

Story Meets Story World

How do you construct a non-linear, narrative-rich Virtual Reality experience while working within the confines of a traditional MMORPG?

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Abstract

With the affordances of the immersive technology of Virtual Reality, game designers are looking to find a new language for MMORPG narrative; one that matches the dynamic, non-linear and interactive nature of the medium. Using the context of commercial video game Orbus VR, this study attempts to create a story world that can navigate and work within the confines of Virtual Reality. The outcome of the research is presented as an online transmedia Story Bible, along with an exegesis to contextualise the study and identify some of the primary issues and themes to emerge.

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Nick Jones

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person except that which appears in the citations and acknowledgements. Nor does it contain material which to a substantial extent I have submitted for the qualification for any other degree of another university or other institute of higher learning.

Signature of the candidate:

Intellectual Property Rights Statement

All narrative content within the story bible and game script is copyrighted and belongs to the game studio Ad Alternum. All original content contained within the academic work is my own intellectual property.

Exegesis

Introduction

This exegesis looks at the story bible I have written for the commercial video game property *Orbus VR*. In Digital Jam's *VR Writers Room White Paper*, Laird et al. define a story bible as being an encyclopaedic document which houses "all of the world-building elements that craft the immersive universe [...including] history, geography, ecology, economy, and technology backstory for the world and its characters [...] philosophy, metaphysics and fantastical properties of the story world" (Laird, et al., 2016 p.12).

Story bibles are living documents. They provide "a single point of entry" for new team members, and "a rich and informative reference guide with which technical and development teams can align" (Laird, et al., 2016 p.12). As a writer it is also essential to keep your audience in mind: story bibles exist for the benefit of development teams, including both creatives (artists, designers, other writers) and programmers – and though they are not specifically for players/audiences, they may contain considerable text that will be shown within the game or other published narrative products.

This exegesis explains the steps I took to create a story-rich game with queer and minority representation, using Jeff Gomez's *Collective Journey* model to subvert the MMORPG conventions of "The Static World" and "The Hero's Journey," creating a narrative about collective action, through the increasingly important medium of Virtual Reality.

Over the past year, I have worked on this project as the *Lead Narrative Designer* for the game studio *Ad Alternum*. On the 16th of December 2017, *Orbus VR* was released on the digital distribution platform *Steam* under "Early Access" (not a complete game, but complete enough to release to the public for critique and suggestions). The full, official release of the game is set for May 14th, 2018, which will include the third and final story act of this particular story arc. As of the writing of this exegesis, the game currently has a "Very Positive" rating which is based off 611 user reviews. As of January 2018, the game surpassed 8,000 registered players (Dutton, 2018). It is also important to state that *Orbus VR* is in fact, the first MMORPG to have been built from the ground up for modern virtual reality (VR) hardware like the HTC-Vive and Oculus Rift.

The current early access version of the game, which will most likely be the version to be played in relation to the marking of this thesis, contains over 20 hours of story content which is comprised of the first two acts in the main storyline, with the third and final act to be added upon full release in the coming months.

The Perpetual World

The largest and most frustrating convention in MMORPGs for a Narrative Designer is the convention of “The Perpetual World.” The Perpetual World is a term used to describe the static nature of an MMORPG’s game world. The game world in an MMORPG must “run persistently and in real-time” (Tychsen & Hitchens, 2006, p.301), so that anyone can play it at any point, interact with anyone else, and still get the same content. This requirement puts a hold on the Narrative Designer’s typical approach of using traditional narrative techniques to build a character-driven plot. A MMORPG typically will allow the player to interact with the physical game world but will disallow the ability to permanently effect or change that world. When the player logs out of the game, the game will act as if the player’s character never existed in the game world: no action that the player makes will ever leave a permanent mark.

Typical examples of the perpetual world include: NPCs (Non-Playable-Characters) who exist for particular mechanical roles in the game (such as selling weapons or items to players) need to remain static through immunity to death and an inability to travel, as their role must be fulfilled for both old and new players. Like NPCs, in-game organizations are also required to remain static, meaning that any group which exists at the start of the game will need to continue in existence no matter what occurs in the narrative. Civilizations can never fall, and the Blacksmiths can never go out of business. Bosses (larger more difficult enemies) will need to respawn after each defeat so that they can be killed by the next player to come along. These bosses will have no memory of having ever died. Geology also becomes static, in that a city cannot crumble, a river can’t flood, and a mountain won’t move. Attitudes of factions also can’t change. Armies will always be at war with each other. Invasions will always be about to happen, but never do so.

Other lesser issues include the fact that no matter how many people are playing and speaking to the NPCs at a given time, the individual player is always the *only* chosen one, every other player is ignored as if they are all in parallel universes. Time also becomes

meaningless. A player can trigger a cutscene, creating urgency in the plot, then go away and do something else for two years, before returning to complete the urgent plot development as if no time has passed at all.

Arguably, every complication within the perpetual world comes down to an issue around time and consequence. Many MMORPGs will have a day/night system, but then forget to include a world calendar or the changing of dates. “In essence, every time the sun sets, the world is the same as it was the last time” (Tychsen & Hitchens, 2006 p.304).

Consequence is the player’s ability to interact with and modify the game world. In many cases a player can be involved with the game world, but their actions will have no lasting consequence. A truly interactive game would require the virtual world to respond to every action made by the player.

Orbus VR and the Static World

Going into this project, it was very important to me to push as far as I could away from the stock standard MMORPG in terms of a static world, and while not everything I would have liked to have done has been implemented, much of what I wanted has been, as well as there being more to come in the future.

Primarily, we have created the beginnings of a template to deal with most of these issues, (more on this later), however, for many of the smaller issues, we were able to avoid problems through the use of *instances*. Instances are “A section of a MMORPG which forms a separate unit, accessible only by individual or groups of players. Multiple iterations of the same instance can operate contemporaneously” (Tychsen & Hitchens 2006, p.304).

A major example of this within Orbus VR is the character of Bishop Roma. Bishop Roma is the game’s major villain. As a representative for the Order of Ma’at and cultural imperialism, it is important that he not only sparks the fire in the player’s journey, but also continues to fan the flames. As such, we needed for him to be in the starting township of Highsteppe to introduce the player to the world. Afterwards, the story called for him to leave the town to return to his base of operations at Guild City. Initially, this created issues with the developers, who wanted to have him remain in Highsteppe throughout the game, fearing that if he left, a newer player would be unable to find him.

In the end, we were able to “flag” the character with an instance, so that when a player got to a certain point in the game’s story, the version of Bishop Roma in Highsteppe would become invisible to them, and another version of him in Guild City would become *visible*.

