

THE ENLIGHTEND GAMER

Talk by Michael Highland
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On the most basic level, what is the Super Mario really about? I'm not talking about the story, the kidnapped princess and her kingdom on the brink of destruction. Think about playing Super Mario, how does it work? You venture out into a world, you move forward, you do your best to progress, but inevitably by some surprise or miscalculation you die. You come back, and now thanks to your last life you learned something, and you progress a little further. Surprise again, you're dead. Another life passes. You learn, you're reborn, you progress, until finally at last you complete you're ultimate purpose, you save the princess. It's a cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

Now, it's not likely the creators of Super Mario were trying to subliminally teach children about the nature of reincarnation. That doesn't change the fact that playing Mario is a nearly perfect experiential metaphor for this important spiritual concept.

In the developed world, we are living in an age of unparalleled technological achievement and comfort: We can fly, we can communicate across space and time, and thanks to Google we are nearly omniscient. Yet for all this progress, we are still grapple with the simplest of human challenges: anger, fear, and attachment. These are problems that emerge not out of external conditions but rather from the internal landscape of our values and beliefs.

Spiritual practices have long existed to effectively address these challenges and bring individuals towards an optimized state of focus, peace, and compassion – ultimately towards enlightenment. But as effective as traditional spiritual practices may be, they were not developed with modern day life or technology in mind. So I think it's time we begin asking how technology might help us to address these fundamental human challenges.

To this end, I'm going to talk today about how videogames might help individuals reach a more enlightened state. I know this sounds funny. As a recovering video game addict myself, I am well aware that videogames are rarely, if ever, associated with improving people's lives. And consequently, most people – most people here I'd guess – believe that videogames are at best entertaining, and most of the time, probably do more harm than good.

So, I'd like to argue that videogames have an inherent spiritual value – that videogames, in their very nature, embody wisdom of the great spiritual traditions. Let me be clear, I'm not talking about the promise of educational gaming. Of course, videogames have tremendous application in learning. But what I'm speaking to goes much deeper. I'm talking about videogames inspiring a positive shift in fundamental beliefs concerning the nature of reality and the purpose of life.

Take the big questions: Who am I? Why am I here? One's answers (or lack of answers) to these questions form the core beliefs that make up one's worldview. Our worldview, in turn, plays a role in just about every facet of subjective experience.

As self-aware creatures, we have the unique ability to inspect our own worldview and ask ourselves “how are my beliefs serving me and the people around me?” A couple years ago I asked myself this question and came to the conclusion that the understanding I had of reality (an understanding based mostly on my knowledge of science) was sub-optimal. This is not to say my understanding was false, but rather, from a functional standpoint, that my beliefs were not leading to my individual fulfillment, let alone the flourishing of mankind – at least as far as I could tell.

So I set out on a journey to reconstruct, or at least augment, my worldview with potentially more-optimal beliefs. I took up traditional practices like yoga, meditation, and study of spiritual texts, in hopes of integrating some new, more-optimal, beliefs into my life. In doing so I discovered something unexpected. Many of the spiritual concepts I encountered resonated with me in a very peculiar way... They made me think of videogames.

I soon realized that when I sit down to play a videogame I undergo a shift in consciousness. My beliefs about the real world shut off, and a new set of beliefs, ones learned through my countless hours spent in virtual worlds are activated. These beliefs form a kind of virtual worldview, based not on any one game, but on my lifelong relationship to the medium in general.

What I discovered was that my virtual worldview already embodied key ideas from the ancient spiritual wisdom I was studying -- that videogames had somehow provided me with an experiential understanding of these foreign concepts. If this is the case, that my virtual worldview offers potentially optimal answers to life’s big questions, then maybe it’d be beneficial to apply my virtual beliefs to real life.

Now, I know videogames are a source of fear for many, mostly mothers, so let me be clear. Mom, I’m not proposing it’s a wise idea to unify virtual and real world identities, or that the behaviors and personalities found in popular videogames are in any way exemplary role models for good living. I’m arguing that underlying beliefs, with which players interact with videogames, constitute a potentially optimal worldview for thriving in the real world.

Let me see if I can make this perspective more palatable by explaining three of the core truths of my virtual worldview that correlate closely with traditional spiritual wisdom, and in my mind have the greatest value in terms of real life.

