The Remediation of the Epic in Digital Games:
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

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Abstract
This paper examines whether certain computer games, most notably RPGs, can be thought of as examples of the postmodern epic. Drawing on more recent critical frameworks of the epic, such as the ones proposed by Northrop Frye, Adeline Johns-Putra, Catherine Bates or John Miles Foley, the demonstration disembeds the most significant diachronic features of the epic from its two main media of reproduction, that of text and oral transmission, in order to test their fusion with the virtual environment of digital games. More specifically, I employ the concept of "epic mode" in order to explain the relevance of The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim for the history of the epic typology, which must now be understood as transmedial. I illustrate the manner in which this representative title assimilates the experience and performance of the epic, as well as several meaningful shifts in terms of genre theory, the most notable of which is an intrinsic posthuman quality. The experience of play inherent to Skyrim does not only validate the latter as an authentic digital epic of contemporary culture, but it also enhances the content, role and impact of the typology itself, which is yet far from falling into disuse.[1]

Keywords: The epic genre, digital epic, instantiation, transmedia theory, epic mode, video game aesthetics.

In Blackwell's *Companion to the Ancient Epic*, Richard Martin makes the poignant claim that the epic is the single most "pervasive, 'unmarked' genre, in terms of where and when it can be performed," as well as the "culturally most significant and 'marked' form in terms of its ambitions and attitudes" (16). Martin's in-depth study on the epic genre confirms

that textual or performative characteristics alone cannot be aptly used in order to define whether a particular production is, indeed, epic. Over the past two decades, several attempts have been made to more accurately define this typology, including *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic* (2010), edited by Catherine Bates, *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World* (1999), edited by Beissinger, Tylus and Wofford, Adeline Johns-Putra's *The History of the Epic* (2006), and *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (2006), edited by Robert Fowler. A likely explanation for this recent compulsion to meticulously ascribe certain features, characteristics and processes to the epic may be attributed to the lack of a commonly accepted epic of postmodernism, even though the age itself seems to be nearing its end or, as Stephen Connor put it, "entering a new phase" (11), and despite the proliferation of cultural artefacts created in the epic mode. Another reason for this trend may be a growing support among scholars, such as John Trafton, Johns-Putra, and Luke Arnott, for the idea that epic productions are now manifest in other media capable of artistic representations, ranging from film to fantasy literature, comic books and even video games. It did not help that research on the epic seeking to overcome Eurocentric productions and views brought further ambiguity to the definition of the genre. As Martin concludes, the latter elaborates a bifocal relationship between "pervasive, everyday speech" and "a mode of total communication, undertaking nothing less than the ideal expression of a culture" (18). Most importantly, the roles diachronically associated with the epic have fulfilled chief community functions both in the age of their production and afterwards. It can be argued that, with the emergence of the digital environment in the second half of the 20th century, it became increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to textually represent an authentic experience of what it means to be postmodern. Just as postmodernism seems to have been superseded by several of the most important themes initially associated with it, posthuman(ism) and new materialism, to name a couple, so did the production and assimilation of the epic overflow the traditional media of folklore and the literary tradition, speech and hard-copy texts, only to advance into the wider field and phenomena of culture. The ubiquity of digital media has already challenged and redefined our notions of literature, art and even what it means to be human. Within this

unstable context, *the* epic of the posthuman age rapidly became transmedial and, I argue, is now manifest in video games.

Johns-Putra contends that we may find some of the epics of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries in films such as *Spartacus* (1960), the *Star Wars* series (started in 1977), as well as *Gladiator* (2000) and *Troy* (2000), some of which did an excellent job of "drawing on contemporary political concerns and catering to modern audience expectations" (212-3). Controversial at a first glance, the shift from a solely text-based medium (digital or analog) to one that incorporates performance and visual imagery alongside storytelling is strikingly similar to the growth of folklore or various oral traditions into written text. Numerous social changes led to an extensive transition to print as a result of better durability, functionality, and the need for widespread access to information (Norman). In *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, Bates proposes that "cinematic remakes and the perpetuation of epic motifs in contemporary blockbusters and computer games ensures the form remains ever present in the popular consciousness" (ix). Virtual worlds represent a recent addition to the assembly of artistic means and/or media of expression. Furthermore, this cluster of expressive possibilities was supplemented by augmented reality, a phenomenon that offered users "the ability to combine both the physical experience of the streets and the digital experience of the Internet" (Skwarek 3). Simultaneously, the postmodern "*delegitimation* and *dedifferentiation* … between what had been called … cultural levels (high culture and low culture)" (Connor 3) prompted scholars to think of the previously literary genre of the epic as entertaining a "peculiar and complex connection to national and local cultures," as well as to acknowledge that many "prose genres have epic qualities" (Beissinger et al. 2).

