

GAME BUDDHA

A pecha kucha talk by Michael Highland

I'm here to talk about video games.... video games and enlightenment. No really. If you haven't figured it out already I'm much more geek than guru, but nevertheless I've become very interested in the question of "how can video games be used to help improve people's lives?"

I'm not alone. Many people are trying to design 'meaningful' games that will solve real world problems, broaden worldview, or teach cooperation and tolerance. And power to them, that work is needed. In my mind, the challenge is not coming up with a new game design that will subliminally trick people into being better humans, but rather altering how we think about and use video games -- so that they naturally become tools of growth and possibly even self realization (aka enlightenment). So tonight I'm going to propose some new ways of thinking about reality, virtual, and otherwise...

First, does any one here practice lucid dreaming?

For everyone else, a lucid dream is a dream in which you know you're dreaming. Many of us have experienced this to some degree. But with practice, you can learn to remain fully lucid while dreaming for longer periods. It's like the best virtual world you'll ever visit, every bit as real and detailed as this moment. It's unbelievably awesome the first time it happens. There are some simple tricks to triggering lucid dreaming, if you're curious just find me after the talks.

An interesting fact: most adults have trouble flying even in fully lucid dreams. Children on the other hand often report vivid dreams of flying. At a certain age we stop believing we can fly. Our beliefs about the world still permeate the dream.

Last year I met Jayne Gackenbach, a Psychologist, who researches the relationship between video game play and dreams. One of her studies showed that people who play violent first person shooters, are more likely to have violent dreams. Not a big surprise. The cool thing is, those same people exhibit more lucidity in their dreams, greater agency. And they suffer less misfortune because of it. As a gamer and lucid dreamer, this makes intuitive sense to me. Playing a video game is a lot like being in a low-fi lucid dream.

So what if we started thinking of video games, not as entertainment or software, but as a kind of dreaming, a consensual dream, a technologically induced altered state. How then would we use a video game to catalyze personal growth?

Well most people in our culture don't think of dreaming as a valuable state of consciousness. We tend to dismiss our dreams upon waking. However, in the Bon school of Buddhism, dream yoga, has been used for thousands of years as a primary spiritual practice.

The theory is, that by regularly experiencing how real lucid dreams can be, it's natural to start experiencing 'real life' as simply a very consistent and persistent dream. For them, fully

internalizing this deep truth is part of a path to liberation and self realization. But this world view beneficial?

Well for one, many people (myself included) go through life bouncing around on autopilot, mostly reacting, and very infrequently observing themselves as players in a bigger game. By observing, rather than feeling subject to, experiences, thoughts, and emotions, it's possible to see the whole picture with greater equanimity and peace.

So the dream yogis got me thinking. Could video game play then be approached as a similar kind of spiritual practice? OK. This is a little bit of trick question. Really, almost any activity (from cooking to standing on one leg) could probably be developed as meditative practice for spiritual development. But video games...? I think are an ideal candidate.

For one, like I said, they can be thought of as lucid dream, a state around which a robust practice already exists. Two, hello, they're fun. Three, video games, unlike dreams, are highly structured and designed to be rewarding. Imagine the benefit of seeing the real world as a game designed to challenge and reward you.

Another plus -- the hero's journey, a universal, cross-cultural, metaphor for growth and transformation is already at the heart of so many popular games. I won't even get into the unintentionally philosophy... but, Super Mario? Think about it. It's an awesome metaphor for reincarnation.

So for now let's approach it like a lucid dream. It doesn't matter what the game is about. The important element would be setting an intention to maintain a heightened awareness of the game as purely an illusion. You would resist the tendency to lose yourself in the game, to check-out and go onto autopilot.

Say this practice worked as expected. By observing ourselves playing, we'd realize we're actually playing all the time. There'd be an understanding that on some level, real life is, yes an illusion, but a structured illusion.

How would this new worldview play out? Well, first off, because video games are dream like, we could expect a Buddhist flavored sense of detachment and objectivity from the activities of life, and in turn a greater sense of equanimity. This I'd argue is good. Beyond that it's hard to say, but I'd hope one would come to see himself or herself as a protagonist in a self created story. A hero's journey, a persistent game world where the objective is continued challenge, growth, and fulfillment.

So next time you jack in, just for fun, try this. Treat it like a meditation. Stay focused on the awareness of the game as a kind of dream you're choosing to partake in. If you realize you've lost yourself in the fun, take a moment, observe, breathe, and regain that heightened state of awareness. The longer you go the better. And afterward, if you feel so inclined, look me up and let me know how it went.