

HEROES IN VIRTUAL SPACE

SIMONA KLAUS

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts
Department of Ethnology and
Cultural Anthropology
Cerkova 7, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

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We live in a consumer society in which human existence is guided into a never-ending search for fun and pleasure. Global communication flows transport various folklore elements and in this process they gain new shapes and meanings. It is interesting to observe how folklore or mythological elements, in our case hero patterns, appear in computer technology, especially in computer games. The focus of this paper is on the quests of virtual and classical heroes. I will argue that folklore elements are reproduced in modern media such as computer games.

Key words: *Folklore, mass media, computer games, hero pattern, virtual hero*

Myths have been present in human societies since the beginning. They have always been part of human imagining and man's making sense of the world around him. The myth is generally understood to be the most sacred narrative form (Malinowski 1984:197). Mythical gods and heroes have told our ancestors how and how not to behave. In the past, especially during the Romantic period, folklorists gathered stories, legends and myths in an attempt to preserve them in an ever-changing world. There are a number of definitions of myths and mythical elements, but most authors agree that myths are sacred narratives with a significant function in societies (Malinowski 1984:196-206). Throughout history, various schools of thought have looked to specific characteristics and functions of myths to form definitions. The first folklore studies of the hero myth date back to the 1870s, when Edward Tylor argued that many such myths follow a uniform plot or pattern (Segal 1990:vii). His work inspired many other academics, among them Johann Georg von Hahn, Vladimir Propp and Otto Rank, to

name just a few, to identify hero patterns. The various approaches used by these folklorists to analyse hero myths give us rich material for comparative studies today.

The function of myth has changed over the decades. Myths still transmit the beliefs of our ancestors, but not in the dogmatic sense of explaining, for instance, the creation of the universe. This does not mean that the myth has disappeared from our consciousness, quite the opposite; it still exists on various levels even in today's information society but in a much more disguised or at least less obvious way. In the mass media of the 21st century, we see a hero advertising domestic cleaning agents on television, we hear about an everyday hero who has saved another person's life, a football team that has won the world championship, and so on.

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing interest among folklore scholars in the mass media and the types of folklore that have consequently appeared (see Dundes 1975:xvi). My main focus will not be on heroes who appear on television shows, in movies, books, newspapers and magazines, or to those we hear about on the radio. Instead, our attention will turn to an often overlooked topic among folklorists – computer games. “Computer games have moved from subculture to mainstream industry” in the last few decades and therefore represent an important part of everyday life (Dovey and Kennedy 2006:1). There are many types of computer games, but the ones we are interested in are fantasy “role playing”¹ games. The heroes featured here take a leading role² and their characteristics and ordeals will be compared with those of the classical mythological heroes. Several questions appear in this context and I will try to give some answers. Why have virtual heroes appeared? Can we argue that folklore elements are reproduced within mass media such as computer games? Which elements are being reproduced in the four games analysed? Why and how? Does this signal “the end of mythological elements” or do mass media provide a new space for their continuity?

¹ The games discussed here are *Morrowind*, *Ultima*, *Diablo*, and *Rune*.

² There are also multi-player games, where players/heroes exist in same game and interact with each other.

THE HERO PATTERN IN FOLKLORISTICS

Many folklore researchers, especially in the late 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, were interested in the meaning of myths and the role of heroes in them. Firstly, I must note that there was a generally accepted difference between heroes and gods in folkloristics: stories of gods are defined as myths, and stories about heroes are defined as legends. Myths take place in a primordial past and describe the creation of the physical world by gods, animals, or “cultural heroes”. Although human beings do not often appear as heroes in myths, according to Bascom, heroes often have human attributes. Heroes’ actions take place in a world different from our own or in a different sphere of the world (the underworld or the skies (see Bascom 1984:9). Legends take place in a less distant past within the present physical world, and tell of migrations, wars and victories, the deeds of past heroes, chiefs and kings, and the succession of ruling dynasties (Segal 2005:6, 31; Dundes 1975:164-165; Bascom 1984:9). For Carlyle, “hero myths are stories about divine heroes – divine in effect, whether or not formally” (see Segal 2005:6), which negates the above mentioned distinction. It is evident now that the distinction between heroes and gods is blurred by the concept of heroism, which does not demote gods but rather elevates humans to the position of gods. Usually, the gap between the human and the divine is insurmountable, but there are exceptions, such as Heracles³ and Jesus Christ (ibid. 6-7). Segal also points out the unequal status of heroes compared to that of gods, stating that “heroes are not only celebrated, they are also worshipped, but not in the same way as gods are” (ibid. 5-6). The relationship between heroes and gods is indeed a complex one, especially since there are many types of heroes, as will be discussed below. This article will mention some of the turning points in research on the hero pattern based upon myths, and present a new type of hero relevant in the present world – the virtual hero.

³ Heracles the son of Zeus was mortal, but because he accomplished superhuman feats of strength and outmanoeuvred death, he was rewarded immortality (Segal 2005:6-7).

THE HERO⁴ CONCEPT – FROM MYTHOLOGICAL HERO TO VIRTUAL HERO

As mentioned above, the first appearance of the hero pattern dates back to the mid-nineteenth century when Edward Tylor, Johann G. von Hahn⁵ and Vladimir Propp⁶ tried to determine a hero pattern that could be found universally in every myth. These scholars were not interested in the origins of myths, nor in their meaning and function – their goal was only to define the hero pattern (Segal 2005:12). The hero patterns they defined begin with the exposure of the hero (special omens or evil threat that predict his existence), follow phases of his path (leaves home etc) and end in heroes salvation and heroism (Segal 1990:viii-ix).

There are other folklorists who analysed hero patterns yet also considered the origins, functions and the meaning of myths. Joseph Campbell, Otto Rank and Lord Raglan are considered to have made the most significant contributions to the theoretical framework of the hero pattern (Segal 2005:12).