Another form of personalized instances, is through spacial instances, namely areas and locations that we only wanted to be accessible to an individual player or a small group of players. Currently, in game, examples of this can be seen in the player house (every player has their own instanced version of their house that only they can visit), the training grounds area (complete with an instanced version of Guardian Bart), the Order of Ma’at’s archives (a library beneath the University) and Bishop Roma’s chambers (used for a boss battle between the player and Bishop Roma at the end of ACT 1 of the game’s story)

Looking into the future, we have discussed concepts such as instancing battlefields to allow only a group of (for example) five players who are linked together as a party, to participate in its content. This would allow for a communal experience, while still keeping it small and specific enough that things don’t get out of hand. However, an issue still to be explored and solved with this, relates to – what if two players in the party are at the right point in the narrative to take place in the example battle, but the other three are not? Do they have to wait for the other three to catch up? Or can all three participate, only to then be required to catch up and repeat the battle to get the appropriate advancement in story?

While instances can solve many of the issues of the static world, they are a temporary fix at best, unfortunately remaining so until further technology advances in this area. Another important aspect of fixing the problems of the static world, of course, is to do with the flow of time. While we have taken steps to resolve this, there is still plenty more work to be done around this area.

When I began working on Orbus VR, the game world had barely any ambient sound effects and there was no weather system. There was a day and night system, but the art style was so low-poly that it gave everything the feeling of being quite plastic and artificial. I would not be so presumptuous to say that I changed this, or that the developers did not have ideas in mind when I suggested, but I did push for a weather system, a season system and a game calendar.

As of this date, a weather system exists in world that cycles through sunny weather, windy weather, light rain, heavy rain and thunderstorms (the sound of which tends to frighten almost every player the first time they get caught out in one). We are yet to develop a seasonal system, because to create periods of snow fall, or autumn leaves etc, would require building art assets specific for those seasons, which of course, costs money. We are however developing several annual calendars for the different cultures in the game, one of which is in the process of being implemented at the time of writing this. These Calendars go alongside different festival days that the world celebrates, and players will in the future be able to celebrate along with it. What this will do is create a real sense of time passing in-game. It will be important to accompany these calendar dates with physical in-game changes as well, as it will do us no good if a NPC offers the exact same quest year in, year out without blinking an eye lid.

One of the initial components of the story bible that was begun all the way back in February 2017 and only finished recently, was the world timeline. The timeline is important for us as developers because of the approach we are choosing to take, and in fact, pioneer in the future of Orbus VR. The approach I'm speaking of is what we term "The Living World Model." The Living World Model, as I describe in the story bible "requires a radical shift away from thinking of our game as a static piece of entertainment. Rather, we must see Orbus VR as a portal through which we can view a real, living, breathing world" (Jones, 2017, p.48-52).

Creating a game using The Living World Model requires, as previously mentioned, instances to "give the appearance of things moving forward in the world as players progress in the game" (Jones, 2017, p.48-52). As well as "creating certain side quests or minor main quests that are time sensitive and require players to work within the confines of the world's clock to complete" (Jones, 2017, p.48-52).

Having a timeline allows us to operate within the confines of Orbus VR's world history: "Large aspects of the game's plot and history are non-negotiables and march forward, regardless of where the player is, and permanently change the world for future expansions and sequels" (Jones, 2017, p.48-52).

Because this approach is highly experimental and will not come into play until after the official release of the game, it is hard to conceptualize everything involved in this model, or even whether it will work. Currently, this is brainstorming, but what we do know is that

there are definitely non-negotiables in the plot that will eventually require major restructuring of the game world. There will also be rewrites of quests so as to fit with the next part of the story, while giving the same or similar gameplay experience to new players who have missed out on the initial beginning plot.

One such way we could do all this is to have a record of when players first start their adventure in the world. If they start before a certain date, then they have access to the original plot until they have finished it. Players who start the game after that date... ..are only able to view the original plot through a history book and exist within the updated version of the world... ..this would require two servers (two online versions of the game) until all players eventually filter out of the original plot and into the second season. (Jones, 2017, p.45)

The Hero's Journey Motif

In his seminal work on the Hero's Journey, Story Consultant Christopher Vogler stresses that:

The Hero's Journey model is a guideline. It's not a cookbook recipe or a mathematical formula to be applied rigidly to every story. To be effective, a story doesn't have to concur with this or any other school, paradigm or method of analysis. The ultimate measure of a story's success or excellence is not its compliance with any established patterns, but its lasting popularity and effect on the audience. To force a story to conform to a structural model is putting the cart before the horse. (Vogler, 2007, p.231-232)

While this is true, it certainly hasn't stopped writers across the board and over the years from relying on this model as if it is the specific framework all good stories need to be built with. The Hero's Journey has even (and unsurprisingly) made its way into the very framework of video game narrative design. In his book *Video Game Storytelling*, Evan Skolnick, devotes a large portion of his writing to explaining this motif, pointing out its importance by saying:

Today, the Monomyth (Referring to the Hero's Journey) is widely known and used on a daily basis by writers, editors and other creative professionals working in movies, TV, novels, comic books, plays, and yes, games. If you're working with a game writer, it's very likely she'll be more than a bit familiar with it, and will probably integrate aspects of it into your game story. (Skolnick, 2014 p.28)

Derived from Joseph Campbell's text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, The Hero's Journey is a narrative framework that is found not only in most modern-day stories, but also throughout history, in folklore and legends as well as many classics of literature. It consists

typically of twelve stages that chart the progress of the protagonist, or “hero” on his or her adventure, beginning with a transition from the character’s normal life, and ending with their return, having accomplished a great feat.

The hero (as mentioned) begins their journey in *The Ordinary World*, before receiving a *Call to Adventure* – typically through an inciting incident or a herald-type character. Initially, the hero will be apprehensive and *Refuse the Call*, before being convinced to undertake the journey after *Meeting with the Mentor*, who is traditionally a wise old man. The hero then takes part in *Crossing the Threshold* from the normal world and into the magical or dangerous world. They undertake *Tests* and make both *Allies* and *Enemies* before finally they *Approach the Inmost Cave* where their ultimate challenge lies in wait. The hero then partakes in the *Central Ordeal* which typically involves them undertaking some kind of death and rebirth. Once they have succeeded, they are given a *Reward* of some kind, whether this is a magical elixir, or a lesson learnt. They take *The Road Back* home, but before they can reach safety, they will undergo one last challenge to symbolically “clean the blood from their hands” before going through a *Resurrection* to become worthy once more. Finally, they arrive home having *Return(ed) with the Elixir*. Their journey is over, they have come home and brought their village a boon or treasure to help them survive and/or prosper into the future.

