

Chapter 28

“To Be Shot at Without Result”: Gaming and the Rhetoric of Immortality

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ABSTRACT

Winston Churchill famously asserted that “there is nothing more exhilarating than to be shot at without result.” Whether or not this is accurate, it is indicative of an ancient and persistent myth which depicts combat as the locus of glory, virtue, and sublime exhilaration. Drawing on the works of Ernest Becker, Gregory Nagy, and Ian Bogost, this chapter traces the combat myth from Homer to Call of Duty, situating it within a rhetoric of heroism and ultimately, immortality. Given the immense popularity of the First Person Shooter (FPS) and Action Role Playing Game (ARPG) genres, which employ combat as their dominant motif, the myth appears to be alive and well. The chapter concludes with a discussion of terror management theory and its application to videogame analysis and design.

INTRODUCTION

When you go to war as a boy you have a great illusion of immortality. Other people get killed; not you. . . . Then when you are badly wounded the first time you lose that illusion and you know it can happen to you. (Ernest Hemingway, Men At War)

There is nothing more exhilarating than to be shot at without result. (Winston Churchill)

Fortunate and favoured, the survivor stands in the midst of the fallen. For him there is one tremendous fact: while countless others have died, many of them his comrades, he is still alive. The dead lie helpless; he stands upright amongst them, and it is as though the battle had been fought in order for him to survive it... Not that he has avoided danger; he, with his friends, stood in the path of death. They fell; he stands exulting.... The man who achieves this often is a hero. He is stronger. There is more life in him. He is favoured by the Gods. (p. 228)

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Writing three decades before *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) appears, Canetti’s description perfectly captures the *ethos* of the contemporary First Person Shooter (FPS).

This survivor scene is not unique to the videogame, however; on the contrary, it is played out in countless poems, movies, television shows, and only now videogames. The survivor is extra-ordinary, someone special. This sense of extra-ordinariness, or divine favour, plays on a deeply rooted, evolutionary need to stand out, and is therefore incredibly powerful. According to cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (e.g. 1973, 1975), this drive for recognition, or “cosmic significance,” is not only something we all crave, it is in fact an expression of the primary motivation for all human activity, the denial of death. Becker’s concept of death denial via heroism, and the way in which it manifests itself in the videogame medium, will inform much of this chapter. As we shall see, the videogame, with its logic of winning and losing, provides a relatively safe and accessible arena for standing out, for getting a taste of heroism.

Moreover, as both an interactive and audio-visual medium, the videogame is well suited for propagating the idealized, disembodied conception of combat described by Churchill and Hemingway. Indeed, it is not until he is physically wounded that Hemingway’s “great illusion of immortality” shrinks away, and while videogames increasingly employ haptic metaphors to simulate the experience of being shot, a slight rumble in one’s controller is far removed from the jarring, physical realities of the combat experience. In short, videogames are capable of offering the “exhilarating” experience of getting “shot at without result” better than any other medium. They offer a “heroic,” sanitized, and above all, *fun* iteration of the combat experience, free from the material horrors of actual war (Stahl, 2006).

Given the immense popularity of the FPS and Action Role Playing Game (ARPG) genres, which feature combat as their dominant motif, the heroic

myths surrounding combat appear to be alive and well. With the emergence of the videogame, we can experience the visual and aural cues of the battlefield - the snap of a bullet, the satisfaction of lining up an enemy and pulling the trigger - without enduring the physical hardships which accompany combat. We can virtually participate in historical victories such as the D-Day landings of 1944, or the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. We can climb up the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Activision, 2009) leader boards, or attain an excellent kill to death ratio. Taken together, these experiences form an overarching rhetoric of heroism, death defiance, and ultimately, immortality.

Drawing from an interdisciplinary group of thinkers, this chapter will examine the way videogames propagate a rhetoric of immortality through a variety of mutually reinforcing techniques, including immersion, procedural rhetoric, and narrative. It should be noted that these categories are not rigid, but permeable; indeed, it is precisely when these categories play-off of one another that they are most effective. Before turning our attention to the videogame, however, it is important to understand how immortality and heroism relate to one another, and how they have interacted with one another since the beginning of Western civilization.

KLEOS, ARISTEIA, AND THE HOMERIC HERO

The idea that individuals can achieve immortality via heroism is at least as old as Homer. The Hellenic scholar, Gregory Nagy (1999), examines this relationship at length, most notably through his discussion of *kleos*. The term *kleos*, according to Nagy, initially meant simply “to hear,” but eventually evolved to signify the eternal renown, or glory afforded through song:

Etymologically, kleos should have meant simply “that which is heard” (from khuô ‘hear’).... [K]

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