THE MYTHOLOGICAL HERO

Firstly, folklorists have defined a hero type that is entirely imagined – the classical mythological hero. Many researchers have tried to define this figure's characteristics from different points of view (see Campbell [1949] 2004; Lord Raglan 1990; Meletinski 2001; Dundes 1990). Some have argued in their work that mythical heroes were in fact real people who after their death were attributed divine characteristics by others and therefore became celebrated as heroes. Lord Raglan (1990:158-159), on the other hand, tried to prove the opposite and denied any connections between real people and mythological heroes. One of the main reasons for this is the incredibility of written sources, which usually appear several decades or even centuries after

⁴ There are many types of hero in broader scientific discourse (superhero, fictional hero, tragic hero, etc.) that have influenced the development of the virtual hero. However, they are not mentioned here, since analysis concentrates upon the topics and types of heroes folklorists discussed in the past.

⁵ Von Hahn's hero pattern has 16 categories (see footnote 8, page 4 and 5).

⁶ Vladimir Propp divided the hero's life into 31 categories with numerous subcategories (Propp 1995:33-76).

the alleged hero's lifetime (ibid.). As Lord Raglan argued, one often finds completely different stories about a hero when comparing historical writings and traditional lore (ibid. 165-166).

Joseph Campbell ([1949] 2004) emphasized the importance of the hero by employing the concept of the “cultural hero”. In his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he analysed mythological heroes and their characteristics. Heroes are, next to gods and anti-gods, the main characters in mythological narratives (ibid.). They are usually male⁷ and possess cunning, physical strength and courage. Heroes are often half-human and demigods, as is most evident in the case of Greek mythology where many heroes are sons to Zeus and “earthly” mothers. Their heroism becomes evident already in their early youth through their behaviour and individual nature (see Segal 2005:16-23).

The hero can be recognised on the basis of several typical characteristics. A number of theoretical approaches have been used to define typical characteristics and quests. Psychoanalysis, founded by Sigmund Freud, represents one such field, and differs from other approaches by only considering the hero's youth. Freud himself was very interested in fairytales and myths. He sought in them special symbols that would help him analyse the unconscious. After he compared dreams and myths, he concluded that the same patterns exist in both (see Dundes 1984:270-290). The importance of Freud's knowledge of classical mythology is evident in how he named the two crucial concepts in his work – the Oedipus and Electra complexes⁸. But the equalisation of dreams and mythological content is problematic because they have different origins and forms. Johann G. Von Hahn⁹ and Otto

⁷ The journal *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* has addressed this issue (Cassell and Jenkins 2000).

⁸ The Oedipus complex is named after the Greek mythical character Oedipus who killed his father and married his mother due to unusual circumstances. Freud tried to prove that this state of mind is universal and that it must be suppressed in our youth in order for us live a normal life later on.

⁹ The hero pattern according to von Hahn: 1) The hero is an illegitimate child; 2) The mother is a princess; 3) The father is a god; 4) Prophecy about prevalence; 5) Exposition; 6) Breastfed by animals; 7) The hero is raised by a shepherd couple without children; 8) The hero is daring; 9) Goes abroad; 10) Triumphant return back home; 11) Kills oppressor/saves mother; 12) Builds cities; 13) Exceptional or unusual death; 14) Dies in shame because of incest/dies young; 15) Hero is killed by a jealous enemy; 16) Hero kills younger brother (Segal 1990:xii-xvi).

Rank¹⁰ (Segal 1990:viii-ix) followed Freud's theory and formed hero patterns according to it. According to these scholars, only the hero's childhood and youth were relevant for the analysis of hero myths.

Carl G. Jung also discussed hero patterns and his important contribution is reflected in the work of his student and successor James Campbell who formed his own system based upon the idea of "monomyth" (ibid. ix-xi). What differentiates this hero pattern from Von Hahn's or Rank's is the relevance of the second part of the hero's life – adulthood. He also stressed four main distinct functions of myth.¹¹ The emphasis here is on archetypes and the unconscious part of the human mind, individual or collective (ibid. xvi-xxiii). His heroes may also be female, not exclusively male as was the case with Rank's heroes.

One aspect of a hero pattern defines it according to the relationship between myth and ritual. Segal writes about myth-ritual theory which tries to determine what kind of relationship forms between the two, did ritual exist before myth or vice versa or are the both concepts connected or do they exist in society separately? Authors such as Lord Raglan see the core of analysing myth in its connectedness to the ritual, i.e. the connection between the hero and ritual. Raglan states that "myths provide the script for ritual"¹² (See Segal 2005:23) and it is the meaning of their mutual activities that is of great importance. In myth-ritualist point of view, all phases of human life are important for establishing hero pattern. James Frazer is considered to be the most important representative of this theory, but as he did not pay

¹⁰ The hero pattern according to O. Rank: 1) The hero has respectable parents; 2) The father is a king; 3) Problems with pregnancy; 4) Warning prophecy; 5) Hero is put into water; 6) Saved by animals or people of low origin; 7) Breastfed by an animal; 8) Grows up; 9) Finds respected parents; 10) Vengeance upon the father; 11) Gets recognized by people as a hero and king; 12) Achieves honour (Segal 1990:xii-xvi).

¹¹ 1) To instil a sense of awe and mystery in confronting the world; 2) to provide a symbolic image for the world; 3) to maintain the social order and 4) to harmonize human beings with the cosmos (see Segal 2005:17).

¹² The opinions of scholars upon the relationship between myth and ritual vary from defining the myth as the basis for creation of the ritual on one hand to the ritual as a basis for the formation of the myth. In fact both categories are mainly defined as intertwined and connected.

much attention to the hero pattern, I will not discuss his work further at this point. Much more important in this context is Lord Raglan's work. As Segal (2005:24) states, "It is Raglan who turns a *theory of myth in general into a theory of hero myths in particular*." Raglan added some important elements to his hero pattern. Among the most important are that the hero overcomes a monster with the help of a magical object, and that magic plays a crucial role in solving riddles and overcoming labyrinths. Raglan analysed 21 myths and created a hero pattern with 22 phases, thus demonstrating that there is a typical pattern and that ritual and myth are closely connected (Segal 1990:138).