VIDEO GAME TRUTH ONE: I AM NOT MY AVATAR

Just like an actor assuming a role, within videogame worlds players act through virtual characters, or avatars. The player effectively provides the consciousness for what would otherwise be an automaton, or in gamer speak a bot. In Hindu philosophy, a person is composed of two distinct parts, the transient self and the true self. The transient self, we know very well -- it’s comprised up of our physical body, and all the mechanisms of sensation, thought, and emotion. If you think of yourself as computer, the transient self would be the hardware and software. The true self in this analogy would be the computer’s user, the seat of consciousness and intention. One of the core spiritual challenges of Hinduism is to recognize the true self, in order that one can act with clear intentions rather than at the impulses of thoughts and emotions.

The relationship between transient and true selves perfectly parallels the relationship between player and avatar. In this case, it’s more than just an analogy however. Gamers constantly experience the dichotomy of their own more permanent self and the transient virtual characters they play though. It’s not unusual to become so fully identified with an avatar that one loses touch with the most basic bodily needs. Players can forgo food, sleep, and bathroom breaks, for

endless hours, in what I can only describe as an out of body experience. Players become transfixed with the transient and lose touch with what is real, or at least relatively real. From the Hindu perspective, this is how the majority of people live their lives, disconnected and mostly unaware of the pilot within. Where a yogi can spend a lifetime practicing to transcend the transient self, gamers tangibly experience a powerful experiential metaphor for this dissolution every time they unplug. The avatar fades and reconnection with the body and mind naturally follows.

VIDEO GAME TRUTH TWO: THIS WORLD IS AN ILLUSION

Experientially, videogames have something important in common with dreams. When in a dream state we generally accept whatever we experience as though it were real. It doesn't matter how absurd an encounter may be, it's not until you wake that it becomes clear the dream was all an illusion. The same can be said of virtual states. When fully engaged in a game world, players don't question the "realness" of the illusion. Video games today, for all the advances in realism, are still a poor facsimile for reality. What's always surprises me, is it doesn't matter, the mind recalibrates to the lower bandwidth of sensory input and the virtual comes into focus as a very genuine reality. Your mind makes the dream real.

At times the virtual actually feels more real, more colorful, rich, and emotional than everyday experience. Right now, how real does this moment feel? Could you be dreaming right now? How would you know the difference? In a way, you are always dreaming, your mind is always making it real, sometimes more, sometimes less.

For ages, philosophers have pondered the question of how much of an illusion (or dream) our conscious experience really is. According to Hindu and Buddhist teachings the answer is yes: the world as we experience it is a partial and fragmented version of a greater underlying reality. Independently of trying to verify this belief, we can ask: What are the benefits of conceiving of reality (as we generally experience it) as an illusion? From the Buddhist perspective, the benefits are plain. First, consider how many conflicts in your life (and in the world in general) are the product of cycles of over-reaction. In the Buddhist model, approaching life as an illusion fosters a sense of detachment. The point not to withdraw from the illusion, but rather to experience it as an observer, with less attachment, and in turn less over-reactivity.

That's all well and good, but the challenge here is in getting past how intense this illusion seems, and how easy it is to become attached to what feels very real. There is no simple off switch to this very persistent and consistent dream we call reality.

We can think of videogames then, as a kind of dream within a dream. This is where videogames provide another useful experiential metaphor. As I've said it's easy to lose oneself in the illusion of a videogame, to grow attached to the virtual world in a way that mirrors how we engage with the 'real' world. Videogames though, unlike reality, are relatively easy to wake up. This gives gamers the unique opportunity to observe the formation of attachment and the process by which the illusion of the virtual becomes increasingly real.

There is also a unique opportunity, for game designers, to manipulate the player's sense of reality. This was famously done in a series of action games titled Metal Gear Solid. In one of the games, your commander famously tells you, in a moment of crisis to 'Turn off the game console' – it's not clear if he is speaking to you as the player, or to the character in the game, or if somehow you have become the same person. To this day the memory of this experience has stayed with me, and likely changed the way I look at reality.

VIDEO GAME TRUTH THREE: I AM A HERO, AND HAVE A DUTY TO PERFORM

So. Why exactly do people play videogames? If you're a gamer of any kind (yes - that includes you Facebook Farmers) you should ask yourself this question. Why do I play? I've meditated on this question, and the conclusion I've come to, is that for me, the fundamental draw of videogames relates to simulating a sense of personal purpose. It's the feeling of knowing who I am, and exactly what I'm meant to do. This feeling arises from a simple, but not necessarily obvious, rule about most videogames...: All aspects of the virtual universe are designed to function in harmony with the right action of the player (that is whatever the designer intends the player to do).