This narrative motif, although not wrong in-and-of-itself has become problematic, especially in the MMORPG genre as while the Hero’s Journey deals with a singular *chosen one*, the MMORPG deals with potentially millions of *chosen ones*. Where the Hero’s Journey is linear by nature, an MMORPG is non-linear by nature – players can pick and choose what quests they wish to complete, how long they want to “free-play” between story segments, and even, if they pay attention to the plot at all.

The Collective Journey

In recent years however, something has changed. Something is happening to the Hero’s Journey. Looking at the rate and frequency of how many Hollywood films using this model are flopping, one could be forgiven for thinking audiences are getting bored of it. For others, it doesn’t seem to ring true anymore, and in certain cases it’s a cause of discomfort for

them (Chalquist, 2017). While Hollywood and the Games Industry are still busy pumping out the same narrative structure, there have been a few stories that have diverted from the norm and gone on to become quite successful because of it. *Game of Thrones*, *The OA*, *Stranger Things*, *Orange Is The New Black*. Even *Star Wars* – traditionally the tried and true template for the Hero's Journey, has departed from that model in its latest film *The Last Jedi* to take a completely different approach (Gomez, 2018).

I spoke on this shift with Jeff Gomez, an international expert in transmedia narratives and new forms of storytelling. Gomez has, for the past few years, been working on mapping a new narrative phenomenon, which he refers to as *The Collective Journey*. Gomez explained to me his thoughts in this area, by beginning with the status quo.

“For tens of thousands of years, the human brain was hardwired to absorb story – linear story and conflict-laden story” (J. Gomez, Personal Communication, 09/06/17).

This conflict-laden story was told because the clear majority of human history has been spent in survival mode. Human history before the Industrial Revolution quite literally involved people leaving their home and venturing into the wilds, experiencing danger and collecting things while under threat, that once brought back to their community would help their families survive.

That's what Roland Barths called the eternal return [after Friedrich Nietzsche]. This kind of circular, cyclical narrative that involved hesitation, training, venturing forth, violence - both physical and psychological, the retention of treasure – or the boon, the return to furnish the treasure to your family or community, and therefore you were elevated and celebrated as a saviour or a hero. (J. Gomez, Personal Communication, 09/06/17)

If we stop and think about that concept, and how it applies to our world, our society today, it becomes, for many, somewhat uncomfortable. For Gomez, who admitted in our interview that he was, as a child, on the receiving end of violence, the Hero's Journey motif had always felt quite uncomfortable, despite still loving classics like *Lord of The Rings*. His discomfort, as he revealed to me, was born out of a distrust of the idea that we always have to resort to physical or psychological violence in order to resolve our problems. What it was, he explained, was his “discomfort [with] causal solutions for systemic problems” (J. Gomez, Personal Communication, 09/06/17). The Hero's Journey has been with us potentially since the dawn of man, and in the Stone Age, there were no systems. Everything was causal, so the

Hero's Journey narrative worked, and still works, to a degree, because it is so hardwired into that animalistic part of our brains.

But today, in the 21st Century, we are in a very real way, living in a vastly different world. The rules are different. Our societies are different. As Gomez went on to explain, this new narrative model – The Collective Journey is “...in many ways a response to the Hero's Journey in a post-digital environment” (J. Gomez, Personal Communication, 09/06/17).

It's the huge advancements in technology that has brought about the massive changes we are now seeing across all different sectors. When you overpopulate the world, and introduce non-linear communication through the internet, things are bound to change. And if they don't?

If you persist with hero's journey mentality, then you're going to get polarization. You're going to get tribes who make themselves right – because that's how they get the boon and give it back to their people – and make others wrong – these are the people who must be conquered or smashed or destroyed or tricked, to get the boon. (J. Gomez, Personal Communication, 09/06/17)

Quite obviously, this is the sort of mindset most of us try to avoid in our daily life. The compartmentalization of ourselves and others into different tribes, is counterproductive to our modern society and creates discord among people.

This phenomenon has been heavily covered through social identity theory, in which people attempt to increase self-image by enhancing the status of their own group, all the while discriminating against another “outsider” group. This kind of behaviour, Jeff argues, is perhaps engrained within us because of the social narrative we tell ourselves. And so, to change that, what we need are new *types* of stories. A different model.

One that has less to do with right and wrong or good and evil, and more to do with infinite diversity and infinite combinations. More to do with the fact that we now possess tools that allow for us collectively to not just defeat an individual enemy but alter an entire system. (J. Gomez, Personal Communication, 09/06/17)

We can see this model springing up naturally all over the world in the past hundred years. In the 1900s, Mahatma Gandhi became a leader and generated a massive movement. Dr Martin Luther King in the 1950s also stood against a broken system and saw change occur. Both of these movements were largely formed by strong leaders, but in the post-King and Gandhi era, we've also seen spontaneous, self-organized systems, leveraging digital technology to become movements in their own right.

2010 saw the Arab Spring, where Social Media allowed protestors and activists to organize and rally in a way like never before. In 2014, students in Hong Kong, also leveraging modern technology, took part in the *Umbrella Movement*. A final example being the rise of the Columbian people against the FARC, a terrorist organization that had been waging war in their country for decades.

All of these self-organized movements happened stunningly rapidly, causing people like Gomez to ask, how such things could happen? How were these movements able to form without there being a single leader? How did they impact things so quickly? As Gomez notes:

Whether they win or lose is not the point. The point is that they emerge with amazing speed. Black Lives Matter in the United States, for example. Amazing! And then you have people who are catching on to how to stimulate behaviour in massive populations in subtle ways that can be hazardous or oppressive. I studied how Putin's use of multi-lateral narrative helped oppress the Russian people and create an authoritarian government, even when democracy was a possibility in the 1990s for Russia [...] And of course, it really hit home when the Trump Campaign began to use very similar techniques here. (J. Gomez, Personal Communication, 09/06/17)

There is power in the stories that we tell ourselves and each other, power to help others, but also, power to do harm.

Because of this, it's important for us to understand the model for this kind of narrative – a fully participatory narrative. A story may be told by one or a few individuals on the surface, but in actuality is being told by thousands or even millions of people through technology like social media.

“The Collective Journey is a model that we see as an evolution over the Hero's Journey because it considers the fully participatory nature of people. It considers the diversity of the participating population” (J. Gomez, Personal Communication, 09/06/17).

Not necessarily pitting right against wrong, the Collective Journey narrative's focus is about altering systems. It considers the fact, that with amazing speed, something that starts out as just a concept, can become a reality in a very short amount of time.