THE CULTURAL HERO AND HIS ANTIPODE

As shown above, there are many ways to analyse the hero pattern. One concept already briefly mentioned above but not yet defined is that of the "cultural hero". Jeleazar Mojsejevič Meletinski (2001) devoted much attention to the "cultural hero" concept in his work entitled *Bogovi, junaki, ljudje*. Meletinski defined the "cultural hero" as one who "brings elements of culture to the people" (ibid. 5). Cultural heroes often steal cultural goods from gods or higher deities. This motif can most clearly be seen in the classical myth of Prometheus who stole fire from Zeus and brought it to mortals. We can find a belief among ancient peoples that "everything that is, originates in distant mythical times as a result of heroes or totemic ancestral action. Success or failure is highly dependent upon strict respect of the traditional rules" (ibid.). People must show respect towards the hero. Stories of heroic deeds spread orally and most of them were first written in the notes of various researchers. It is interesting to see that "cultural heroes, especially in the oldest versions, are not morally idealised; their adventures and indecent acts serve as a warning to people, they are examples of how 'not to do' things and examples of 'how it is proper to do' something" (ibid. 9).

One very important feature in the case of the cultural hero is rebirth. Death is the "natural" end of ordinary people and the rebirth occurs only when a divine or heroic person is in question. As Meletinski puts it, rebirth is "a metaphor for the hero's perfection" (ibid. 17) and with that a reason for people to respect and honour him.

According to Meletinski, cultural heroes always appear in myths in pairs, usually with a brother (ibid. 10). We can say that one figure represents the good side and the other its counterpart, or bad side. The first helps people and the other tries to harm them. Prometheus once again figures as a fine example of this thesis. Prometheus is regarded as the oldest cultural hero in Greek mythology in which we find two brothers, one clever (Prometheus) and the other foolish (Epimetheus). The story goes that Prometheus brings knowledge to mortals, gives them fire and teaches them to understand art. Because his brother does not succeed in producing such good things, he becomes jealous and out of rage creates things that harm people, such as monsters, negative powers and diseases (ibid. 15-16). The good/bad dichotomy is present among gods in all world mythologies. The antipode of the hero is often the trickster. Interestingly, tricksters are often seen as cultural heroes because, in a way, they also bring good things to mankind. At the same time, they represent a sort of parody of the god of creation. They appear as female or male characters (Davidson 1982:105). In Nordic mythology, the trickster is named Loki, in North American Indian mythology popular tricksters are a crow and a rabbit (ibid. 104) etc.

The detailed analysis of the hero pattern developed by Meletinski denies the existence and use of a very important element in the hero's life and deeds – the use of magical objects. I do not fully agree with this conclusion because it is evident that many myths and stories about heroes contain god-given magical objects. Even if they do not employ such objects, gods sometimes interfere in the hero's acts with some other form of magic and therefore this element should not be completely excluded. In contrast to Meletinski, Raglan argued that magic and magical objects are omnipresent in heroic narratives (1990:157-175).

THE MODERN HERO

According to Segal, the traditional mythological hero did not die away in the 20th century but was transformed and continues to exist in the form of the "modern hero" (2005). This type of hero does not have divine attributes. In mythology, the hero may be of divine descent but as he reaches

other media, for instance literature, he becomes increasingly profane. The hero is just a normal person, weak and often lacking moral principles. Contemporary heroes in sports, show business, the economy and politics are admired because they are successful, not because of their divinity.

The path of technological development has led the hero into new worlds of existence in the 21st century. Heroes appear over and over again and they live on. Segal argues that “myths about heroes do not try to solve the gap between human and holy, but change people into virtual gods by ascribing them divine characteristics. These characteristics can be everything from physical attributes (strength, size, looks) to other features (such as intelligence, integrity)” (Segal 2005:7).

Mass media¹³ construct heroes and their “heroic deeds” from ordinary people on a daily basis. A heroic deed can vary from saving someone’s life to a good sports result. The creation of the profane hero continues in the form of political heroes, who are of course strongly connected to social circumstances and prevailing ideologies¹⁴.

THE HISTORICAL HERO

The concept of the historical hero appeared in the 19th century and was discussed by contemporaries together with the mythological hero. This type of hero was a real living person and not a fictional figure of myth or legend. Thomas Carlyle published his book, *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History*, in 1841 in which he discussed historical heroes and their powers to change the flow of history. He divided historical heroes into six categories (the hero as a deity; as a prophet; as a poet; as a priest; as a man of letters; as a king). Their common feature is their ability not to see things as other people do but to discern what lies beyond the obviousness of reality (see Segal 2005:1-2).

¹³ A lot could be added to the hero debate here from the point of view of literature and the superhero concept, but there is just not enough space here to cover all various topics.

¹⁴ For example, many people consider the former Yugoslav president, J. Broz Tito, to be a hero.

Historical heroes, then, are real people who were made into heroes as a result of important actions during their lifetime. Robert A. Segal's book *Hero Myths* (2005) features heroes from various mythologies (Celtic, biblical, Polynesian, etc.) on the one hand and historical figures like Christopher Columbus, Joan of Arc and Galileo on the other. He does not aim to draw parallels between the mythological and the historical hero, but tries to show how the concept of the hero has changed along with societal change. Segal recognises several types of heroes – besides the mythological and historical also the literary hero – and divides them into several subcategories. We read about the national hero, the hero as an explorer, the hero as a saint, the intellectual hero and the hero as entertainer. Names cited here include George Washington, Davy Crockett, Elvis Presley etc. As we can see, the hero has assumed a human image and physical body.

In the late 19th century, a number of theories on historical heroes were developed. The first theoretical view, also adhered to by Carlyle, honoured the “great man” whose actions influenced the whole of society (Segal 2005:39). Carlyle argued that time or era shape the type of heroes that are needed in them and make it possible for them to evolve. The hero as deity could only appear in the ages before science was fully developed. He also stated that heroes' existence was self-evident according to “pagan” beliefs in interconnectedness and the omnipresence of the divine in the physical human world (ibid. 2). Since Carlyle talks about hero as a deity in times before the full development of science, he refers to such beliefs as pagan. His theoretical point of view faced much critic and opposition.

One theoretical agenda that claimed the opposite, i.e. heroes are made by society. For Friedrich Nietzsche and Herbert Spencer, the hero was a product of society and that is why they celebrated society as a whole and not the hero alone (ibid. 4, 39).

