

THREE POSTMODERNISTS HEROES/ANTIHEROS IN THE VIDEO GAME

TRÊS HERÓIS / ANTI-HERÓIS PÓS-MODERNOS NO VIDEOGAME

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ABSTRACT: In terms of good and evil, our simple goal is to show how grey are three videogame characters in *The Cave* (2013) in the light of the postmodernist convention of antihero. As in all media, Postmodernism seems to have permeated videogame stories as well. Throughout the article, we will try to highlight slipperiness of the distinction between the hero and the antihero in *The Cave* as opposed to the moral clear-cut demarcation in other games.

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RESUMO: Em termos de bem e mal, o nosso objetivo é mostrar o quanto três personagens do videogame *The Cave* (2013) são nebulosos, à luz da convenção pós-modernista de anti-herói. Como em todas as mídias, o pós-modernismo parece ter permeado também as histórias de videogame. Ao longo do artigo, tentaremos destacar aspectos escorregadiços da distinção entre o herói e o anti-herói em *The Cave*, em oposição à clara demarcação em outros jogos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Anti-herói, Jogos, Histórias, Pós-moderno



Image 1: The Cave

Introduction

The hero/antihero figures are perhaps the most central element in storytelling. There are heroes and there are villains, and there are those characters that fictionally live in between the good and the evil, now commonly known as postmodern protagonists, also known as the postmodern antiheroes. John Fitch maintains that the traditional hero is “usually depicted as one delivering salvation,

enacting positive change, and bringing relief from suffering or oppression”. Fitch reminds that the hero usually possesses the emotional, physical, and moral strength as well as charity and fortitude. On the other hand, the anti-hero is defined in the dictionary as “a protagonist who lacks the attributes that make a heroic figure, as nobility of mind and spirit, a life or attitude marked by action or purpose.” Abrams also compares the qualities of both the hero and antihero:

The chief person in a modern novel or play whose character is widely discrepant from that which we associate with the traditional protagonist or hero of a serious literary work. Instead of manifesting largeness, dignity, power, or heroism, the antihero is petty, ignominious, passive, ineffectual or dishonest” (11).

We find Eunice Madison’s statement quiet accurate in summing up the collective opinion of critics regarding that postmodern fiction is dominated by the anti-hero who was born in modernism. Madison’s claims that “ethical heroes have all but disappeared from literature”. The Madison reminds us of John Gardner’s *Moral Fiction* where he wrote that postmodern authors show no interest in critiquing social problems, presenting moral dilemmas, or reflecting ethical values through heroic characters. This proves true in our game analysis of *The Cave*; however, we find it interesting that even within the same unheroic premise, our three characters – together – are signaling a different set of values not yet recognized on the postmodernist/modernist map. Reading older and more recent literary theory reference, it seems that we – collectively – are getting better in creating clear demarcations between what makes a postmodernist protagonist as opposed to the modernist one.

In this discussion, we need to highlight that we have encountered three grey colored characters in terms of their morality and course of action. These are the Hillbilly, The Knight, and The

Time Traveler characters in a game that insists on postmodernist narrative expression. The game we are about to critique shows an extreme skepticism toward ideas heroism. The voice-over narration always accompanies the player through his/her journey with the characters while by means of cynical commentary on events that shows no sympathy for the misfortune depicted in the story. The voice of the narrator is acidic and condescending as it commenting on the characters actions. That is after the player is guided by the game to perform these character actions. Our three characters would fit perfectly in Ihab Hassan's description of antihero in that they "appear primarily in the guise of the victim, not acting but acted upon by the world" (59).

The Cave can be called a postmodernist narrative because of its irony, playfulness, and black humor. The game overuses parody and satire to ridicule conventional narrative traditions, and presents instead the postmodernist imperfections of the protagonist's personality as opposed to the altruistic traditional hero. We experience these characters weakness and flaws as we unfold the riddle-ridden story, and thus we – as players – become central in the storytelling. The game itself rewards our efforts by means of a play mechanic called the "cave paintings": a part of the story presented in a number of painting that explains how the protagonist has become an antihero. At the end, we leave the game with the impression that all our three characters have finished their journey from the grey state to the villain's state.