Whereas the Hero's Journey is a largely linear movement, a step-by-step one-thing-leads to another, the Collective Journey works in an altogether different way. The Collective Journey is *non-linear* in that, different aspects or *beats* of the narrative can be happening at the same time or out of order due to all the multilateral elements that occur in the narrative. As Gomez explains:

We aren't following necessarily an individual through a linear cycle, rather we are looking at a community [...] these are large casts of characters that are factionalized, that are grappling not just with some singular villain, or even some singular outside force, but with a system that is broken. (J. Gomez, Personal Communication, 09/06/17)

Although a story may have a human(-oid) antagonist, such a character will not exist as the end-all, be-all. They are not the wellspring of evil, nor is their death or defeat the key to saving the world. Rather, they are products of a broken societal, spiritual, physical or metaphysical regime, a leader for a collective group that simply holds a differing point of view, than the group or groups a story's perspective causes us to identify with.

In this sense, the Collective Journey story is not about good versus evil, but about how individuals and communities respond to a broken system. As is true to humanity, characters will fight with each other, argue and cause strife at first, before the truth of their systemic problem slowly dawns on them. At this point, if they are successful, characters will "transcend and become a collective to alter the system" (J. Gomez, Personal Communication, 09/06/17), as only a collective group of allies can understand, attack and change such a thing.

Though the individual beats of the Collective Journey have been publicly discussed at length by Gomez during a seminar in New York on February 23, 2016 entitled "The Collective Journey: Transmedia and the Rise of a New Form of Story" (The National Arts Club, 2016) most of what follows regarding the detailed structure of this model is yet to be formally published and has been derived from personal communications between Gomez and myself.

In the Collective Journey, our hero or heroes begin their journey much like the Campbellian/Vogler tradition. They begin in *The Old World*, but instead of a Call to Adventure, there is *The Shift* in which something happens. It could be good, it could be bad. It could be personal or traumatic. Basically, it functions as an event that causes a realization in the character/s of the broken system they are living under. Once they have had this realization, the heroes move on to *Tap the Digital Oracle*. The heroes consult their technology so to understand what is going on. In a more contemporary narrative for example, they might Google the problem. This step is all about the inclusion of technology into the story, rather than the exclusion that many traditional narratives enact. The characters are then forced to *Adapt or Succumb*. Characters are killed off. Others can't deal with the situation.

They give up and move off the playing field. Meanwhile, others find it within themselves to somehow persevere and cross the threshold into the greater story being told.

There are *Different Paths* to be taken on this journey – an infinite number of choices. There are different ways to get the job done. *Signs and Images* also play an important part. These are not supernatural interventions, rather, iconography and indicators that will help the characters progress.

Multiple Solutions may present themselves. Different ways to resolve conflicts, many that will be in opposition to one another, different, competing agendas. In the Collective Journey world, *Paths will Cross* between different characters. They may be oppositional paths or similar paths, which creates the problem that *Anyone Can Die*. People who the audience expect to be the hero, may not be. Your favourite character may be killed or taken off the table at any minute.

As the characters begin to truly understand their situation, we reach *Deconstruction* – the heroes break the situation down into its different parts to try understanding it. This causes an *Embracing (of) the Reversal*. The characters discover what the oppositional forces and systemic issues are, by accepting them as part of the universe. Instead of directly opposing them and destroying them, the characters realize that these issues somehow need to be integrated into their worldview so that they can reach a resolution. This beat leads to *Reaching Plurality* – the characters learn how to hold oppositional viewpoints in their minds at the same time. This is the process of integrating the situation so that a resolution can be reached. *Super Positioning* allows the characters to project themselves into a kind of social media or use means to amplify their message, getting their allies, and perhaps even their enemies to embrace it.

Nearing the end of the narrative model, there is the *Endless Universe* – There is a greater story world out there, a greater universe. There isn't just the fiction that is unfolding, or even the non-fiction. There is the discussion about the fiction or non-fiction that is unfolding around the narrative as well.

Having reached the end of their journey, the characters discover *Collective Movement*, through their numbers, they can create a shift. As their community acts, they hit a *Momentum* which accelerates their movement to create *Change Making* where the system is at last altered, or the heroes are crushed, or somewhere in the middle – the system is slightly altered.

This change results in the final beat: *The New World* – what we end up with once all is said and done.

Orbus VR and Transitioning from the Hero's Journey to the Collective

Because Orbus VR is an MMORPG, by its very nature it is a social game, and in fact, some of the best reviews we have been receiving have focused on how it fosters a community of people and gets them playing together, defeating monsters together and completing quests together.

This socialization was one of the beginning goals of developers, and it was quite important to them that the narrative reflected those ideas. Because of this, Orbus VR was a near perfect fit for the Collective Journey narrative model. In my development of the story and characters, I've tried my best to incorporate as much of the CJ as possible for this first Orbus VR title. When I came on board, the developers had never heard of the CJ, and although very excited to incorporate it, had to a certain extent developed a lot of what they wanted the player's gameplay journey to be. So, although the Collective Journey was implemented, we still have left overs of the Hero's Journey narrative model in places – primarily the player being a somewhat "Chosen One".

THE OLD WORLD: Täella-Oso is in a state of false peace. The all-powerful Order of Ma'at reigns over all the major points of civilization. In Patreayl, people are for the most part compliant and believing in the Order, mostly ignorant to the evils it has committed. They believe in Ma'at and order and despise the use of pagan magic. The realm of chaos Täella-Brüha is a dirty word, a hell for sinners, and almost all remembrance of the Janists and Laegonelle has been forgotten.

THE SHIFT: The foiled assassination attempt of Bishop Roma creates a shift in the lives of many characters. That of the player as well as the attempted assassin, Sir Oscar Hulthine whom is executed for his crimes, spurring into motion a greater revolution against the Order.

TAPPING THE DIGITAL ORACLE: Before his death, Oscar sends the player out to explore the Order archives to learn the truth of their wickedness. The player is then sent to speak with victims of the Order to further confirm the Order's evil.

ADAPT OR SUCCUMB: Upon discovering the evil of the Order, the player must adapt to this new world by joining the Knights of Patreayl, lest they succumb to the dystopic rule of Bishop Roma.

DIFFERENT PATHS: The player is encouraged to follow missions from both the Patreayl Knights and the Order. They are given opportunities to sabotage Order missions. They can also cross paths with side characters whom are sometimes opposed to the player's motives, or other times ambivalent.