Some authors combined both of the above-mentioned agendas and stated that a strong individual character and a specific climate in society are needed to produce heroism. G.W.F. Hegel, for instance, honoured the hero because of his inner personification of the “world order”. Hegel's “great man” may be motivated by personal reasons but he still acts for the good of society (ibid. 4).

Sidney Hook defined two categories of heroes, one being the “acting” individual and the other a person who initiates events. The latter is a hero in the true sense of the word and may be male or female. The actions of this hero are able to change the course of history. Hook did not agree with Carlyle about history being consequential. He did agree, nevertheless, that certain individuals shape the course of history with their personality and that “decisions derive from the character of the agents” (ibid. 4-5).

The 20th century presented many different types of heroes, which were discussed and analysed by scholars of various disciplines. Heroes became more and more a part of the physical world, and interestingly at the end of the 20th century the concept of the hero in a way once again lost its physical shape and human body and entered the virtual world in which every individual can become a hero.

THE VIRTUAL¹⁵ HERO

Before I discuss the virtual hero, it must be stressed that the virtual hero came into existence as a result of the long technological development of computers. Virtual worlds, the World Wide Web and other communication technologies became part of everyday life in the beginning of the 21st century. Real and virtual spaces have long been defined as two separate entities, but recent studies show that they intertwine in complex interaction (Mitra and Schwartz 2001). There are certain boundaries between the physical and the virtual, but they nevertheless influence each other and are co-dependent. Computer games are a fine example of this connectedness, as we can see how a player in the physical world directs the hero in the virtual space of the game. One can “dive” into an unknown world through the eyes of the main character by controlling their actions (Castronova 2007; String Weinbren 1995:403). J. Dovey and H. W. Kennedy (2006:9) address the same phenomenon using the word “immersion”, which in their opinion is a highly “desired quality of the production of active, engaging

¹⁵ Virtual space is defined as a “non-space”, which is created by people through various media technology – in our case computer technology. A similar concept is cyberspace or cybernetic space (Mitra and Schwartz 2001), which refers to the connection between “real” and “virtual” spaces.

and meaningful experiences.” As mentioned before, people can become heroes themselves through only a click or two.

For folklorists to study¹⁶ contemporary phenomena connected to computers it must be stressed that computer technologies have a high level of interaction and interactivity. Direct communication or face-to-face interaction has long been, and in a way still remains, the main characteristic in defining folklore as an event or performance. This is one of the main arguments that many folklorists have used¹⁷ to argue that the forms of folklore that appear in the mass media are not real folklore because the form of communication is indirect. Some recent cultural and media studies show otherwise¹⁸. As Gumpert and Drucker argue for the case of computer games:

Interactivity/Interaction – the action of the user generates a response either from another human being or computer program at the other end of the media connection. Interactivity is associated with action-reaction or command-response exchanges. Interactivity allows a user to make choices that will result in a variety of responses. Interaction and interactivity is associated with person-to-person contact and interactivity is associated with person-computer exchanges (Gumpert and Drucker 2005:23).

The dissemination of digital media communication has offered media audiences a wide variety of participatory social spaces and sites for production activities (Dovey and Kennedy 2006:124). But things have not stopped at defining the audience as solely participatory. Some authors like Sue Morris see computer games¹⁹ in this respect as prototypical of

¹⁶ It is almost impossible to analyse computer games on a textual level due to the interactivity involved that turns text into multiple texts that can be interpreted in many different ways. Computer games studies define the experience of gameplay as an embodied phenomenon (Dovey and Kennedy 2006:6, 20).

¹⁷ Many still do. For example, Slovene folklorist Marija Stanonik still argues that folklore that is communicated in any other way than directly or naturally represents second-hand folklore or “folklorismus” (Stanonik 1999).

¹⁸ The conceptualisation of audiences has travelled a 30-year path from spectatorship, through active audience theory, to the model of participatory audiences established through studies of fan culture (Dovey and Kennedy 2006:124).

¹⁹ Morris is referring to the FPS game genre (“First-Person Shooter”).

new media economies insofar as they are an excellent example of the shift from participatory media culture to a “co-creative” media form (ibid. 123). Computer games are therefore no longer seen as classical mass media. Instead, their interactive potential manifests itself more obviously as technical development continues.

It is evident from a number of folkloristic studies that folklore exists, appears and evolves in various mass media (Dégh 1994; Dundes and Pagter 1975). If television and radio left little space for individuals to express their ways of looking at the world around them, computers, together with the internet, give the individual the opportunity to be much more active. This is clearly evident in the various blogs, forums and comments that appear on the World Wide Web on a daily basis. Instead of looking at all sites in which virtual heroes appear in connection with computer technologies, I will analyse several virtual heroes that appear in specific computer games²⁰.

Computer games have developed along with the rest of computer technology to become a vital factor in the mass entertainment industry²¹. When computers first appeared, computer games also entered the market. They were simpler than today but used every new feature of computer technology to their advantage. The first computer game is said to have appeared in 1971 and since then many genres have been developed. Action, adventure, strategy, shooting, sports, racing and fantasy role-playing games, all with numerous subtypes, make up part of the picturesque range of contemporary computer games. The development of computer technology has been rapid and there is a continuity of game development throughout it. At first, games adjusted to new technologies but soon started to develop faster themselves. New technologies began to appear to satisfy the demands of the gaming industry for faster and better computers. In the last decade, playing computer games has spread from the private sphere

²⁰ *Ultima*, Origin: Electronic Arts; *Diablo*, 2000, Blizzard North: Blizzard Entertainment; *Rune*, 2000, Human Head Studios: Take 2/G.O.D; *Morrowind*, 1998, Bethesda Softworks: Ubi Soft Entertainment.

²¹ Computer technology spread to consumers when personal computers (PC) became more accessible after Jack Kilby invented the chip in 1958. The first PC as we know it today appeared on the market in 1983.

into the public sphere of the Internet, where individuals combat evil and fight each other in virtual worlds.