However, in order to identify certain computer games as examples of contemporary epics, it is necessary to trace the ways in which they incorporate the features and roles of this category, as well as how the former are changed by the new media. Northrop Frye understands this progression of form and media as an organic evolution, wherein an epic *mode* merely experiences several mutations, sometimes reflected in form:

> In epos, where the poet faces his audience, we have a mimesis of direct address. Epos and fiction first take the form of scripture and myth, then of traditional tales, then of narrative and didactic poetry, including the epic proper, and of oratorical prose, then of novels and other written forms. As we progress historically through the five modes, fiction increasingly overshadows epos, and as it does, the mimesis of direct address changes to a mimesis of assertive writing. (250)

Frye's perspective makes it not only possible, but entirely likely that the epic mode would be incorporated in media such as film or digital games. My contention is that certain computer games, particularly RPGs (role-playing games), have not only ingeniously translated the features and functions of the epic genre into their fictional universes, but enhanced them in genuinely artistic ways. It is almost natural that traditional forms of the epic should become obsolete and that the genre should experience mutations reflecting at least some of the defining traits of contemporary life. The latter commonly includes a rejection "of modern scientific rationality," of metaphysics and of any discourses that resemble totalizing narratives, alongside a marked de-centering of the concept of identity (Connor 16). An uneasy relationship with the past, oftentimes bordering on obsessive preoccupation, as history is frequently reconfigured and reconstructed with the aid of new developments, as well as a general reconsideration of the body and of humanity's relationship with alterity, following the posthuman turn, are also distinctive features of present-day culture.

To begin with, I turn to the manner in which scholars currently understand the epic and its forms. John Miles Foley advocates for a broader, "open-ended model of 'the epic' … by adopting Penelope's non-parochial concept of 'those things that singers memorialize'" (180-1) on the one hand, and the need to place Western examples in a broader framework, accounting for as many traditions as possible, on the other. Alternatively, Johns-Putra promotes the idea of "genre as process, as temporally determined … [wherein] the 'whole' and its 'parts' are unstable" (5), reflecting Hans Robert Jauss's and Ralph Cohen's ideas that such classifications are intimately bound to the contexts that produce and use them. When arguing for the idea that genres are historically unstable, Johns-Putra employs reception theory to demonstrate the inherently social

dimension of such categories. Instead of continuing the debate over high/ low culture or written/ oral binaries, it would be more productive for the scholarly community to embrace typology as a "shared set of expectations … that changes over time" (Johns-Putra 6), the instability of which is bound to create certain contradictions between particular productions. Similarly, Tom Ryall's interpretation of cinematographic genres leads him to conclude that the latter are governed by the "master triangle of artist/ film/ audience" (28). Each side has its own contribution to and impression upon the typology, which is viewed in terms of "patterns/ forms/ styles/ structures that transcend individual" productions (29). Particularly since we are experiencing a "postmodern fascination with the epic, and a need to invoke it in all kinds of texts and situations" (Johns-Putra 1), it is all the more necessary to explore the media of computer games for examples of stories that enchant, and that are worth memorialization and celebration.