Goals are Common

The Cave is the story of seven characters: The adventurer, the Hillbilly, the Knight, the Monk, the Scientist, the Time Traveler, and the Twins. The game features the voice narrating of the cave itself, a talking cave where the events take place. The cave speaks in a deep male voice that accompanies the player throughout the story.

To play the game, the player needs choose three characters out of the seven. The game begins with the following voice-over introduction:

Welcome! Don't let my sultry and mysterious voice startle you. For hundreds, nay, thousands, nay, nay, nay tens of thousands of years, people have come to me in search of what they desire most. Few find what they are looking for even fewer ever leave. Welcome to...the cave. That's me, the cave. Yes, I'm a talking cave. Don't laugh, it makes dating hell. Besides, I have a really interesting story to tell you this evening. So pay attention. It's a story of seven people and a glimpse into a dark place in each of their hearts. But be careful before you judge...There is a dark place in your heart as well. Someday you will find yourself descending my depths in search of what you desire...and you might not like what you find either."

Then the voice goes on introducing the characters:

1. The Twins: "They just want to go out and play. What could be more innocent than that?"
2. The Monk: "He seeks his master, so he can become the master. It's a journey filled with peace and enlighten. And murder"
3. The Adventurer: "She is hot on the trail of lost companions and unequalled ancient treasure. But not necessary in that order."
4. The Scientist: "She is on the cusp of a great discovery for all of humankind. And a hundred millions lives hang in the balance".
5. The Time Traveler: "She's is here to right a wrong a million years in a making. Fortunately for her yesterday is a new day".
6. The Hillbilly: "on this fine Night he searches for his true love, but does desire burns too brightly in his heart?"
7. The Knight: (The Talking Cave seems to jeer) "He is in one quest for a sword of unequalled power and prestige, but will he find it before anyone else gets hurt?"

After being introduced to the seven game avatars, the player must choose three of them to start the game. To enter into The Cave the player's first mission is to bring tree trinkets to the gift clerk shop. The mission begins and requires the player to instigate the group work of three characters. As a group, the player can sense the positive side of the game: the cooperation and the sense of the common journey where a group of travelers work together to achieve a common goal. Once you learn you need the group always together to solve the problems, you also realize sometimes they need to be in different locations in the cave to solve a puzzle. Some examples of that situation are: one character needs to place a sausage on a spike to lure a monster, another character needs to ring the bell to awaken the monster, while the third needs to activate the trap that pulls the monster by its tail. At this point in the game, any character could do whichever job, but later on in the game, each character needs to do its part based on its own strength. For example, the Hillbilly's strength is to hold its breath, and so he has to be the one doing the diving part of the mission. Each character in the game has its own special power. The Twins' is called The Ghost: they can copy themselves and be in 2 different places in the same time. While The Monk can perform telekinesis, The Time Traveler is able to teleport and The Knight can become invincible. The Hillbilly can hold his breath, The Scientist can hack, and The Adventurer cleverly uses her grapple. In each new adventure the player has the opportunity to experience each aspect of the personality of the characters chosen; this will help the player to learn about their dark sides.

The characters chosen for our analyses were: The Hillbilly, The Knight, and the Time Traveler. Throughout the game, the player learns that The Hillbilly has been a neglected child who grew up to become a heart-broken man, and an angry arsonist. The Time Traveler is an envious woman who seeks murder. The Knight is a playful young boy who thought he could defeat the dragon.

The Antiheros



Image 2: The Knight

For this game instance, we have chosen The Knight. He is in fact a peasant boy who wants to play. Hiding behind the shiny armor he stole, the knight strives to obtain Excalibur, the legendary sword to complete his playful fantasy. The game shows us the real knight passing through the fields on his horse. He drops dead from a heart attack – conveniently enough, an unheroic way for a knight with a shiny armor to die. The peasant boy watches the knight sweating heavily. He waits till the knight stops moving, and then he collects the knight's armor. He wears the armor, mounts the knight's horse, and then he rides away into adventure.