The genre of computer games discussed here is so-called “fantasy role-playing” or FRP²² for short. In these games, a player (gamer) plays a hero who is a central character. This hero has a background story that can be compared to that of the classical mythological hero. Games contain many elements that find their parallels in European mythologies. Computer games also create their own mythologies and histories. The result is that some games follow certain classical mythological lore, for example *Rune*. Some mix both mythological and fantasy elements, such as *Diablo*, while *Ultima* mixes Christian mythology and imagined features. *Morrowind* combines Hindu beliefs with imagined features, and some introduce an almost completely imagined mythology (for example Blizzard’s game *Warcraft* and the later online game *World of Warcraft* which are not discussed here²³). Although classical mythology is not always used in an obvious manner, some elements appear in not so obvious ways. If we compare historical worlds with the worlds of the games mentioned above, it is clear that the games represent mediaeval times.

I earlier mentioned interactivity and interaction, and they play a role in the choice of gaming character. Some games have only one predetermined hero (usually male), leaving not many options for the gamer. *Rune* is an example of such a game. The story does not evolve if the gamer does not strictly follow the character’s quests and ordeals in exact order. Others give the individual more options and we can choose between male and female gender, various beings (most often imagined or mythological, e.g. elf, dwarf, orc, human, etc.) or occupations (such as hunter, sorcerer, warrior, etc.). Heroes in computer games gain strength, intelligence, speed and other attributes; they sharpen their techniques throughout the game as they progress through a maze of quests and ordeals. They are granted various

²² *Diablo* can be seen as a representative of the subgenre “action FRP”, whereas *Rune* can be classified as an “action adventure” but has definite FRP elements (e.g. acquisition of new items, character development, etc.).

²³ An interesting analysis of the game can be found in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft® Reader* from 2008 edited by Corneliusesen and Walker Rettburg (see list of references).

magical objects and are often helped or endangered by various deities. In games, the hero sometimes appears as the reincarnation of a god, and his opponents as the reincarnation of a rival deity, as is the case in *Ultima* and *Morrowind*.

HEROES IN MORROWIND, ULTIMA, DIABLO AND RUNE²⁴

MORROWIND



Figure 1: Hero in Morrowind; "Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion: With Bethesda Softworks' Pete Hines", Jeff Buckland, 3/16/2006, <http://www.atomicgamer.com/articles/5/the-elder-scrolls-iv-oblivion-interview> (6.10.2010).

Morrowind (Figure 1) is a fantasy land where the struggle between good and evil finds its battleground. A prophecy speaks of a hero (the reincarnation of the god of kindness, Nerevar) who is destined to fulfill his or her heroic destiny through dreams and many quests, as well as through interaction with the people of *Morrowind*. Players of the game control a character for whom they choose a race, gender, occupation and name. In

²⁴ These games consist of an original game with one or more optional expansions bringing additional content to the original game.

addition, the character's appearance can be customised. Many magical objects can be employed for the hero to fulfill his or her tasks, given to him by various characters in the game. Throughout the game, the hero struggles to rid the land of a disease spread by an evil deity. The climax of the game is brought about by a fight with the main enemy character, whose death by the hand of the hero is the final proof that the hero is indeed the reincarnation of Nerevar. After defeating the arch-enemy, the hero becomes immortal.

DIABLO



Figure 2: Hero in Diablo; "Diablo II Is Ten Years Old Today", Marc "DjinniMan" Allie, 6/29/2010, <http://www.co-optimus.com/related-news/diablo-2> (6.10.2010).

The hero, whose name can be chosen by the player, is tasked to eliminate the many minions of the three evil brothers Diablo, Mephisto, and Baal,²⁵ who wish to destroy the world of Sanctuary. The game gives the player a choice of seven different characters (an amazon, an assassin, a barbarian, a druid, a necromancer, a paladin, a sorceress) with different skills, which in turn dictate different playing styles. All characters are skilled in the use of different forms of magic and their skills progress throughout the game (they become faster, their strikes more accurate, they

²⁵ Also known as "The Three Prime Evils": Diablo = Lord of Terror; Mephisto = Lord of Hate; Baal = Lord of Destruction.

gain strength or greater magical powers, etc.) to make them more efficient in combating evil. Each of the three evil brothers is a powerful adversary; Diablo (Figure 2), especially, is a tough opponent to beat for any hero. His eventual downfall does not bring immortality to the hero, merely the respect of the people who, on one hand have given him quests, but on the other hand also have helped and encouraged him in his quests along the way.

RUNE



Figure 3: Hero Ragnar in Rune;
<http://downloads.khinsider.com/wallpapers/rune> (6.10.2010).

The story of the game is set in a fantasy world of Norse mythology and the action mainly takes place in a place called Midgard. The main hero is a Viking called Ragnar (Figure 3). The game loosely follows the story of the Eddas, featuring Norse gods, their characters and doings. It adds freely too, since for instance in the game Loki tries to dethrone Odin himself, a motive that does not exist in Eddas. Ragnar²⁶ is called upon by Odin to fight the followers of Loki, who plunder Midgard and kill Ragnar's

²⁶ There is an interesting parallel with the work of H. R. Ellis Davidson: *Scandinavian Mythology*, where we read about a great hero called Ragnar Lodbrok, a passionate follower of Odin who dies defending his honor.

family. The player has no customisation options: Ragnar is predetermined as a male Viking warrior. Ragnar has to travel around guided by Odin, fighting various enemies to reach the main opponent. At the end, after the main enemy (Loki's follower Conrack) is defeated, Ragnar is allowed into Valhalla²⁷. The game ends in an unusual twist, because Ragnar himself has to become a monster to defeat his enemy, but Odin therefore abandons him. Though Ragnar succeeds to kill Conrack at the end, he is deadly wounded and destined not to reach Valhalla. Odin appears again and grants Ragnar the entrance in Valhalla, since he proved to be a true hero (and a faithful Odin's follower).

ULTIMA



Figure 4: Hero Avatar in Ultima; Jens "DaimosDragon" Hoenscheid, The Wayward Avatar; Ultima IX: Ascension, http://www.rpgplanet.com/ultima9/extra_stuff/covers/u9cover3.jpg (6.10.2010).

²⁷ Valhalla is a great hall in Asgard, where gods and warriors, killed in battle, have endless feasts and fights (Davidson 1982:31).