SIGNS AND IMAGES: To join the Knights of Patreayl, the player is told to "follow the signs". They discover the Knights of Patreayl's symbol – a King Stag head symbolizing bravery and patriotism, and follow graffiti to the Knight's hidden lair. The player also learns how to cast "Runespeak" to change and effect their world.

MULTIPLE SOLUTIONS: Some quests call for bribery, others for violent force, and others call for morally ambiguous answers. There are many ways to save the day in the game.

PATHS WILL CROSS: Initially the Player will, while working for the Order cross paths with the Knights of Patreayl who have a very different idea about how to unite the country than the Order. The Player will cross paths with many characters, some they help fulfil smaller tasks/quests, and others they encounter, such as the Inquisitors will oppose them in their quest to unite Patreayl.

ANYONE CAN DIE: The honourable and charismatic Oscar Hulthine is executed, Bishop Roma dies in the Necropolar, and the scholar Sicilus is tortured and forced into betraying her friends, Sir Markos of Rūneval is kidnapped by General Clavacius.

DECONSTRUCTION: The true scope of the situation is revealed to the player and their allies at the climax of the story where they begin to understand not only the inner workings of the Order and the complacency of many of Patreayl's citizens, but also the looming threat of the Necropolar Lords and the apparent reawakening of the ancient Esasa race. Only once all those playing pieces are revealed can they begin to plan a path ahead.

EMBRACING THE REVERSAL: Moving further into the future (post initial game) the player and their allies will have to learn how to get along with characters like High Commander Fassith and General Clavacius, as well as the Order in Ottathamine to try and combat the greater threat of the Necropolar Lords and the Esasa mutants.

REACHING PLURALITY: Again, this will be reflected in further expansions to the game, but the cast of characters will have to learn how to hold opposing views to each other, while working together to make a greater change for the world that they find themselves in.

SUPER POSITIONING: Super positioning in game takes a very literal role in which, players can superposition themselves in the social medias of the game to work together and uncover the lore and history of the world, as well as hidden, secret truths that may help them further on in later expansions. One such example, is the organic creation of folk-lore for the world, which comes from player fanfiction written on the community blogs. This content is often taken onboard by myself in narrative development of future story elements. Orbus VR has also been designed to be an incredibly social game. Every time one player speaks to another player and agrees to help them out or teach them, they are super positioning themselves.

ENDLESS UNIVERSE: Though the plot centres on the Patreayl Knights and their battle against the Order of Ma'at, a greater story is taking place. The Necropolar Lords have awoken, the doors to the ancient Esasa subterranean cities are opening and things are moving

down there in the dark, looking to reopen the door to the realm of chaos. Though the story seems to focus on conflict, the real danger is the system of religious fervour and the arrogance and ambition of man to control things that must be thwarted.

COLLECTIVE MOVEMENT: The Player comes together with the Highsteppe Guardians, the Obnobi Bedouin, the Rune Wargs, the Explorer’s League and the Brotherhood as well as OTHER PLAYERS, to face off against the corrupt Order and the power hungry General Clavacius.

MOMENTUM: Taking place in a future expansion, the new “United Patreayl” army have come together and are ready to lay siege to Guild City and free it from General Clavacius and the Enforcer’s oppression.

CHANGE MAKING: Before they can do so however, General Clavacius and his army ambush them in their hideout, the scholar Sicilus has been tortured into giving away their whereabouts, the United Patreayl army are unprepared and therefore defeated. Their leader – Markos is captured and imprisoned, and the player and other allies barely escape with their lives.

THE NEW WORLD: With their armies scattered or dead, the player and those surviving allies now find themselves in a harsh world, worse than ever before. The Necropolar Lords are on the loose, Sir Markos has been captured and General Clavacius now rules the city. They begin to regroup and plan their next step...

In the case of Orbus VR, what we have is two versions of the Collective Journey narrative occurring. There is the narrative of the initial game, and then the larger narrative of that saga.

LGBTQ and PoC Representation

The final issues I wanted to attempt to grapple with in the development of Orbus VR, were those of representation in video games. Primarily in LGBTQ representation, as well as the treatment of PoC (People of Colour) and non-imperial cultures.

In her seminal essay, *Putting the Gay in Games* Adrienne Shaw gives us several statistics about the video game industry that are somewhat alarming. She writes:

Statistically, the video game industry is fairly homogeneous. According to data from IGDA's 2005 survey of workforce diversity [...] the vast majority (91%) of respondents identify as heterosexual, 5.1% as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and 3.2% declined to answer. Males accounted for 89.1% of those surveyed and 1.5% of all respondents identify as transgendered. (Shaw, 2009, p.234)

With over 90% of industry workers identifying as heterosexual and 89% of those surveyed identifying as male, it's no wonder why we have such a problem in this industry with lack of representation in content. Between the lack of LGBTQ characters in AAA studio games, and the fetishization of women with completely unrealistic battle armour found in many fantasy titles, it becomes quite clear why so many outside this field view video games as the realm of pimply fourteen-year-old boys. Moving forward, more recent statistics, coming from 2017's survey show us not much has changed in twelve years regarding representation of LGBTQ and PoC within the industry.

Survey respondents were predominately male (74%). Only 21% identified as female, 2% identified as male to female transgender and fewer than 1% identified as female to male transgender. An additional 2% selected 'Other' as a response [...] The majority identified as white/Caucasian/European at 68% [...] Regarding sexual orientation, 81% of respondents identified as heterosexual, 5% as homosexual, 11% as bisexual and 3% as other. (IGDA, 2017, p.11-12)

Interestingly however, there does appear to be a desire in the industry for more diversity. 81% of respondents for the same survey said that they felt diversity in the workplace was either very or somewhat important to them, which was the highest percentage in the history of the Developers Satisfaction Survey (DSS). The survey also found that having diversity within the actual game content (i.e. characters, storylines etc) was also important with 85% of respondents marking that they felt it to be either somewhat important or very important to the games industry (IGDA, 2017, p.11-12).

Comparing this to the same survey held between 2014-2015, 50% of respondents believed diversity in game content to be 'very important' (IGDA, 2016, p.22-37), though a note was made that:

[...] diversity in the workplace was the category deemed important least often compared to diversity in the industry and diversity in game content. This may suggest that in an abstract sense, video game developers recognize the need for diversity in the industry and the cultural texts that circulate as a result of their work (e.g., games and related commentary). However, they seem less likely to perceive negative implications – to themselves or their products, for instance the cultural content of games – as a result of a homogenous team in their own workplaces. (IGDA, 2016, p.22)

In short, what this tells us is that there is a desire for change, though not necessarily an understanding of the steps required to make the change, as well as a danger of stagnation, in that developers could believe change to have already occurred without it indeed doing so.

