DEVIN PROCTOR

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Bytes of Passage: Video Game Inhabitation as Ritual

Abstract: As players enter into the world of a video game, they are transitioning into liminal space, wherein the boundaries of self and self-representation are blurred and morality as it exists in the non-virtual world is suspended. This study explores the fantasy role-playing video game *Oblivion* as such a liminal space, through phenomenological participation by the author and his wood-elf avatar, Francine Boas. Utilizing Carl Jung's *persona* and *shadow* archetypes, Rushing and Frentz's psychological/ritual model, and the rituals of game-play as analogous to rituals performed by the Ndembu people of Zambia, the study traces a gamer's journey through choices that ultimately construct multiple identities.

> *Like the religious ceremonies of passage by which we mark birth, coming of age, marriage, and death, games are ritual actions allowing us to symbolically enact the patterns that give meaning to our lives.*

> (Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*[1])

You wake up in a prison cell. You are wearing sandals, pants, a sackcloth shirt, and wrist irons. You are not sure how you got here. You hear someone in the next cell threatening and insulting you as you look around your new home: a small wooden table with a jug and a cup, a long stone tablet to sleep on. Rusted chains hang from the rock walls, casting dancing shadows in the torchlight. This is your introduction to the world of *Oblivion,*[2] a fantasy role-playing video game. You have nothing, are no one. Your usable space is confined to a tiny locked room. You are no longer where, or who, you were when you sat down to play the game. It is a transformation that happens thousands of times a day in our real, physical world, when people choose to inhabit others – alters, avatars, roles, characters. Video gaming is no longer, as was once thought, exclusively the realm of teenage boys. According to the ESA's *2011 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data*,[3] the average American video game player is 37 years old. 29% of gamers are 50 or older, compared to only 18% who are under 18. While the stereotype holds true that there are more male than female gamers, it is only at a ratio of 58% to 42%. Even more

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[1] Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: the Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 143.
[2] Although the game's full title is *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, it is commonly called simply *Oblivion*, which is how it will be referred to in this study.
[3] Entertainment Software Association, "Industry Facts," *The ESA. com*, 2011, http://www.theesa.com/facts/index.asp (accessed December 3, 2011).

telling is how prevalent games are: 72% of American households contain video game players. This can help account for the fact that the gaming industry brought in $25.9 billion in 2010.[4] Video games are not 'just games,' they are aggressively pervasive elements taking up more and more of America's leisure time.

Video Games as Liminal Space

The concept of liminality comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning 'threshold.'[5] Liminal space is "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed"[6] by the laws and conventions of larger society. In liminal space, morality, social standing, and rational decision-making are suspended. As an anthropological construct, liminality was introduced in Arnold ven Gennep's ethnographic work concerning ritual practice, *The Rites of Passage*. Van Gennep divides ritual into three phases, "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)."[7] In the separation phase, a person is moved outside of the normal modes of society and behavior. This often involves a change in location or appearance to establish a separate identity. The transition phase includes the actual liminal space, a "period of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo."[8] Categories of understanding and symbols of meaning are no longer assumed. Everything must be tested and proven. Rules are rewritten. The people involved in this phase rebuild previous notions and face truths about the way they had constructed their reality. The third phase, that of incorporation, involves the person returning to society with renewed understanding of his or her place within it. Having been separated and forced to confront truths about him or herself, the person is allowed to rejoin the community as a full member.

Victor Turner builds on these concepts with the notion of the "liminal *personae*" or "threshold people."[9] When involved in ritual, those who inhabit the liminal space must be "represented as possessing nothing" and therefore may "wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status."[10] In liminal space, all who exist are blank slates, so they may adopt the identity and properties the ritual bestows on them. The deconstruction of all other symbols from the outside world – including normal clothing, title, even names – serves to create an environment of transparency and truth. All knowledge created within liminal space comes from core understandings that do not rest on semiotic readings of our comfortable and constructed culture.

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[4] *Ibid*.

[5] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 1969), 95.

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 11.

[8] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 24.

[9] Turner, *The Ritual Process,* 95.

[10] *Ibid*.