To this end, establishing some of the distinctive diachronic roles, characteristics and functions of the genre is instrumental to the inquiry of whether certain RPGs are instances of the contemporary epic. Epics are usually "narratives of great and courageous deeds against the backdrop of watershed historical and even prehistorical events" common to ancient traditions such as the Greek, with its *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or Akkadian, with *Enuma Elish* and *Gilgamesh* (Johns-Putra 7). These accounts were often combined with fantastic mythological deeds performed by gods or godlike figures. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the epic began to encompass ideologies of the medieval romance in poems such as *Roland*, the later *Orlando Innamorato* by Matteo Maria Boiardo or its sequel, *Orlando furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto. Yet the configuration of the medieval romance was not entirely compatible with the teachings of the Western Church, and so the following narratives sought to reconcile it with Christian morality, giving birth to the familiar patterns of courtly love. Christian culture became imbricated with Western cultural products to such an extent that the pursuit of its virtues, within a world dominated by sin, is transformed into a central theme of the time, as illustrated by Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, as well as by the reformed "knightly quests of romance" (Johns-Putra 7) of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. This quest for redemption reaches

its apotheosis in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where prophetic revelations of salvation and "divine truth" (Johns-Putra 7), rather than the pursuit of Platonic love, become the aim of the heroes. The thematic shifts were concurrent with community developments, which attempted to adapt the distinctly 'vulgar' romances and tales of medieval times, as exemplified by Geoffrey Chaucer's collection *The Canterbury Tales*, to the increasingly widespread and prominent religious worldviews that were becoming the social norm, in the same manner *Beowulf* had previously reconciled pagan heroism with Christian elements (Johns-Putra 50). By employing allegory, such examples of the epic thoroughly accounted for the way in which the Western conception of the universe and the world was evolving during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The spirit of the times is accurately embodied by Martin Luther's claim that reason is fruitless in the realm of religion, where the "works of God are unsearchable and unspeakable, and no human sense can find them out" (31), as well as by Michel de Montaigne's forcing of reason into the arena of faith, by means of scepticism, which was perceived by Montaigne "as the sole source of our knowledge of religion" (Fieser).

At the same time, however, a parallel evolution of the genre takes place starting with the beginning of the 17th century in the form of mock-epics. Building on the similar patterns of subtle satire directed at society that are present in *The Canterbury Tales*, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, John Dryden's *Mack Flecknoe*, and Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* are noteworthy examples of the way in which the traditional conventions of epic were subverted and employed to advocate for a more pragmatic way of thinking, a Weltanschauung that was grounded in the real world, rather than misguided by idealism and/or affectedness. Empiricism was emblematic of the transition to the modern era and an increasingly secularized society that could no longer rely on religion to explain its existence and the surrounding world. Indeed, the 16th and 17th centuries are acknowledged as the timeframe wherein a scientific revolution occurred within the European context (Fieser). The initial investigative methods put forward by the champions of modern science, Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton, highlight an incompatibility between science and religion, emphasizing the everlasting contradiction between

faith and reason. In fact, during Galileo Galilei's lifetime, the "Church was taking an overly-literal interpretation of the biblical passages in support of the old earth-centred system" (Fieser) to such an extent that it was asking its followers to blindly believe. It is precisely the issues of completely surrendering oneself to a totalizing discourse, be it religious, personal, or otherwise, that the mock epics of these two centuries problematize.

The genre is subject to yet another turn beginning with the 19th century, a transformation marked by the distinct need for an everyday, "anti-epic heroism, a heroism of the self" that constructs a grand tale of "self-development" (Johns-Putra 8). Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* adeptly illustrate the way in which the poet himself becomes "the hero of his own epic" (Cantor 381) in a possible reconciliation of the previous conflict between reason and faith, pragmatism and idealism. This was done mainly by understanding oneself as a project within the bigger framework of society, which was to be reformed either by aesthetic, poetic or empirical means. The then nascent concept of the self, wholly absent in earlier literature and which was introduced only in the second half of the 18th century (Lyons 16), had run its course quite rapidly. A possible explanation of this is the fact that the Romantic age "revered the self as an alternative to the dead soul, and so they had to have a pious faith in it – in the same way that they had a pious faith in the imagination which they set against the mind-forged manacles of reason" (Lyons 16). If fictions regarding the surrounding world were easier to believe in, unfeasible narratives about oneself were more difficult to defend, particularly since the basic, immutable quality of subjectivity is that it is defined in relation to others. From the end of the 18th century and up until the middle of the 20th, the individual self was perpetually destabilized by the rapid succession of political, industrial, scientific and economic revolutions occurring in the timespan of less than two centuries. Peoples' way of life, knowledge, aspirations and concerns were impacted to such an extent that Modernist art and literature reflected an acute need to define identity in the greater framework of modern society, while accommodating recent discoveries in science and thought. Less than a century from Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the epic "becomes … a