The story is set in the fictional land of Britannia, where a nameless hero fights evil by completing various quests set before him through employing his virtues (honesty, compassion, valour, etc.). The appearance of the hero is predetermined, but the game starts with a series of questions, the answers to which help determine the hero's class²⁸. The final aim of the game is to prove that the character is the Avatar (Figure 4), an earthly reincarnation of the supreme deity (Knott 1998:45, 52, 55, 124; Tomšič 1999:60-63). This is achieved by succeeding in various quests, so proving that the hero cares for the people. Hero has to often resolve riddles and answer tricky questions. The highlight of the game is, again, the final battle between the hero and his arch-enemies, and ends with the ascension of the hero.

Now that I have outlined some of the general features of these computer games and heroes, I continue by comparing the mythological to the virtual hero.

PARALELS BETWEEN THE MYTHOLOGICAL AND VIRTUAL HERO

The heroes presented above – Avatar, Ragnar, the heroes in *Diablo* and *Morrowind* – all have very similar features. This might be because they all appear in the same computer game genre (FRP) that demands a certain type of hero. If we were to establish a *virtual hero pattern*, there would be two possible beginnings, one in which the hero predetermined by the game and the other in which the gamer chooses a hero from a range of options according to his or her liking. All heroes are presented with no clear history or childhood. They are called forth to save the world through a series of trials or quests. The quests vary from saving a certain character from death and solving various tasks to defeating strong enemies. The heroes face opponents, monsters and evil beings in many shapes and sizes, who try to stop them from fulfilling their quests. They are aided by magical helpers, objects or chants. The final battle brings the hero honour, sometimes in the

²⁸ Mage (honesty), bard (compassion), fighter (valour), druid (justice), tinker (sacrifice), paladin (honour), ranger (spirituality) and shepherd (humility).

form of an honourable death as in the case of *Rune*. Many features resemble other hero patterns but the main difference is the fact that the whole game, especially the virtual hero's actions, depends strongly upon the player's decisions. This may be the best example for a "profane hero", since there is nothing sacred about the people playing these games.

We can draw several parallels between the mythical and the virtual hero and they will be discussed below. Elements of various hero patterns, as mentioned above, appear in the analysed computer games.

Usually, the games start by presenting a story telling us about the hero's unknown past. This is very similar to some folklore genres, for example myth and fairytale. The *Morrowind* game begins with a prophecy about a hero who will save the world. Special signs indicate that the player's game character is indeed that hero, whose youth remains a mystery: 1) birth to unknown parents under a celestial sign; 2) immunity to disease; 3) visit to the guardian of the "Nerevar" cult to receive instructions; 4) a stranger's voice unites the Houses; 5) a stranger's hand unites the Velothi; 6) destruction of the Sixth House; and 7) salvation from the curse of false gods. Most of the ordeals seem impossible to achieve in the beginning, but as the game proceeds, options increase to overcome all obstacles. The same pattern appears in the game *Ultima*.

Several folklorists have noted that in myths we receive little information about a hero's youth or childhood. An unusual birth is mentioned by Otto Rank as an exposure of a hero by special sign or event (see Segal 1990:viii-xi), while J. G. Von Hahn describes illegitimate birth, and Lord Raglan unusual circumstances of birth, etc. (see Dundes 1990:138). In the games *Diablo* and *Rune* there is no information given about the heroes' youth, and the character is grown up person or in the case of Ragnar, a youth just passing his rite of passage into adulthood. There is also no prophecy.

1. The hero is called to undertake a mission and succeed in several quests in order to achieve a certain goal

Trials and quests are at the core of the analysed computer games and must be successfully completed in order to continue the game. These quests are often "impossible" to achieve and normal mortals (i.e. not heroes) do not

stand a chance. A successfully completed quest is one of the signs that the character who has accomplished it is a hero and not an “ordinary” person. There are many examples of such quests and trials in classical myths and legends: Arthur was the only man able to pull the sword of Excalibur from the rock, Jason obtained the Golden Fleece with the help of magic (Cotterell 1998: 195, Guerber 1994:230-240), and Heracles needed to accomplish twelve trials before he became immortal. When Eurystheus assigned the trials to Heracles, he was certain that Heracles would fail. Because Heracles received help for the second and the fifth trials, he was assigned two more trials, but was nevertheless successful in the end (Guerber 1994:188-207). All of the classical heroes mentioned above returned home as true heroes. As an example of an unsuccessful hero I should mention Gilgamesh, who failed to gain immortality despite completing several quests successfully before the last trial. So, while there are heroes who accomplish everything and gain their prize, there are also those who fail.

2. Interference of gods and supernatural forces (hostiles and allies)

In the Greek myths, gods show an ambivalent attitude towards heroes. At one moment they are helpful and supportive, at the next they seek to destroy the hero. This is a common motif in computer games and sometimes gods are just testing the hero’s faith in them. This is evident in the game *Rune*, in which the hero Ragnar, although guided by Odin, must transform himself into a demon to win the final challenge. Of course, as soon as he transforms, Odin abandons him. But after Ragnar is victorious, Odin returns and explains to him that this was a trial and since he has succeeded he may proceed to Valhalla after his death. In *Morrowind*, gods help the hero on several occasions, and this motif also appears in Greek mythology. Perseus is an example of a hero who receives magical objects from the goddess Athena and god Hermes (Schwab 1998:196).

In the *Ultima* game series, the hero himself is the reincarnation of a high god or Avatar. Avatar is the earthly form of a god in Hindu mythology (Knott 1998:45, 52, 55, 124).

3. Riddles and magic, magic objects and spells

Magic is present in myths as well as in the analysed computer games. As I have already mentioned, Perseus receives several magical objects from the gods: a miraculous shield, a cap that makes him invisible, a sharp sword and a pair of flying shoes. There is hardly a hero in any game who only possesses physical strength. The fighting skills of certain characters in games depend mostly on magic, for instance the classes of priests, sorcerers, druids and paladins (warrior priests). If not the whole character, at least its weapon is imbued with magical powers that enhance the damage dealt, makes the attack more accurate or calls the forces of nature for help. Here we find some parallels with Vladimir Propp's hero pattern (more specifically points 12 to 14), where the hero acquires a helper or magical object if he is successful in his quest (Propp 1982:33-72).