Focusing specifically on LGBTQ representation for a moment, let's return briefly to Adrienne Shaw's article, an important point is made around the danger game developers face in attempting to create diversity in their content. Speaking on the industry's attempt to create games for a female market, Shaw writes:

Recognizing both the social and economic importance of targeting female gamers, some companies have attempted to court the “girl gamer” market. Market research, by companies such as Purple Moon, sought to establish essential qualities of the “girl games market” by looking at how boys and girls play outside of gaming (Gorritz & Medina, 2000, p. 47). **Significantly, they did not look at what girls who were already gamers did or did not enjoy but rather were targeting the nongaming girl market.** According to Gansmo et al. (2003), **when female players are discussed by designers, generally a very traditional feminine stereotype is evoked, which translates into game designs built around social relations, romance, emotions, and roleplaying [...]. Creating a subgenre of games that appeals to stereotypes of gendered play habits resulted in “ghettoization” or girl games...** (Shaw, 2009, p.233) *Emphasis added.*

Taking what is quite frankly a sexist mistake on the part of developers and laying it over the focus of this section on LGBTQ representation, there is a danger of, as Shaw puts it, “Ghettoization” of gay games as well. In fact, later in her essay, she provides an example in which Sony took out an advert in the gay magazine *Attitude*, to promote their new Singstar game. The advert used half naked, muscular firemen with the intention of selling the game to gay men. Shaw notes that this approach is the same failed approach taken to advertise games for girls, in that it attempts to appeal to homosexual gamers as gay men instead of as people who enjoy playing video games (Shaw, 2009, p.238).

The fundamental error being made here, is assuming a connection (in the case of girl games) between female gamers and traditional femininity, and (in the case of gay games) a connection between queer gamers and flamboyant highly sexualized aspects of gay culture –

something that not every queer person identifies with or relates to, and certainly has nothing to do with playing and enjoying video games.

Lastly, in terms of representation for PoC in video games, but particularly MMORPGs, we need to consider the issues of whiteness in the fantasy genre. Helen Young writes in her book *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* about the phenomenon specifically of Orcs in their relation to racial issues:

Orcs in Fantasy came into existence through Tolkien's imagination and have been transplanted into countless worlds outside Middle-earth. In Middle-earth they are a monstrous Other constructed through racial discourses. They are: somatically different to the White Self of the Fellowship; part of a millennium old Western cultural discourse that Others the East and its people; and the embodiment of racial logics and stereotypes, and the perceived threat of miscegenation. They are the prototypes for the massed armies of evil's foot-soldiers which swarm the worlds of High Fantasy under different names. (Young, 2016, p.89)

Young goes on to consider how humans and other humanoid creatures such as dwarves and elves are coded White, explaining that alternatively, Orcs are coded to be non-specifically non-White, and their development often incorporates discourses associated specifically with Black culture and/or Native American culture or other indigenous backgrounds. Young also considers how Orcs are made to be "other" through their skin colour (typically green, brown or black), extreme aggression, irrationality, and having a primitive disorganized culture, or a homeland which lies outside the borders of civilization (Young, 2016, p.89).

While Young is speaking specifically of the Orc as a creature, it should be obvious that this same approach can be easily used when representing PoC in fantasy, regardless of what species they might be.

Queer Heroes and PoC in Orbus VR

As someone who identifies as bisexual and a Narrative Designer working in the industry, I have been publicly outspoken about my thoughts around representation in games. In 2017, I was interviewed by a website which monitors queer culture and gaming, and was asked why I thought it was important that queer audiences are able to see themselves represented in the games they play, and in the developers who make the games they see. The interviewer also enquired as to what I felt could be done to improve the industry for queer audiences and developers.

It is important for queer audiences (especially young queer audiences) to see themselves represented in games and media in general because it instils a sense of confidence, it creates a normality around being queer and it can be encouraging to see a heroic representation of oneself in a fictional context. It's also important in our representations, that we show queer characters as being complex, multifaceted messes of both good and bad morals, because queer people are just like regular people, and people are hot complicated messes.

The reason I bring this up is because, this is the philosophy that I went into Orbus VR with. I didn't want to create a "gay game" as referenced earlier, rather, I was interested in creating a game for everyone, that just so happened to have queer characters. Nor did I want to create a game that just so happened to have queer characters doing queer or sexualized things, rather I was more interested in characters doing "people things" and incidentally being gay.

Two of the central characters in Orbus VR are *Lord Oscar Hulthine* and *Lord Markos Rõnval*. They are interesting characters because they are both gay *and* heroic Knights. Markos, being perhaps the closest thing to a heroic figure out of all the game characters, is also represented a dark-skinned, haling from a colonialized country.

When I was a child, I read a novel by John Connolly called *The Book of Lost Things*. In it, the protagonist, a young boy, befriends a Knight named Roland, who is searching for a man named Raphael, whom he has had an intense loving relationship with and now believes to be dead. Though Connolly never explicitly states Roland to be gay, as a young closeted teenager, I felt a huge sense of inspiration in reading about Roland and Raphael simply because Roland was so chivalrous and heroic - I'd never seen a gay character represented like that before.

Looking into the book while writing this exegesis, I found that Connolly didn't actually intend to write Roland gay, however he does say: "I didn't (write him gay) but if you want to read him that way, then that's fine... ..when I was writing the character of Roland, I left all such matters deliberately ambiguous" (Connolly, 2007). Which is bizarre, because I remember him as vividly as *being* gay. It was this character of Roland that inspired my two gay knights in Orbus, and while not as ambiguous as Roland and Raphael, their intention is to inspire others, the way I was inspired by Connolly.

With Oscar, I wanted to create a brave hero with a morally ambiguous past (he killed his own father, for complex reasons players will discover), that subjugated traditional heroic knight stereotypes. Using a sample image from google (as seen below), I began to develop him as a bookish, but heroic blond knight in shining armor. Basically, the traditional “straight” looking handsome hero, but subverting his archetype through developing him as a homosexual.