vehicle for conveying the increasing confusion, fragmentation and slippages in perception" (Johns-Putra 8) and is thus greatly charged by the crisis-state of the self underlying the Modernist movement. The existentialist strain of philosophy that had a major impact on Western thought during this timeframe, through Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, among others, was tackling precisely these problems of epistemology and ontology. Existentialism came to the conclusions that human existence was defined, to a great extent, by its situatedness, anxiety of being 'on its own' and impossibility to live in an authentic manner in the world of the time (Burnham and Papandreopoulos). As I show in what follows, in an epic representative of our current age, at least some of these kernel historical features and defining shifts, of which mythological deeds and legends, the crisis of the self, knightly quests of (more or less) courtly love, the pursuit of reason and divine truth, are the most obvious, will undoubtedly surface. Towards the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, virtual reality added further layers to the problematizing of the subject. As such, ontological and epistemological inquiries regarding "the nature of the human, the real, experience, sensation, cognition, identity and gender … by the postulated existence of perfect, simulated, environments" (Bukatman 188) become increasingly frequent. When video games found a way to integrate these recent shifts in culture and thought, commonly summarized as either postmodernism or post-humanism, they became authentic instances of the contemporary epic.

Beyond features belonging to the thematic dimension, the epic genre is also essentially defined as a performance delivered for spectators or transmitted to a readership, meaning that "audiences are crucial partners in the transaction of the epic" (Foley 177). It is inherent in their make-up, through the numerous mnemonic techniques they employ, that these stories be sequentially transmitted, usually by experienced bards who would often act as translators themselves. The particular circumstances of performance are crucial to the meaning that is delivered, as both the African *Mwindo Epic* and *Son-Jara*, for example, are habitually told in episodes, which the performers intend as a synecdoche of the entire tale. Foley refers to this as an "'immanent' approach," which

indicates "a dependence on understood, inexplicit context" (177). Such interpreters would deliver idiosyncratic experiences, sometimes introducing expository intermissions, leaving certain bits to implied understanding or preferring certain readings of symbolic elements over others. For instance, in the case of the *Mwindo* tale, "research has shown that singers do employ building blocks of diction and narrative to make and remake their epics," while also being aided by "relatives who provide musical instrumentation and who themselves know extensive passages from the epic in question" (Foley 176). Daniel Biebuyck, the scholar who recorded the work and published it for the first time, states that the range of expressive tools employed by the telling itself includes singing, mimicking, dancing and dramatic performance, wherein the bard embodies the hero of their narrative (13). This intimate connection between work and individual illustrates how "one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community" (Lukács 66), wherein the hero can be understood as a metonym for a larger group of people or a culture.

In what concerns the emergence of the epic mode in the virtual environment, I will work henceforth with an applied example. More specifically, my intention is to examine to what extent Bethesda Game Studios' *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) can be considered a contemporary epic, just as *Ulysses* was an epic of Modernism, *Paradise Lost* of the late English Renaissance and *Chanson de Roland* of the Middle Ages. The most pressing concern is to demonstrate how playing *Skyrim*, an "aesthetic form" (Shinkle) that gives rise to "a ludic activity" (Shinkle), is similar to reading or witnessing a performed epic such as those mentioned above. Particularly over the last two decades, the video game industry has incorporated numerous aesthetic features. The game has been described as "a representational artifact that gives evidence of being constructed with great skill, creativity and style; a work that is subject to criticism and that is emotionally expressive; and an artifact that has a high degree of formal complexity" (Tavinor 62). Although not necessarily challenging from an intellectual standpoint, its interactive dimension and the multitude of artistic properties it currently displays have turned *Skyrim* into more than just mass art. On the contrary, the

