

Chapter 6

Sacred Geographies: Myth and Ritual in Serious Games

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author suggests that designers create serious games by turning to an interesting class of stories called sacred scenarios. Such sacred stories are found in many, if not all, cultures. These are richly promising sources for game narratives: They are serious yet entertaining; they combine fantasy with deeply held and emotionally charged visions of life; they offer situations that express basic human experiences; and they bring together the basic elements of story—plot, action, and spatial setting—in rich and surprising ways. They are also easy to program and can be used to create complex narrative experiences from simple elements. The author describes different modes of these sacred scenarios and sketch some possible games to be drawn from this source.

INTRODUCTION

In churches, temples, and caves and on remote mountaintops, cultures celebrate their origins and make contact with the divine forces surrounding them in intricate rituals full of movement, choreographed action, words, and music. Though these ceremonies sometimes look like spontaneous outpourings of religious fervor, they typically closely follow age-old scripts that prescribe every detail of the event. These scripts guide the group as it integrates its

myths with its traditional rituals. I term this pairing of myth and ritual a sacred scenario for, like a theatrical scenario, it provides the outline for the ritual performance. The rites may differ from place to place, but they have one thing in common: They all are attempts by a community to maintain and extend contact with the great divine forces that surround its world. Groups may supplicate, praise, and even threaten those powers, but the ritual always affirms the absolute importance of the community's relationships with the sacred as a source of safety, power, and knowledge. Typically the scenarios concern an encounter between human and nonhuman realms

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and involve some transference of power from one realm to the other. As such, the scenarios implicitly connect their particular view of human–divine relationships with a sacred geography. Where do the gods live? How do humans make contact with them? Where do demonic forces lurk? Where do the dead go when they depart this world? The answers to these questions reveal in dramatic fashion how a society conceives the structure of the cosmos and the place humans occupy within that structure.

Ceremonies invoke myths to tell the story of the community and its gods, and ritual action enacts certain features of the story and actualizes it in the present. An example familiar to us from Western European culture is the Christian Mass. The Mass has both a text and a rite: The text recounts the story of Christ’s passion and his redemptive sacrifice; the accompanying rite recreates that story through the actions of priest and communicants. The story assumes a sacred geography that situates God up in heaven and humans below on the earth. Given that geographical disposition, the ritual of the Mass functions as a kind of spiritual tool for drawing the deity down to the human plane where He can be encountered, ingested, and made potent in the lives of the communicants. The story explains what the priest is doing, and the rite makes the story active in the life of the community. The entire event—text, ritual, music and so on—serves to transport participants into a kind of sacred time where they become actors in the original event and are spiritually renewed by their intimate contact with the divine.

Games that draw on such sacred scenarios would be serious in two ways. First, they can be used to program complex, thematically intricate stories. Because these sacred stories are set in universes made of intersecting yet geographically separate worlds, we can use them to create a long complex narrative that at the same time is easily divided into discrete segments or chunks,¹ each chunk being one of the realms through which the

character travels. By combining these chunks into larger wholes, we could produce surprisingly sophisticated “macro” narratives. A program could exercise firm control over each individual segment and then combine them all into a long and complex narrative. And second, these scenarios could provide players with serious learning experiences, for these scenarios express in a concrete, embodied form a culture’s deepest intuition about how the world functions and how humans can connect to the divine. As gamers navigate through these sacred geographies, they can gain a deep feel for the nature and function of religious systems and for the intricacy of cultural difference.

There has been much debate over whether or not computer games are, or can be, narrative. I will not enter into the ludology–narratology controversy, which has been “chewed over” by too many for too long. Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan (2004) provide a detailed overview of the debate, devoting two entire sections to the problem without coming to any firm conclusions (pp. 1–60). Kallay (this volume) gives a trenchant account of the debates and explains her own reservations about how the problem has been framed.

Jenkins (2004) points out that the gameplay-story debate misses the point by focussing on whether or not a game tells a story, and thereby omits to take a closer look at the narrative elements at a more localized level, or so-called “micronarratives” (p.125). Jenkins’s reading of the possibilities of spatial storytelling not only provides an interesting way to link gameplay and narrative, but the micronarrative approach of reading games also proves useful when applying psychology to games. When juxtaposed with narrative psychology, the isolated actions of the micronarrative (which can be anything from a game level to a sub-level scene) allow for a much more in-depth analysis of the common factors in narrative and the gameplay, as will be demonstrated in the case studies. (Kallay, this volume)

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