A riddle is a further element present both in classical mythology and in computer games. Some riddles are simple, others very complicated and demand a high level of skill. Tests of the hero's inventiveness are as demanding in computer games as in classical mythology. One example of such a test is the riddle from the game *Morrowind*: "The eye of the needle lies in the teeth of the wind – the mouth of the cave lies in the skin of the pearl – the dream is the door and the star is the key". The hero must progress to a certain area in the game where he finds a very narrow valley where the wind blows; he then falls asleep and when he wakes up, he finds the entrance to the cave where he picks up a ring named "Moon-And-Star". With the riddle accomplished, he proves to himself and others that he is the reincarnation of a god (Nerevar).

Most of the quests in the game *Ultima* are based upon riddle-like tests where the hero (the player) must decide between a few options. Depending on how the hero reacts, his popularity grows or is diminished, and he is perceived as more righteous or more evil.

Oedipus, too, in the myth must give the correct answer to the sphinx's riddle before the city of Thebes if he wants to live. The sphinx wants to know "which animal is that which has four feet at morning bright, has two at noon, and three at night?" (Guerber 1994:250). The answer is man and the sphinx ends up disappointed and is killed by Oedipus. Some riddles bring heroes ultimate victory, but in the case of computer games their solution only opens the path for further trials and riddles.

4. The cultural hero who fights evil to save the world

In classical mythology, the cultural hero helps ordinary mortals. In games too, the hero always fights against evil powers in various forms, such as gods, demons, monsters or the disciples of evil gods in order to save mortals. In *Diablo*, *Ultima* and *Morrowind*, the heroes have clearly defined evil rivals. In the game *Diablo*, the aspects of good and bad are clearly distinguished, with the Archangel Tyrael being good and the trio of Diablo, Mephisto and Baal being evil. Here, we see that the names of the evil deities are borrowed from Christian demonology. The game's hero is anonymous and he is on the side of the light and good. On one quest, his task is to return the light back to the people, resembling the present of fire by Prometheus. Ragnar in *Rune* is also guided by the god, representing the good and fights followers of the evil side until he defeats the prime evil itself and thus saves the world. In *Ultima* and *Morrowind*, the heroes turn out to be reincarnations of gods after they have finished a series of quests and defeated their evil opponent. Similar opposition of the good and the bad can also be seen in classical mythology i.e. Prometheus and Epimetheus.

In the *Ultima* game series, the hero also fights evil and must prove his abilities as the Avatar. The game is based upon three principles, each forming eight virtues, just as in Hindu philosophy (Roof 2000:71-72; Cavendish 1980:14-33). The hero's final goal is to reach perfection in all virtues. The hero is obliged to take care of other characters and assist them in every way, even in strange situations.

All the analysed games feature a hero who saves certain fantasy world through his actions and is rewarded for that at the end with honour, immortality or a good afterlife.

5. Fighting enemies – the final battle and the hero's victory over death

Every game includes combat with enemies, especially fights with monsters, demons, and other supernatural creatures like dragons. Dragons and other monsters represent the forces of chaos. The monsters that appear most often in games are: orcs, goblins, dragons, harpies, hydras, devils, souls of the dead, and skeletons (Tomšič 2000:61-67). They are mentioned in myths, and by killing them the hero gains his or her heroic reputation. Great battles took place in classical mythology between Zeus and the

Titans²⁹, Indra and Vrtra³⁰, Teshub with Inari and the dragon³¹. Some heroes who fought monsters include Herakles, Gilgamesh, and Rama³² (Meletinski 2001:53). Struggles with dragons date back to Hittite-Hurite mythology as R. A. Boulay points out in his book *Flying Serpents and Dragons: The Story of Mankind's Reptilian Past* (1997). The monsters that are tamed or killed by heroes are extremely various, easy or hard to overcome, with or without magical powers, very ugly or extremely seducing etc. This, in a way, strengthens the aesthetic effect of victory over them because the warriors do not use magic but strength, bravery, inventiveness, sense of justice and – here and there – they receive help from the gods (Meletinski 2001: 97).

These fights are at the core of FRP computer games; they are more present than any other element. As I have mentioned before, many classical myths exist featuring combat. Some enemies are more difficult to kill than others and the toughest enemy in the game (the so-called “boss”) usually appears at the end. The most heroic fight must surely be the one with Death itself. There are several examples in Greek mythology of the attempts of heroes to save people close to them from the realm of Hades, whether successfully or not (Schwab 1998:53). Ragnar in the game *Rune* must overcome Hel (the name, which resembles hell or inferno), the goddess of the underworld, in order to avenge his father’s death. It is therefore possible that in games the hero’s ability to deceive death or to overcome it is the feature of real “heroism”. In the games mentioned above, every

²⁹ In Greek myths of creation Zeus defeated his father Cronos, a titan, who wanted to destroy him. This fight resulted in a war between Titans submitted to Zeus and those who refused to do so (Guerber 1994: 8-14).

³⁰ In the Indian Vedas Indra defeats the dragon Vrtra, Storm-god and Inari also defeat a dragon (Leeming 2001).

³¹ In Hittite *Myth of Zu*, storm-god Teshar and Inara defeat the dragon or evil serpent (Boulay 1997: 88-89).

³² Herakles fought many opponents, starting with strangulating a poisonous snake in his crib as he was still a baby (Guerber 1994: 188). Gilgamesh fought a monster Humbaba or Huawawa (Boulay 1997: 167). In Ramayana, one of the two great epics of India, we find a life story of Rama, who at one point of his life fights Ravana and his armies to save his wife from the imprisonment (Menon 2003: ix-xi).

hero is able to come back to life, the only difference being in the mode of return. One mode is resurrection and the other is loading a previous game saved by the player.

In *Ultima*, the game ends when the hero ascends into the sky. This reflects a strange mixture of beliefs: if the hero is the Avatar (which in Hinduism means he is a reincarnation of god or a god himself), he need not ascend into heaven. Ascending can be found in many beliefs but the most “famous” ascension can be found in Roman Catholicism; that of the Virgin Mary. In computer games, the hero never dies so that the game will end completely and in this way he overcomes death.