game is similar to the epic in this regard, in that the latter often tends towards folklore and popular entertainment. Despite the fact that this analysis is strictly meant to deal with the content of the game, rather than its communal dimension or the experience of engaging with it, it is not inconceivable that the new media are akin to experimental art, which seeks a call to action, engagement on the part of the audience, and a way to challenge one's horizon of expectation. The aesthetic quality of video games like *Skyrim* goes far beyond the content they display and into the game mechanics they employ, the relationships they maintain with their communities, as well as their impact upon the individual player.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of the epic mode that is to be found in *Skyrim* is the occurrence of heroism, namely the way in which it fosters and represents the latter. The kernel storyline of the game is the avatar's quest to become the Dragonborn (Dovahkiin), an individual best defined through the archetype of the chosen one, and to prevent the dragon Alduin the World Eater, also described as the "creator of the dragon civilization," from precipitating the apocalypse. The heroic plot of the game closely follows the structure of ancient epics. The journey motif is exhaustively emphasized as the player must use their avatar to travel to remote places around the region of Skyrim, which encompasses roughly 38 square kilometres (Clare). The protagonist is required to confront supernatural beings in fierce battles. The adversaries can range from bears, mammoths and giants to undead skeletons, vampires, automatons, werewolves or awe-inspiring, fire/ice-belching dragons. In addition, the NPCs (non-player characters) are not always friendly, as one can encounter bandits, members of the opposing faction – Imperials or Rebels, depending on which one is joined – and even an entire cult conspiring to thwart the current Dovahkiin. There are powerful artefacts that must be retrieved from dangerous burial mounds, shrines to be visited, and several deities to be encountered. The individual can elicit the help of certain guilds, have an aid of their choice always by their side, but also learn from the Greybeards how to master the power of the Dragon's tongue, the Thu'um. The confrontations serve as experience and preparation for the upcoming battle with Alduin, as the avatar grows in strength by gaining levels, equipment and abilities. By playing the game, one does not just

decide the fate of their hero. On the contrary, the destiny of an entire region and its inhabiting cultures hangs in the balance of just several resolutions or, in some cases, a distinct choice.

Skyrim is not devoid of romance either, as marriage is an element of gameplay that renders the experience more immersive. Generally, the option for proposal becomes available only after a particular task is completed, which serves the purpose of establishing a good standing with the soon-to-be spouse. The knightly quest here varies from the not-so-noble gathering of some grapes to the offering of a mammoth tusk, becoming thane of a city, besting the future spouse in a fist-fight or completing a guild's entire questline, as in the case of Aela the Huntress or Farkas. The fact that same-sex marriage is permitted is an important step forward towards integrating current social dynamics with the courtly values of romance epics, particularly since both male and female NPCs are programmed with gender neutral dialogue towards the player avatar. Although the possibility to make a transgender character was not part of the basic release, the *Playable Transgender Race* mod – a downloadable, fan-made modification of the game – is nevertheless available.

Anti-heroism is equally embedded in the game, as the avatar is vulnerable to certain crippling diseases, of which vampirism and lycanthropy are the most impactful. They gain various benefits from sleeping, which can be enhanced by choosing a bed that is actually owned by the player and by sleeping in the same building as their spouse, as well as sometimes significant bonuses from eating certain foods. The latter features, along with the progression system of levelling up and acquiring skills only by repeated use over long periods of time (for instance, archery expertise by constantly using one's bow in combat) suggest that the protagonist is, at least initially, a frail creature that can easily fall prey to bandits, stronger opponents or, as it often happens in dragon encounters and falling off cliffs, pure chance. Experiencing the mundane, banal and anti-heroic within a structure intended to be played as an epic journey is the predicament of many players. In fact, a significant part of the community actively engages in subverting the main narrative by playing either as Olaf or Nordrick, typical peasant-looking characters who set out to fulfil their destiny not as Dragonborn, but as "self-made men." Such

gameplay is carried out as close as possible to verisimilitude in an attempt to imitate the story pattern of "rags to riches." Magic, fighting dragons, using potions or going on adventurous quests are out of the question for these characters, while the usual goal is the accumulation of a fair amount of wealth (anywhere from 25,000 to 50,000 gold) by entirely probable means, such as hunting, gathering, mining, crafting and selling merchandise. The simultaneous existence of the heroic, anti-heroic and the mundane reflects some of the complexity of the contemporary world, whereas the refusal to subscribe to a grand narrative seems to be entirely derived from the impulse to deconstruct and reject a totalizing, absolute interpretation.