However, we did have some issues around the creation of his physicality. After developing his character profile and providing a sample image, the initial art designs for Oscar were somewhat underwhelming:

**FIGURE 1 SAMPLE KNIGHT
(DASHINVAINE, 2013)**

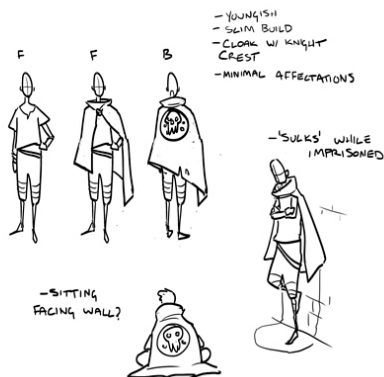
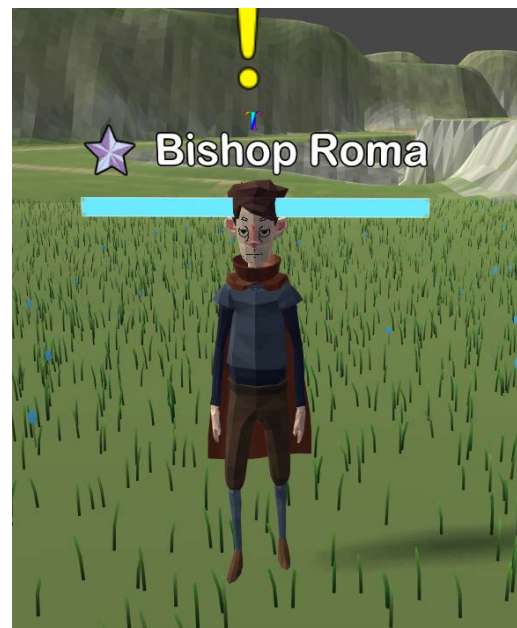


FIGURE 2 OSCAR ART (AD ALTERNUM, 2017)



**FIGURE 3 EARLY IMAGE OF OSCAR, MISLABELLED
AS “BISHOP ROMA” (AD ALTERNUM, 2017)**

This prompted a discussion between me and the developers, attempting to explain my reasoning:

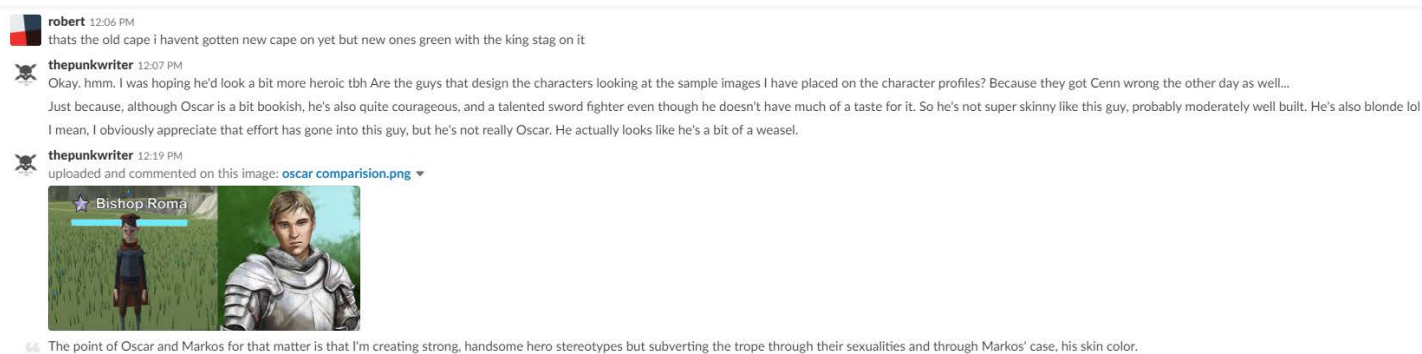


FIGURE 4 SLACK CONVERSATION (AD ALTERNUM, PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, 2017)

Eventually after this conversation and several others, we ended up with Oscar looking like this:



FIGURE 5 OSCAR END RESULT 1 (AD ALTERNUM, 2017)



FIGURE 6 OSCAR END RESULT 2 (AD ALTERNUM, 2017)

While not exactly what I was after, it was close enough to developing the physicality of the character I was after. But as we know, physicality isn't everything, and Oscar himself had to speak.

Unlike Connolly, I wanted my characters to be for certain gay. I didn't want to flaunt it in the faces of players, but I also didn't want to relegate them so far into the background that it wasn't noticeable. And so, I gradually layered the queer overtone through his dialogue as sampled below.

It's you. The thief. You thought you were quiet out there in the Lowland woods, but I have the eyes of a hawk. I saw you disappear into the undergrowth with my crest [...] I took you for a simple villager, a starving peasant who thought they could sell such a treasure so as to fill their hungry belly. Who could've known you'd rat me out to the Order? It appears I underestimated your desire to please the Order. I will not make that mistake a second time [...] This indiscretion, this failure won't deter me. I remain a loyal soldier. A warrior dedicated to the honor of the Knights of Patreayl! My heart beats in time to the thud of our shields against the skulls of our enemies, and my soul, my soul holds true, enraptured by my fearless leader, Markos of Rüneval! (Jones, 2017)

In this initial conversation with Oscar, he reveals his allegiance, and ties it specifically to Markos of Rüneval, his lover, however without directly implying lover. Here, I am establishing something more along the lines of what was common in Chivalric literature throughout antiquity -the concept of heroic friendships, such as Johnathon and David in the Bible, Achilles and Patroclus, Damon and Pythias, Oresetes and Pylades in Greek mythology and literature.

After seeing Oscar captured and shipped off to Guild City for his execution, the player is asked to attend to his final rights, which sparks our second conversation with the Knight:

Ha! My little defeater! I didn't expect to see you in such a place as this... Ah, and is that an Enforcer cloak? So now I understand. Ambition was your motivation, and status your reward [...] All six of my brothers once wore the crest you wear now... Oh, they've long since been promoted and killed on far off battlefields. Even I did a brief stint working the same job as you and them. I always wanted to be an academic, but my father wouldn't stand for it. He sent me to this city... in a way, it was his own undoing. It was through the Order that I discovered the truth, met Markos, and... well... a story for another time perhaps. (Jones, 2017)

Here, I am teasing a little more out of Oscar with his trailing off into backstory. But when we reach Oscar's execution, that's when the truth finally comes out, bold and proud:

I stand here, due to die. I am convicted not because of the crimes I have committed, but rather, because I stood for freedom! Freedom in the face of a tyrannical Order... and a desolate goddess! If I am to die, then as my last words, I declare my loyalty one final time to the Patreayl Knighthood, they alone stand to curb the tide of this corruption... Father, I am sorry for what I did to you. And to Sir Markos, I declare my undying loyalty, before the eyes of men and gods. I shall serve thee in the next life, if ever I am given the chance... I love you. Executioner, do you worst! (Jones, 2017)

This is very much the approach I have taken for most of the game in terms of LGBTQ representation. While maintaining queer characters front and centre, dropping information about their queerness has been done via subtle progressions of dialogue, or through visual

cues, as is the case with Kreyen, the genderfluid FTM Obnobi Bedouin that players encounter further into the game, who wears a binder to hide her breasts, and shaves her head.