CONCLUSION

We can establish the continuous presence of the hero pattern through centuries of human existence, in oral traditions as well as in literature and other mass media. The type of hero has changed in accordance with the social conditions in which a hero motif existed. It is evident from the analysis of mass media that heroes continue to exist, although with different functions and faces.

In the case of the computer game virtual hero, there is no doubt that this is a new type of hero who has appeared as a product of contemporary society flooded with different kinds of mass media and entertainment industry. In an attempt to demonstrate continuity, I have compared the hero patterns determined by several folklore scholars in the late 19th century and prominent in other classical myths with the plots of four computer games: *Ultima*, *Morrowind*, *Diablo* and *Rune*, which were published in the early 21st century. Several parallels can be seen that should be underlined. We take all the features in various hero patterns and do not separate different theoretical frameworks from one another. Firstly, the hero is called to undertake a mission and accomplish a number of quests in order to attain a certain goal. Secondly, gods and supernatural forces interfere. Elements that appear constantly in myths and computer games include riddles and the use of magic, magical objects and spells. A further common feature is the cultural hero motif, in which the hero fights against evil to save the world and brings light and knowledge to “ordinary” people. The last parallel

between the sphere of myths and computer games is the final battle against the enemy and ultimate victory (over the strongest enemy).

If we compare the various types of heroes mentioned above, it becomes clear that the virtual hero has a specific position among them. Usually, we mainly hear and read about classical, mythological and historical heroes, but in the case of the virtual hero, the player can identify and become one with the character. While a listener or reader creates or imagines his or her own fantasy world on the basis of narrative and cannot become a part of it in any actual way, the player of a computer game on the other hand enters an already visualized world and contributes to create it through the playing process. Alone the modern hero seems related to the virtual one, but the modern hero is created by mass media in the “real” world and many times has just a brief existence. A person must actually do something heroic to acquire the “hero” title. In contrast, the virtual hero as a factor of virtual space can enable anyone to become a hero. Players can start the game whenever they want and become a hero over and over again.

The choice of the various hero pattern elements that appear in games is based on the decisions of the game designers who create the stories and shape the heroes. The classical mythologies of the past are rich with motifs that are used to construct narratives in computer games. We could say that folklore elements assume a new form in new media, but by stating this we are presuming that people recognise these various elements as stemming from classical mythology. So, players are required to have some previous knowledge. What happens if a player is not familiar with the myths and heroes that appear in the games he plays? The person who plays a game must be informed about these elements and their origin; if not, we cannot speak about the continuity of a specific element. But if the player recognises folklore elements, a certain feeling of satisfaction appears. In the broader context a player becomes a part of “a conspiracy of informed smugness”³³ as Roz Kaveney colourfully defined it within film studies (2005: 4). Myths and other folklore elements create a fantasy world in games, which is more believable or meaningful to a player. Through epic hero quest, which is the centre of our attention here, the player finds itself in the middle of sacred

³³ The term also refers to allusions and references on popular culture and other aspects of “real” life.

narrative i.e. myth. Tanya Krzywinska argues that “playing at or identifying with a hero, fictional or otherwise, affords a vicarious yet pleasurable sense of agency” (2008: 127). Active role of the player, together with virtual hero pattern, creates a special fantasy world, where one can become a hero and in J. Dovey and H. W. Kennedy’s words “immerses into a meaningful experience” (2006:9).

The computer games industry is one of the biggest computer industries in the world today. Computer games are increasingly popular, along with all sorts of other games based on contemporary technology, like the games on mobile phones. Popular culture is awash with games and consequently with virtual heroes. Scholars have already started to define the study of this phenomenon in the form of “computer game studies” (Dovey and Kennedy 2006:2). The four analysed games represent just a small fragment and an attempt to relate them to the field of computer games studies. Being so much present in our everyday lives, computer games are also under constant pressure from consumers since the popularity of certain genres depends on the wishes of customers and players. For example, during a soccer world championship, people tend to buy more sport simulation games. The popularity of certain genres varies, but in general, computer games are increasingly in demand. The virtual hero has thus appeared in specific social conditions in which people spend a lot of time behind computers and communicating in virtual worlds.

The various beasts, monsters and evil opponents originating in classical mythologies have created interesting and thrilling virtual worlds that demand saving by heroes. I must stress here that an analysis of only four games cannot give complete answers to the questions asked at the beginning of this paper. Many mythological elements are not used in games, and many virtual creatures are the results of the authors’ fantasy and imagination. It is not appropriate to generalize these results. But I believe they are important and should divert some scholarly attention to the field of computer games and their relevance in the modern world.

Heroes exist in all spheres of our lives, not only in the virtual spaces represented in this paper by computer games. The main part of the paper addresses cultural heroes and virtual heroes, and I am well aware that not much attention has been paid to other types, such as the historical hero,

the modern hero or the superhero. The aim of this paper is to incorporate the area of computer games into folkloristic discourse, believing them to be as relevant as any other contemporary mass media. Computer games represent a particular mode, in which folklore, in our case the hero, appears, is adapted and lives. There are many issues left open and many gaps to be filled (e.g. the hero concept in literature) and I therefore hope that this paper will prompt further research in this area.

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Simona Klaus

HEROJI VIRTUALNOG SVIJETA

Danas živimo u potrošačkom društvu u kojem je ljudsko postojanje vođeno nezaustavljivom potragom za zabavom i užitkom. Globalna kretanja doprinose širenju različitih folklornih elemenata i u tom procesu folklorni elementi dobivaju nove oblike i značenja. Zanimljivo je propitati načine na koje se folklorni ili mitološki elementi, u ovom slučaju herojski obrasci, pojavljuju u kompjuterskoj tehnologiji, posebice u kompjuterskim igrama. Članak je prvenstveno usmjeren na iskušnja virtualnih i klasičnih heroja. Autor će nastojati pokazati da se folklorni elementi pojavljuju i u modernim medijima kao što su kompjuterske igre.

Ključne riječi: folklor, masovni mediji, kompjuterske igre, herojski obrasci, virtualni heroji