But the ethos of the video game epic is more complex than the heroism of Ancient times or the self as project during the Romantic and Modernist eras. Indeed, going beyond socially accepted behaviour is also part of the game's mechanics. Certain villainous choices have their own in-game consequences, but the polyphony of discourses prevents the construction of a totalizing, moralist judgement at a given time. This unique dimension of *Skyrim* renders the experience compatible with a postmodern ethical stance, wherein the central authority responsible for grand narratives is deconstructed and delegitimized. The hero can become a follower of distinctly evil deities, like Molag Bal or Boethiah, which thrive on wreaking havoc, as well as on killing people. The player can torture other NPCs, bribe, steal, frame and kill innocents as part of the Thieves Guild or become a paid assassin by joining the Dark Brotherhood. They can kill or sacrifice their spouse to marry another, since divorce is not possible, and, most disturbingly, they may willingly turn to cannibalism. The postmodern nuance has made it so that the epic genre is once again a medium wherein heroes, far from the virginal purity and virtue of Malory's Sir Galahad or Milton's perpetually enduring and penitent Adam, feature morally ambiguous personalities and even embody the monstrous, as they did in the Greek and Akkadian epics. For individuals looking to experience alterity, the Dawnguard DLC makes it possible to become a vampire and join the Volikhar group, in addition to the option of becoming a werewolf associated with their enemy faction of the Companions. Ethical ambiguity is perhaps the most enjoyable quality

of the game, and it does not usually influence the player's progression, because no interpretive framework or particular reading of the game is given priority over others. One can embody versions of Sir Galahad, Adam, Heracles, Leopold Bloom (here, as Nordrick), Dragonborn, Remus Lupin, Count Dracula, Feign (receiver of Dickensian stolen goods), a "hashashin," as Dan Brown calls them, any combination of the former, and more. This degree of personalization that one's character can benefit from within *Skyrim*, turning the idea of becoming a distinctive subjectivity into the theme of the game, integrates Modernist ideas of human existence as defined by situatedness, as well as by one's choices.

Last, but not least, as early as the first hour of gameplay, the player of *Skyrim* is faced with complex issues of religion, ritual and conflicting moral stances caused by persecution, gods and goddesses. Although quite problematic, given the fact that each of the 10 playable races has their own version of a creation myth and divine beings, playing the game with an avatar who seeks divine truth is entirely possible as the carefully designed world of faith proves to be unexpectedly immersive for a digital world. Exploring the sacred dimensions of the epic mode in this game will confront individuals with belief systems that combine traits of Norse and European mythology, euhemerization, Christian doctrine, Gnostic movements and Zoroastrianism, to mention a few.

There is more to be said about the intricacy of *Skyrim*, predominantly in the episodic relationship it entertains with respect to the universe and timeline of *The Elder Scrolls* series, which can further contend for its status as an epic of postmodernism. For instance, the civil war that is wreaking havoc throughout the world of the game, between the Stormcloaks and the Imperials, is a *mise en abyme* of historical revisionism. The former faction is faithful to Talos, a divine figure that is outlawed by the alliance pact that the Imperials signed with the Aldmeri Dominion. When the protagonist joins the Stormcloak rebellion, they swear allegiance to Talos. However, other histories and narrative accounts within the game, along with previous titles, inform us that Talos is, in fact, the first Emperor, Tiber Septim, and therefore human. The plot becomes even more nuanced when we consider the fact that the Imperials themselves claim to be fighting in the latter's name, but without

honouring him as a divinity. Each side has their own legitimizing narrative to justify their actions, so that the civil war is a cultural and religious conflict as much as it is a military one. Narrative divergences between the Aldmeri and mer (elves and humans) go as far as their cosmogonies, the most prominent departure being the fact that elves consider themselves to be descended from the primeval divinities, while the humans view themselves as the latter's creation ("The Monomyth").

