential for a meaningful dialogue.

Within a cybertext we needn't turn to myths for mere decór. Instead, designers can learn from recent cases like *Journey*, which carry the mindset that myths can be formative to the gaming experience. Henry Jenkin's referred to a similar concept in his theory of emergent meanings within the magic circle of the game world.<sup>20</sup> Meaningful symbolic forms of discourse can exist in the ludicity of game worlds with the proper approach and with designers well versed in traditional images, symbols, lore and myths. Therein mythologies *as systems of symbols, motifs and images* can help charter an innovative leap when simulated in video games, informing, structuring, preserving and communicating how we experience such systems of our shared global heritage along *unique pathways of effort* (ergodics) for each user.

## 5.2 Critique of Violence

Through the language of mythological symbols and mechanics of gameplay, *Journey* conveys a sustained engagement with the controversial 'myth' (as fallacious fable) of violence often attached to video games. By alluding to the particular motifs demonstrated in this article, I have demonstrated how the game further brings about a healing quality, wherein the gaming arrangement is reconfigured, i.e., situating the *agôn* ahead of players rather than between them. This, in part, is further facilitated by the deferment of conventional game world identities (e.g. name tags and unique avatars), instead placing players in a shared experience of estrangement. As such, *Journey* asks of players to renegotiate their potential role as companions rather than combatants. I suggest this gesture is a subversive move by the developers in an effort to revitalize the video game medium as a pathway of artful expression and of potential emergence of the numinous.

## 5.3 Mythology and Ludology

*Journey* inherits and creatively responds to gaming's basic social tenet: that it takes two to have a game – i.e. the foundational 'syzygy' (from the Greek *suzugia*: yoke with; conjoin); perhaps a

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<sup>19</sup> By 'mythopoetic' I mean an intentional fabrication of a world, its culture and its lore, sourced from and re-visioning traditional culture mythologies.

<sup>20</sup>

fitting homage to video gaming itself.<sup>21</sup> One need just look to the larger movements of social media networking and convergence to realize that regardless of how privatized or escapist the act of video gaming can be (or misrepresented as), the shift towards re-socializing the experience has been there all along. A ‘mythos,’ in this instance, can emerge as not only in-game lore, but as the structuring principle that in-forms the gaming experience and the culture, allowing for identity, *communitas* and the liminal to persist.

#### 5.4 Outlook

Games such as *Journey* mark a significant contribution to the larger project of elevating digital games to the rank of art (See Burden & Gouglas 2012), affirming their status as viable cultural artifacts (See Bogost 2006, vii) with their own unique expressive value. And yet, *Journey* takes it one step further, putting players in touch with the numinous, the realm of the sacred and the mystery of human relations. The convergence of the ludic, mythic and spiritual has an old history in material culture: many of the motifs and themes presented in *Journey* echo back to ancient games like the Indic Snakes and Ladders (200 bce).<sup>22</sup> The material has only found a new hyper-iteration in video games enabling an intensified refiguring and synthesizing of traditional stories and philosophies from across the globe into a cohesive potentially transformative gaming experiences shared on a much larger scale.

The themes and pathways of events depicted in *Journey* touch on very real experiences and ideas that have founded sacred traditions, mysteries of antiquity, religions and philosophical schools. That the material has now found translation into a contemporary video game is a feat, I submit, that could not have been achieved without the care taken in respecting (and rendering) the nature of sacred paths, texts and myths themselves – a task not to be undertaken lightly.

### Supplementary Material

#### *Tale-Types:*

AT 300 The Dragon Slayer

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21 Consider the aptly named but never-born history of *Atari Inc.*'s first iteration *Syzygy* by co-founders Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney. Derived from physics, a ‘syzygy’ is also applicable to the conjoined endeavor of two entities. (Kent 2001, 35). Deities and their consorts function on such principles.

22 ‘Moksha-Patamu’ (Liberation’s Ladder), which became the basis for Chutes and Ladders. Players are rewarded for self-less actions, hastening their ascendancy to *moksha*. (*Encyclopedia of Play in Today’s Society* 2009, 646-647).

AT 303 The Twins or Blood-brothers (N772; A515.1.1)

AT 613 The Two Travelers

*Motif Index:*

**A. MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIFS**

A136.2 Combat between god of light and dragon of ocean.