This is our knight, and his companions in this journey are the Hillbilly and the Time Traveler. The Hillbilly appears in the story as a man with a noble purpose; that is, to win the heart of girl he loves. The Time Traveler quest is simple: she is trying to murder her co-worker's ancestor. At this point, it is seemingly established by the game that the story will be a hero's journey type of story. While the



Image 3: The Hillbilly

game play does not negate such premise of the story, it becomes obvious that we deal with three antiheroes. The three characters do unheroic and less than admirable acts to continue their quests.

Slay the Dragon to Win her Heart

In the knight's quest, our three characters cooperate to get around the dragon and steal the golden coin to win the princess's proof of love. However, someone forgot the dragon gate open and so the dragon escapes and chews the princess. The show must go on and the King – the princess's father who waits passionately for someone to win his daughter's heart and who believes the Knight is the one who deserves his daughter's heart – does not need to know she died during the quest. The knight goes ahead and tries to pull the Excalibur sword



Image 4: The Time Traveler

from the rock in the king's court. The King believes the Knight deserves this opportunity with Excalibur for winning the princess's heart, but the Knight is not a knight and he fails to pull the sword from the rock. The Hillbilly then sneaks into the vault under the castle and blows the rock's foundation with dynamite. The rock crumbles as the peasant boy draws the sword out. The King becomes full of joy and runs to the princess's quarters to tell her the good news. Our three characters leave in a hurry with Excalibur before the king finds out his daughter was killed during the quest.

The game characters get to the carnival where the Hillbilly's quest must take place. The Hillbilly must acquire five carnival tickets in order to buy an oversized teddy bear which he thinks will win him the heart of the girl he loves. Acquiring the first ticket is easy: he just snatch it from the hands of a child. But more antiheroic acts will follow. One of the tickets is acquired by cheating in a carnival game.

The Time Traveler's quest is a murderous quest to satisfy jealousy. Her co-worker won the "best employee of all times" award, and she wants it. The Time Traveler decides to go back in time, all the way to a prehistoric time to find her co-worker's ancestor and murders him. And she does; and thus she gains the "best-employee of all times" award.

Finally, the Hillbilly gets the teddy bear, but the girl he loves is already with another man. The Hillbilly is enraged by rejection and goes into an arsonist rampage burning carnivals. The Knight gets the Excalibur sword, but since he is not a real knight, he cannot fight the dragon, and so the dragon destroys the entire kingdom. The Time Traveler becomes the "best employee of all times" at work, but the world she lives in is now a nightmarish postapocalyptic place; all because she missed with the chain of historical events of humanity. The ending is cruel for all three characters.

Victor Brombert writes that antiheros display different kinds of courage more in tune with our time and our needs. It is true that our three characters in *The Cave* have gone from bad to worse. We

also have to admit they have lied, cheated, manipulated, caused death and damage; they even have abandoned an old man on a remote island. Their journey was one of malice and their purposes were not all pure. They were definitively not modernist heroes. However, the postmodernist profile for antihero seems to be too clear for our three characters simply because the game medium gives us the ability to control them in a way that will make them help each other. Let's consider this: they have been through hell. Their adventure was dangerous as they risked falling from heights, drowning, getting mauled by monsters and dogs, and blown to pieces by explosives, etc. They took these risks and they experienced death many times while we controlled them. Their courage is not in taking risk, but is in taking risk for others. Each of the three characters has performed heroic acts and dangerous stunts just to help their companion – in a way that the player decides on during the game play. While these protagonists are not typical modernist ones, the chivalry they exhibited does not qualify them for postmodernism either.

Conclusion

The presentation in *The Cave* is different. This is not about the typical surge of violence that players experience in *Call of Duty* or the wickedness they could experience in *Grand Theft Auto*. *The Cave* guides the player through a journey to explore the imperfection of the human nature and perhaps what makes you a human. The fact that the game is played – not read or watched – makes the player realize that literary demarcations of postmodernism are not quite suitable for coloring games as a narrative genre.

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