Nonetheless, for the present discussion it is more meaningful to understand how playing *Skyrim* is different from reading or participating in the performance of an epic. The decisive aspect here is that this particular computer game, intentionally designed in the epic mode, gives the individual reader more than just the ability to interact with the artefact as issued by the developers. One can radically change the experience of play through the alteration of game mechanics, textures, aesthetic features, current quests or the supplementation of entirely new areas to the game world by means of modding. The latter additions can be populated and subjected to narrative design in analogous ways to the creation of the initial release, but with the added benefit of sharing it with other owners of the game for free. The community response to modding was overwhelming to say the least. Less than three years after the game's initial release in 2011, there were 10,000 mods crafted and shared by players (Purchese). Some of the most noteworthy and impactful mods to date have been *The Forgotten City* and *Enderal: The Shards of Order*. The problematizing of authorship and self-awareness in terms of intertextuality gives the game a unique postmodern nuance that is not immediately noticeable by experiencing the base content offered by the developers as a result of the purchase.

The second major departure from previous manifestations of the epic mode concerns the experience of play itself. Janet Murray finds that the digital environment as a whole provides the user with an increased level of immersion as compared to text-based media: "The enchantment of the computer creates for us a public space that also feels very private and intimate … wherein computers are liminal objects located on the threshold between external reality and our own minds" (99). Her work foreshadows what Bethesda Game Studios would achieve with *Skyrim* a decade or so

later. For a more nuanced perspective on contemporary play, however, I turn to Gordon Calleja's model of incorporation, which best describes the noetic nature of engaging with digital artefacts such as *The Elder Scrolls* releases. As the individual is permitted mediated access to the fictional world, they are concomitantly internalizing the game world by traversing it, while also being corporeally embodied within it through their avatar or player character (Calleja 88). The fascination and charm of the virtual world increases with the degree of participation and agency that it requires from the player. The more involved the player is, from a tactical, performative, affective, shared, narrative and spatial point of view, the shorter the distance between virtual world and real-life persona. A balance is usually sought between openness, the degree to which it is possible to make one's own story, and narrativity, the extent to which a story is unchangeable. Surprisingly enough, Murray's "rapture of the rhizome" (132) is still the ultimate goal, namely a structure that creates within readers the illusion of being able to navigate the labyrinth of the game world independent of an exterior hierarchy. This feature is commonly referred to as "open-world" in video game design and Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* series are some of the most successful examples of it.

Despite the fact that the fantasy of self-actualization, of evading the linearity of space and time is enacted by the basic, decentering experience of play itself – when the player is both in Skyrim and at their desk, in 2018 and in the year 401 of the Fourth Era, two centuries after the Oblivion crisis – this particular game seeks to actively challenge the individual to acknowledge what Jonathan Boulter refers to as instantiation or the possibility of the subject to "become, through the avatar, something other than what s/he is in the real world" (14), such as, for instance a vampire, a rogue bandit or an agent of the Empire. The experience of an environment tactically refined to simultaneously engage a single individual in a wide range of contradictory ethical stances effectively displaces the player's identity from their current body, giving rise to a complex "structure of distributed, dispersed and displaced wills" (Boulter 13) and minds. A temporary dissolution of the self is also Eugénie Shinkle's conclusion in her study of the aesthetic features of video games

and whether they expose us to a form of technological sublime (8). Yet, for this to happen, Shinkle emphasizes the role of the interface and its functionality in bridging the gap between game content and player.

To conclude, not only does *Skyrim* manifest some of the most fundamental features of the epic mode in its game content, but it also transforms the experience of the epic, as traditionally understood, into a possibility to actively engage in self-becoming against the wider context of a digital community. Testing the boundaries of one's identity through incorporation and agency, while simultaneously experiencing several fragmentary individualities have turned such video games from mere forms of entertainment into an authentic practice of the posthuman. Both reflecting the digital interconnectedness of our world and participating in it, RPGs are increasingly proving to be the epic mode of contemporary times. Computer games displaying the magnitude and game design proficiency similar to the latest episode in *The Elder Scrolls* timeline are symbolic expressions of the current state of culture, some of them quite capable of standing in for the whole through their conflicts and polyphony. The arguments I have presented thus far, mostly related to the way in which digital content has adapted historical epic motifs, show that certain video games have not only drawn on an existing body of epic works in order to create engaging artefacts, but that they have improved upon some of the major features associated with the former, imbuing them with postmodern and posthuman qualities, in the spirit of veritable contemporary epics.

Note:

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