A151.1 Home of gods on high mountain.

A210 Sky-god.

A418.1 Deity of particular mountain.

A418.1 Angel of mountain.

A495 Mountain-God

A515.1.1 Twin culture heroes.

A531 Culture Hero (demigod) overcomes monster.

A662 Upper world (heaven) as a mountain

A722.7 Mountain where sun goes through

A875.1.1 Mountain at center of earth

A962 Mountain (hills) from ancient activities of god (hero).

A1101 The four ages of the world. A development of the present order through four stages or periods, the golden, silver, bronze, and iron ages, or the like.

\_\_\_\_\_ A1101.1 Golden Age. A former time of perfection.

A1117.4 Mortal transfigured to god on mountain.

A1142.2 Thunder from flying dragon.

A1241 Man made from clay (earth).

A1255.2 Man from ears of corn.

**B. ANIMALS**

B11 Dragon

\_\_\_\_\_ B11.2.1.2 Dragon as modified serpent

\_\_\_\_\_ B11.3.2 Dragon's home at top of mountain. His breath forms clouds to hide the mountain.

\_\_\_\_\_ B11.4.1 Flying dragon; "drage" (flies over the mountain)

\_\_\_\_\_ B11.8 Dragon as power of good

\_\_\_\_\_ B11.11 Hero fights dragon.

**C. TABU**

C771.1 Tabu: building too high a tower (Tower of Babel).

C771.2 Tabu: piling up mountains to reach heaven.

**D. MAGIC**

D1149.2 Magic tower

D1365.9 Tower causes magic forgetfulness

D1552.2 Mountain opens to magic formula

D2004.9.1 Forgetfulness caused by Tower of Babel.



D2120. Magic Transportation

D2121. Magic journey.

\_\_\_\_\_ D2121.4. Magic journey by making distance vanish.

\_\_\_\_\_ D2121.7. Magic journey in cloud.

\_\_\_\_\_ D2121.7.1. Magic journey in cloud of fire.

\_\_\_\_\_ D2121.7.2. Magic journey in whirl of snow.

D2122.0.1. Journey to otherworld with magic speed.

D2135. Magic air journey.

D2135.0.3. Magic ability to fly.

D2135.4. Magic transportation to highest summit by divine power.

## E. THE DEAD

E481.3 Abode of dead in mountain.

E721. Soul journeys from the body.

E722.2.1. Soul borne away on cloud.

E722.2.2. Soul borne away on wind.

## F. MARVELS

F0-199 Otherworld Journeys

F55 Mountain reaches to sky.

F55.1 Mountain stretches to sky.

F131 Otherworld in hollow mountain.

F132 Otherworld on lofty mountain.

\_\_\_\_\_ F132.0.1 Otherworld visible from high mountain

\_\_\_\_\_ F132.1 Earthly paradise on mountain

\_\_\_\_\_ F132.1.1 Earthly paradise in air over mountain.

\_\_\_\_\_ F132.2.2 Dwelling of Fortune on lofty mountain.

F460 Mountain-spirits

\_\_\_\_\_ F460.0.1 Mountain spirits as souls of dead.

\_\_\_\_\_ F460.1.4.1 Mountain-men in white caps.

\_\_\_\_\_ F460.3.2 Mountain-men play games.

\_\_\_\_\_ F460.4.2.1 Mountain-spirits help build palace.

F523 Two persons with bodies joined. Siamese twins.

F601.5. Extraordinary companions are brothers (twins, triplets)

## H. TESTS

H61.1. Recognition of twins by golden chain under skin

## J. THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH

J2711 How the tower was built.

## M. ORDAINING THE FUTURE

M301.15 Mountain in human shape prophesies whole family's death

## N. CHANCE AND FATE

N772 Parting at crossroads to go on adventures. (\*Type 303)

## T. SEX

T685 Twins

\_\_\_\_\_T685.1 Twin adventurers

\_\_\_\_\_T685.2 Hostile twins

\_\_\_\_\_T685.3 Twins who look exactly alike;

\_\_\_\_\_T685.4 Twins: as twins are reared one born earlier becomes continually weaker, the other stronger.

## V. RELIGION

V1.6.1.1 Worship of mountains and hills.

V81.2 Tails fall off mountain spirits when they are baptized

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