Take Super Mario (again) for example. The intended action for the player is to move Mario from left to right by running and jumping. Everything in the world around Mario is built with this task in mind and provides complimentary challenges and opportunities to catalyze right action. Subjectively, it feels a bit like everything in the virtual universe is pushing you towards your job as the player.

This idea of correct action is embodied in the Hindu concept of svadharma – which translates roughly as 'personal duty'. It's believed that everyone has a unique purpose; a job to perform based the laws of the universe as well as one's own skills, circumstances, experiences, personality, and place in life. Your svadharma is the call to that personal duty. The process of recognizing and acting upon one's sva-dharma is in essence the hero's journey - a narrative structure universally present across the world's cultures. While hero stories may provide useful metaphors, for most people recognizing and acting upon one's sva-dharma is still a challenging and lengthy process. However, within simplified videogame worlds one's virtual sva-dharma is easy to understand and more importantly easy to feel.

Videogame worlds are effectively designed around the sva-dharma of the virtual hero. Mario's sva-dharma is to progress by moving from left to right. So, whether you're blasting alien hordes on Xbox live, or harvesting crops on Facebook, all videogames share this common underlying meta-experience of sva-dharma: the discovery and fulfillment of one's true purpose. I speak from personal experience when I say: engaging in this process engenders a feeling of profound satisfaction.

It's an extremely powerful experience videogames allow individuals to tap into whenever they want. I didn't realize it at the time, but when I was addicted to gaming, it was this feeling, that I was always hungering for. It's easy to get hooked on the artificial version, and forgo looking for that feeling out in real life. There are generations of young gamers now whose strongest experiences of fulfillment have likely been found in virtual worlds. Think about that for a second... This in my mind may be the greatest risk of videogames, to confuse one's own purpose with those found in the virtual world. As much as I might wish it sometimes, my deepest purpose, my sva-dharma, is not playing videogames.

What videogames offer us here (and I think this is significant) is the ability to taste what it feels like to recognize and fulfill a deep personal purpose. These experiences augment the virtual worldview, and in turn players approach virtual worlds with a belief that there is a purpose, and a satisfaction, to be discovered.

It's very possible to go through real life unaware that this feeling even exists. Even if one is told things like 'Follow your bliss!' or 'Do what you love!' it's hard to know what to look for unless

you've already experienced it. Individuals, who have recognized this feeling through videogames, are arguably better equipped to discover their deepest purpose out in the real world.

OK. I imagine you might be wondering why (if all I've said is true) are gamers not spontaneously becoming more enlightened? Where are all the enlightened gamers? There are a few possible reasons. For starters, it would be foolish to assume all gamers share my exact virtual worldview, or more importantly that they are even aware of having one. It's not until one actively questions their beliefs and experiences that the kind of insights I've shared begin to surface. Moreover, even if one is aware of these concepts, spiritual growth generally requires intention, and some kind of practice to reinforce key beliefs and understanding. Personally, I have only just begun to experiment with videogame-based practices to integrate the positive aspects of my virtual worldview. Using videogames in this way is obviously uncharted territory for both players and developers.

Another reasonable question: Why not just rely on traditional spiritual practices for this stuff, and leave enlightenment to the pros, so to speak? Any experience, from cooking to washing the dishes, can be framed as a tool for contemplation and spiritual growth. Throughout history enlightened philosophers and teachers have discovered and refined specific tools, or practices, that best catalyze self-knowledge and growth. The videogame, in my mind, is simply another potential tool, but one, as I've argued, that I believe is uniquely suited to this task.

I think it's worth noting, that as potent as videogame experiences are today, the medium is constantly evolving. Thanks in part to a now multibillion-dollar industry; the evolution of the game continues to accelerate. Looking at videogames just 10 years ago, and today, it's hard to imagine what they may look like in another 10 years. Undoubtedly, they are only going to get more real, more 3D, HD, and immersive. The raw power of videogames is constantly growing, and with it the need to better understand the implications and potential positive uses of the medium.

The insights that I shared in have emerged out of my own mindful engagement with videogames. I honestly don't know yet if other gamers resonate with my observations. What I do know - is that it's about time gamers woke up and began trying to understand what their virtual experiences are teaching them. The world is certainly in need of compassion, peace, and equanimity on a mass scale. To solve the world's biggest problems, we need more enlightened individuals. Maybe even enlightened gamers. My hope is what I've shared today may spark a new conversation between technologists and philosophers about the positive role videogames (and technology in general) could play in helping us reach this important goal.