Author and technology scholar Janet Murray has stated that, "In psychological terms, computers are liminal objects, located on the threshold between external reality and our own minds."[11] When we enter into the world of the video game we exist, much like the computer that powers it, on this threshold. We change our appearance by inhabiting and controlling an avatar that usually begins as a blank slate. Often, the avatar possesses little or nothing at the onset of a game. We must not assume the in-game world follows the same rules as outside reality. Often, the player must establish his or her new in-game identity (Turner's liminal *personae*), through literally naming the character, or by completing a 'tutorial.' These tutorials exist in virtually every game and consist of small objectives that help the player learn how to use the interface, e.g. how to move, activate certain tools or weapons, and interact with other characters. Once identity is established, the world and its rules and behaviors must be explored and understood. As the game progresses, the player gains a firmer understanding of his or her place within the game space and is rewarded with new abilities or more tools. In this way, the game acts as a liminal space in which the concepts of identity and world understanding can be stripped and reconstructed.

The Psychological/ Ritual Model

Communications scholars Janice Rushing and Thomas Frentz examine internal identity in film using a tripartite model of psychological processing and change they call the Psychological/Ritual Model. Based primarily on a Jungian understanding of the human psyche, the first aspect of the model relies heavily on the unconscious archetypes of the *persona* and the *shadow*. The *persona*, can be seen as "a sort of "dressing" for the ego-the conscious, intentional part of the person."[12] Not so simply put, it "*feigns individuality,* making others and oneself believe that one is an individual… it is a compromise between an individual and society as to what a man should appear to be."[13] This is the part of ourselves that we present to the world, whether or not it is a genuine representation of our core personality. In order to exist in polite society, it is implicitly understood that we must lie every so often, so as not to betray the seamier sides of ourselves. This perhaps more sordid side of Self is represented in the *shadow*, the "dark, other Self which exists in each one of us: it is the dreadful and evil person that we might have been had we not been so careful to put aside all the tendencies within us of which we do not approve."[14] As "evil" and "dreadful" as the *shadow* seems to be, it is intrinsically a part of us, a diametric foil to our well-cultivated *persona*. Although understood as a source of powerful strength, the *shadow* consumes and warps the

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[11] Janet H. Murray, *op.cit.*, 99.

[12] Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frentz, ""The Deer Hunter": Rhetoric of the Warrior," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, no. 66 (1980): 394.

[13] Carl Gustav Jung, *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York : Viking Press, 1971), 105-106.

[14] David Cox, *Modern Psychology: the Teachings of Carl Gustav Jung* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968). Qtd in Rushing.

psyche if given too much sway. It could be though of as Id, if Id had an antisocial disorder.

The second aspect of the Psychological/Ritual model is that of the ritual. In this model, ritual is understood to be the process by which the aforementioned archetypes of Self are managed, and can take two forms: the partial and the holistic. Partial ritual is enacted to manage the *persona*. Partial rituals "reaffirm culturally specified values and, if successfully experienced, lead to a strengthened persona."[15] Partial rituals are conducted regularly and are often enacted in groups as social interaction. Holistic rituals, however, involve complete metaphorical rebirth. Holistic rituals are referred to as such because they involve the whole of the psyche – a confluence of archetypes wherein decisions are made concerning morality and the actor "faces his own *shadow* figure."[16] A person is forced to confront his or her inner moral paradoxes and make choices concerning how to deal with them. Holistic rituals are enacted less often, and can bring about great change.

The third facet of the model is that very change. When a ritual takes place (particularly if it is holistic) the psyche is in a state of confusion. The recognition of the *shadow*, in all its moral inferiority, as a "part of one's Self creates disequilibrium… and requires its assimilation into the consciousness—the result being an altered personality."[17] The fact that the *shadow* has been accepted as an existing aspect of the Self means that a part of the *shadow* must be incorporated into the notion of Self. Jung posits that this can happen in one of four ways: *acceptance, rejection, identification,* or *individuation.*[18] If a person *accepts* the unconscious *shadow*, he or she comes out of the ritual eccentric or childlike, having been broken by the experience of truly seeing his or her own dark underbelly. *Rejection* involves the "regressive restoration of the persona,"[19] and changes the public Self very little. There is no risk involved in this outcome, but it also renders the ritual a useless exercise. The person could *identify* with the unconscious, causing an inversion of personality, wherein "the shadow becomes the face the person presents to the world and his previous persona becomes the repressed shadow."[20] Jung would describe this person as schizophrenic, having attained the "knowledge of the universal collective psyche, particularly the knowledge of good and evil."[21] People who have attained this knowledge cannot successfully wield the power it brings, and through misuse they destroy themselves. *Individuation* is the outcome that Jung, Rushing, and Frentz find the most favorable. The person recognizes and accepts both his or her uniqueness as well as the shared collective properties found within, *shadow* and all, without being consumed by it. Jung describes this person as someone who has "purposely expose themselves to the

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[15] Rushing, Frentz, *The Deer Hunter*, 395.
[16] *Ibid.* Italics added.
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] Jung, *op.cit.*, 116.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] Rushing, Frentz, *op.cit.*, 396.
[21] *Ibid.*

danger of being devoured by the monster… but subdued it, not once but many times."[22] Jung contends that heroes choose this path when tested, and that a strong initial *persona* is required to enact this type of change.