In terms of PoC, it is probably most interesting to consider the character of Bezoula. Bezoula is from a tribal culture called the Rune Wargs, a group of men and women with the ability to control wolves through their minds.

I wanted, with Bezoula and his Rune Wargs, to set the groundwork for future narrative that can act as a post-colonial commentary on the way imperialism has often subjugated the first peoples of a land.

In the lore of Orbus VR, the Rune Wargs were the first people of the country of Patreayl (where the game is set). The story bible describes them as: “a minority race in Patreayl. They are historically the nation’s first people, having arrived in the country somewhere around 5440 B.E. from the Esasa Laboratories in Garbodia” (Jones, 2018, p.166).

Garbodia, being a mostly unknown nation to most of the character in Orbus VR, it is inspired by the fictional kingdom of Wakanda in *Black Panther* and is considered to be:

The dark continent [...] (a) primitive jungle country. Mostly unexplored and ruled by cannibalistic savages [...] Nothing could be further from the truth [...] The country is home to perhaps the most advanced human civilization to have ever graced Tæella-Oso. The Garbodian people are a Polynesian inspired civilization with Aztec/Incan influences who still remember the Esasa (An ancient race of godlike beings that formed much of the world, and created all humans in scientific experiments), being the most prized creation of the Esasa. As such, Garbodians still use much of the Esasa’s technology, and have been spurred on to create their own. However, the Garbodians have also taken on the reclusive aspects of the Esasa, and prefer to stay hidden from the rest of the world in their jungles or at sea. The few Order encampments that have set up base in Garbodia have quickly fallen apart with the Garbodians have forced them from their land. (Jones, 2018, p.182).

The Rune Wargs, forced from Garbodia for unknown reasons came to Patreayl and developed their connection with the Patreaylin Warg. As the first settlers from the imperialist nation of Parathime began to arrive in Patreayl, the Rune Wargs split, as many wanted to fight these settlers for their land, while others, wanted peace. Those who wanted peace, exiled themselves into the desert and became the Obnobi Bedouin, while those who wished to fight, remained Rune Wargs.

The Rune Wargs were, during their defence of their homeland, almost eradicated, and forced out of the best parts of the country (known as the Midlands) to live in the mountainous wilderness that would one day become known as the Lucian Plateau.

Bezoula, who is the current leader of the Runewargs is an interesting character, because although he is a violent man, he is spurred on to destroy the forces of colonialism.

Bezoula holds within himself a deep-seated rage towards the Order of Ma'at (a symbol of imperialism) and by association all Midlanders. Once a young father of two boys, he had his life shattered when the Order caught his children playing around their caravans. Suspecting them of stealing, they strung the children up without a trial, as in their minds, the boys were nothing but "little savages". Having lost his wife in childbirth, the two boys were all Bezoula had left of her, and losing them fractured something in his mind, he became who he is today, with the sole intention of murdering as many of the Order as he can. He does however still hold onto a glimmer of goodness, deep within him – the love he had for his wife and child. (Jones, 2018, p.72)

In game, the player is required to create an ally of Bezoula, so that together, they can face down the forces of Imperialism, as in the grand scheme of things, the Order of Ma'at has destroyed both of their cultures (the player belonging to what the Order believes to be a pagan society called the Janists).

This whole train of thought is built as a starting point for further post-colonial commentary, as well as a way to give more exposure to minorities as heroic characters.

Conclusion

Through the development of this game and the research surrounding it, it is clear to me that rapid technological change is revising the kinds of stories we can tell in video games. However, outside of the technological aspects, there are many things still requiring a more mindful and informed storytelling approach so that the medium itself can move forward as an artform and be appreciated in the same way as other, more traditional mediums of literature. The MMORPG specifically is subject to a whole host of old ideas that inhibit Narrative Designers from moving forward in the complexity of their storytelling. Most of these issues revolve around the *Perpetual World*, in that both time and consequences are impeded by the need for players to be able to access the same content as each other at all periods within a game's lifetime.

Contributing to this restrictive regiment of the player's inability to affect and be affected by time and consequence in the MMORPG, is the stale overuse of the Hero's Journey Motif, in spite of its very framework being at odds with this game genre. Although proponents of the Hero's Journey have always stated that it is a guideline only, and not a

template, many in the games industry have taken it as just that, which has resulted in a disruption of narrative flow, thanks to the differences between linearity and non-linearity, as well as the way players are positioned as singular “chosen ones” despite there being potentially thousands of them at any given time.

Orbus VR stands as something potentially quite special, provided I and the rest of the development team continue to push boundaries and think outside the box. And although we are still heavily constricted by the Perpetual World and the Hero’s Journey (at this time), it is primarily due to technological limitations. We have attempted to deviate from the Perpetual World through using instances, as well as a weather and day/night system, with the end goal of implementing a calendar system, seasons and festivals. These steps, alongside the refashioning (and in some cases, removing) of narrative content to imply temporal change, pushes us in the direction of a living world model, which will allow for greater immersion and more interesting and intuitive story choices.

Orbus VR has also been designed narratively to incorporate aspects of Gomez’s non-linear, community driven Collective Journey. Due to the effects of living in a post-digital era, we find ourselves more connected to one another than ever before, and more inclined to see systemic problems needing change, through group movement, rather than causal problems being resolved by an individual hero. It is important to mirror this change in society within modern narratives, not only so a modern audience sees themselves reflected, but also because it reinforces a world view of social union between people being more powerful than the individual or indeed, the influence of a corrupted system.

Lastly, though the games industry recognizes the need for minority representation in both the games it produces and the workplaces they are produced within, they still have a long way to go and will only be able to achieve this through continually being challenged to push further with who they employ, the kinds of stories they tell and the types of characters they develop.

It is important within the creation of such narratives, not to appeal to minorities based on stereotypes and generalizations, as this will create a kind of “ghettoization” of games, as seen in the marketing of “girl games,” in which stereotypes about women were used to define gameplay and story elements, creating something that was not only insufficient to describe the female gaming community, but that was also offensive in general to the female gender. The focus instead needs to be on developing strong, unique and interesting characters whose

minority aspects (be they LGBTQ or PoC) are not necessarily front and centre of the narrative, but rather parts of a multifaceted personality or identity. This will not only appeal to gamers who happen to be minorities, but it will also a) appeal to the majority, bringing greater awareness, and b) encourage and inspire younger generations through seeing heroic versions of themselves displayed in the media that they consume.

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