Project

If liminality is achieved through ritual practice, and game space is liminal space, then gaming can be approached as ritual. It follows the same basic tenets of separation, transition and incorporation in that we enter the world of a game by changing forms and location (non-virtual to virtual), we learn the rules of a new paradigm, where outside realities are suspended, and we leave the game space having learned new truths about the way we fit in the world. Our projective identity within this liminal space can be seen as a mimetic relationship to an avatar. We are not the avatars, but we are controlling and inhabiting the avatars, so are also *not* not the avatars. Through examination of game-play, this study will demonstrate that, while in our inherently mimetic projective identity, we enact both partial and holistic rituals in game space, interacting between *persona* and *shadow*, and that, when we incorporate back into non-virtual space, we bring with us residual identity change as a result.

Oblivion

The world of *Oblivion* is, by video gaming standards, massive. Unlike many other games, the player may choose to complete the 'main quest,' which contains the major intended narrative arch of the game, and is the only way to 'win' the game, or the player may choose to simply explore and take advantage of the over 200 quests that are available within the game. Along with these quests, there are opportunities to join guilds and factions, to learn alchemy and magical enchanting, and to hunt the many species of plant and animal that live in this virtual world. Most players choose to do a mixture of all of these things. If the player is interested in learning the history of Tamriel, (the world in which *Oblivion* and with the other *Elder Scrolls* games are based) he or she can read the books that are found on bookshelves throughout the homes, castles, forts, caves, ruins, and encampments which are among the 369 listed 'places' in the game.[23] To complete the game's quests by themselves without taking time to explore would take over 100 hours;[24] however, online comments and player chat rooms reveal that many spend over 400 hours in the game.

The Preliminal Phase

When I begin my *Oblivion* experience, I have to choose a character. Most games have the player inhabit the body of a predetermined avatar (usually a white

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[22] Jung, *op.cit.*, 119.
[23] The number 369 excludes all expansion packs to the original game, which would bring the number to 419.
[24] UESPWiki, *Oblivion:Oblivion*, http://www.uesp.net/wiki/Oblivion:Oblivion (accessed December 1, 2011).

male), in order to serve the prewritten narrative of the game. *Oblivion*, however, along with an increasing number of role-playing games, allows players to choose their avatar's name, race, gender, skills, birth sign, and even design in detail how their avatar will look. I choose a female wood elf, painstakingly design her face, and name her Francine Boas, in honor of the project. As for her skills and birth sign, I choose thief and assassin-related skills like *sneak, marksman, security, alchemy, blade,* and *light armor*. I choose these because I want to play the game as a sneaky ninja-type character, hiding in the shadows and sniping, or picking pockets and breaking into safes. In this way I am changing my identity to that of Francine Boas, for a time. This management of specific terms and attributes used to construct identity can be seen as a type of birth, as well as a naming ceremony, both of which are considered by van Gennep to be rites of preliminal separation.[25]

When I have fully created my character, the screen instantly switches to a first person view of the prison described at the beginning of this paper. I, the non-virtual player, am seeing this for the first time through the eyes of Francine, the virtual avatar, who is also seeing it for the first time. We are both experiencing this together at her moment of birth, and thus our shared identity is created. A tutorial begins and informs us how to move around the cell.[26] As we learn together, the projective identity strengthens. After a few minutes, the intended narrative arch of the game begins with the Emperor, Uriel Septim,[27] coming into the cell with his guards. He tells Francine and I that we shouldn't be here; this is the passage to the escape route he is using to run from an assassination attempt. As the guards open up the secret back wall of the cell, the Emperor says to us, *"Perhaps the Gods have placed you here so that we may meet. As for what you have done... it does not matter. That is not what you will be remembered for."*[28] We are pardoned for our unknown crimes, and allowed to progress into the world, but first we must follow Uriel through the escape route. Soon Uriel is fatally hurt, and while dying, he gives us an amulet. He dies; we enter the sewer section of the escape route, fight more creatures, and then exit into the world of Tamriel. Thus ends our preliminal ritual of separation.

In *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner devotes careful study to the Ndembu ritual of *Isoma*. The *Isoma* ritual is enacted when a woman is unable to conceive a child or has multiple miscarriages. The belief is that a *shade*, an Ndembu ancestor spirit, has affected her through a curse, or *chikasu*, and prevented the woman from producing offspring, partially because she has "forgotten" the spirits.[29] To prepare for the preliminal stage of the ritual, an animal's burrow (usually belonging to a

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[25] Van Gennep, *op.cit.*, 62.

[26] The royal "we" is antiquated. That being said, "we, us, our," etc. will be used as pronouns to describe in-game identity as a combination of Francine Boas and myself.

[27] It should be noted that Uriel Septim is voiced by Patrick Stewart, and is thus instantly culturally understood as a voice of authority, wisdom, and fatherhood because of the roles the actor has played in popular movies and television.

[28] Bethesda Softworks, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

[29] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 13.

giant rat or 'ant bear') is opened and a tunnel is dug from this burrow in the direction of the closest water source. The couple affected by the *shade's chikasu* enters the tunnel through the burrow end, which the Ndembu refer to as the death end, or the "hot" end, because of the fire cooking hot medicines near the hole. They crawl through the tunnel and come out of the "cool" end, which should open up near the water source. The woman has had the curse lifted, and now must reconstruct "the conjugal relations between the wife and the husband; and making the woman, and hence the marriage and lineage, fruitful."[30] This is how they enter into the liminal aspect of the ritual, wherein they live apart from the community (in liminal space) and relearn how to be married without the *chikasu* impeding them.

The *Isoma* ritual exhibits many parallels with the preliminal phase of game-play in *Oblivion*.[31] Before the rite, the woman has been cursed by an unknown *shade*, just as Francine and I have been charged with an unknown crime. The aim of the *Isoma* ritual is, in essence, the ability to create life, and can be seen as a ritual to cause birth, much like the character creation in *Oblivion* gives birth to Francine and, thus, my projective identity. The ritual is also to reconcile the "right relation" of marriage and rejoin the couple, just as it joins together the virtual and non-virtual identities in the projective identity, a marriage of sorts. The Ndembu must clear the blockage from a premade hole, as we must open the secret back wall of a prison cell. The couple goes into the 'hot' hole representing death; we begin in a cell lit by torchlight, where our benefactor dies. They emerge from the 'cool' hole by a water source, purged of the curse and ready to reconstruct the marriage in liminal space. We emerge out of a sewer grate at the edge of a lake, exonerated of our crime, and able to explore the world of Tamriel.

The Liminal Phase

Oblivion is filled with partial rituals navigating the control of the *persona*. A fitting example that questions the relationship between the *shadow* and the *persona* is the initiation into the Dark Brotherhood. The Dark Brotherhood is a secretive organization in Tamriel, with no advertised headquarters or public members. Legend holds that they are assassins for hire, and they can be contacted by praying to the Night Mother to have someone killed. The way Francine and I come across them is in a particularly heated battle in the middle of a town square, when we accidentally kill an innocent bystander with a stray arrow. A message that reads, "Your killing has been observed by forces unknown..."[32] appears at the top of the screen. That night, when we go to sleep, a man named Lucien Lachance comes to our room with a contract. He gives us a dagger and says we are to find someone named Rufio at a local inn and kill him with the dagger. When we succeed, Lucien

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[30] *Ibid.*, 18.

[31] It should be stated that, beyond the interesting symbolic parallels, this comparison is imperfect in that the Ndembu believe in the physically curative aspect of the ritual, whereas the ritual in *Oblivion* is simply the passage into the liminal space.

[32] UESPWiki, *Oblivion: A Knife in the Dark*, http://www.uesp.net/wiki/Oblivion:A_Knife_ in_ the_Dark (accessed December1, 2011).

will contact us again. Without knowing it, we had completed the preliminal phase of the ritual by committing and act of murder that was "observed." Our in-game *persona* had changed, because others in Tamriel had witnessed our murder of an innocent. Since it was in the heat of battle, we were forgiven after turning ourself in and paying a fine to the local guards. Lucien, almost as a personification of our *shadow,* had now appeared and given us a directive, pulling us into a deeper liminal space within the already liminal game-space. At first it appears that, since we are a killer, having killed before (always with justification), this is not such a bad proposal, so we set off to find this Rufio. Our *persona* and our *shadow* are growing closer.

When we find Rufio at the inn, we learn that he is an old man. He leads a humble and harmless life, trying to forget his misdeeds as a youth. The only time we will be able to get him alone is when he is sleeping in his bed. This complicates the morality of the contract. We have killed before, but only well-armed combatants or known criminals. This is an old man sleeping in bed. There must be a reason he has a contract out for his life, we convince ourselves. Also, there must be some sort of reward for completing this task, so we sneak up to the bed and stab him to death with the dagger Lucien gave us. He doesn't make a sound. He merely slumps. The lack of sound is disturbing and it takes me out of my game trance long enough to mutter some sort of disgust to myself, then I'm back in the game. I have given in to the *shadow*, to the extent that I have killed a defenseless old man.[33] The next time we sleep, Lucien congratulates us and gives us the location of and password to the Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary. We have completed the liminal phase of the ritual, learning to kill without thought, and are ready for the postliminal "incorporation." When we arrive at the sanctuary, we are welcomed as a "sister," and given new clothes and a new "family." We are now back in the larger liminality of Tamriel as a whole, our *persona* as a killer of innocents strengthened.

The Postliminal Phase

As discussed with the holistic ritual properties of the main quest, winning the game is the only true parallel to the postliminal incorporation phase. The incorporation phases of the partial rituals consist of being admitted into a faction (like the Dark Brotherhood) or being rewarded with a title or useful item. It is always positive, no matter what the ritualized action was. The only negative punishment in the game is going to prison if we get caught breaking the law and don't have enough money or clout to bribe the guards to look the other way. Even in terms of the law in Tamriel, it all comes down to managing our *persona*. The absolute incorporation is, of course, saving the game and turning it off. This doesn't follow the exact steps of incorporation, but even van Gennep admits that, in the case of the phases of ritual, "in specific instances [the] three types are not

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[33] If we had spoken to Rufio before killing him, he would have told us of a botched sexual assault that ended with him killing a woman, giving the justification for the contract. We didn't speak to him, however, and committed the murder anyway.

always equally important or equally elaborated."[34] So without ceremony, I leave my projective identity behind in liminal space, where it will be waiting for me. But does all of it stay there? According to the Psychological/Ritual Model, it does not. Rushing and Frentz would consider me a success, having exhibited *individuation* in the ritual. I have faced and accepted my *shadow*. I have neither *rejected* it nor have I *identified* with it. According to them (and Carl Jung) I have now incorporated parts of that *shadow* into my own psyche. That wood elf thief/assassin who kills old men in their beds is slightly a part of the actual, non-virtual me. Does this mean I will become a cat burglar? Probably not, but I also doubt that I alone have the skill Francine and I have together and wouldn't succeed at cat-burglary. If I believed I could, maybe the answer would be different.

Conclusion

Recently, I stole an umbrella. It seemed perfectly natural to do so; it was raining and I didn't have one. It was sitting there, next to a chair, and no one was around. Was that me? Was it Francine and me? It's not as if I snuck up to the umbrella under cover of darkness or used any of our projective thievery training. I walked up to the umbrella and picked it up. The fact is I looked at something that was not mine and thought that it could be mine if I took it. So I took it, as Francine and I had done many times before. Rituals change people, even if slightly. To refrain, (and rephrase) Janet Murray's words from the beginning of this paper, games are not just "ritual actions allowing us to symbolically enact the patterns that give meaning to our lives," but are gradually becoming ritual actions that enact actual patterns in our lives.[35] We have encountered our *shadows* and incorporated them. In the world of *Oblivion*, there are a group of wizards known as the Necromancers. They use dark magic to raise the dead to be their minions, and do all manner of stereotypically 'evil' things. They are characterized as demented, irrational, and warped, because they cannot fully wield the power they have awoken. They *identified* with their *shadows* long ago, and it has broken them, mentally, physically and spiritually. Anything they endeavor is doomed from the start, as they have rendered themselves powerless. In the world of reality, we could soon be facing a similar danger. We need to recognize that gaming is a very real ritual passage into liminal, formative space. We are both inhabiting and consuming these images on a psychological level and they affect us. While it is doubtful that people will start forming Dark Brotherhoods to engage in contract killing, a missing umbrella could be the very least of our worries.

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[34] Van Gennep, *op. cit.*, 11.
[35] Murray, *op. cit.,* 143.

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