The Annals of Ovidius University of Constanța: Philology Series Vol. XXIX, 2/2018

THE CONTEMPORARY EPIC MODE: DIGITAL GAMES AND THE JOURNEY MOTIF

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Abstract: *As part of a project that investigates the translation of the epic mode in contemporary digital games, the present paper starts from the premise that the principal medium of epic production has shifted from literature, comic book franchises, and film to video games. More specifically, my aim is to explore the motif of the hero's journey, which has always been congenital to the anthropological and literary category of the epic, and which has maintained its central position in fiction since the epics of the ancient world. Within the theme itself, the hero must face various trials, confrontations, and obstacles, which lead to a process of self-discovery, offering a cultural learning experience and a gateway to the exploration of knowledge about human existence in general. The same is maintained throughout video games designed in the epic mode, yet the configuration of the journey has suffered some changes in its translation towards the digital. At large, these revisions reflect the postmodern and posthuman turn, and therefore alter the fundamental process of initiation expressed through the journey motif. To illustrate the above, I propose a form of digital game criticism whereby I comparatively interpret the theme of the quest in its past and present manifestations.*

Keywords: *epic mode, video game epic, journey motif, epic genre, role-playing game (RPG), video game culture, game philology, video game criticism*

In 2015, Espen Aarseth, the editor-in-chief of the journal *Game Studies* and pioneer in the field of game research, firmly declared that "game studies is a success" (*Meta-Game Studies* 1). Among his arguments, he invoked a substantial (and still rising) amount of publications, conferences, as well as academic programmes having been inaugurated since the early 2000s. As of 2017, the global revenue of the games market was $108.90 billion (Newzoo 8), which officially surpassed global box office revenues generated by the movie industry. Furthermore, a 2016 market report estimated that over 1.6 billion people played video games worldwide (Smith 10). Thus, there is no doubt that, today, video games benefit from outstanding global popularity, having successfully created not only an academic niche, but an important social collective. For this reason, I believe video game culture must be placed under scrutiny in a manner similar to the way in which Michel Foucault examines the biopolitical ramifications of the modern nation, or the way in which Giorgio Agamben unmasks the ancient Greeks' partiality towards the human body. In his *Theories of Mythology*, Eric Csapo appropriately points out that "the way we know something is of social importance is through use: if it is important a story will be repeated or alluded to frequently in social discourse" (10). Bearing this in mind, my purpose in this paper is twofold. To begin with, I wish to expand the existing literature arguing for the presence of the hero's journey motif in video games, and I intend to do so by ascertaining to what extent *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, an action role-playing game (RPG), both follows and innovates this archetype. Following this, I trace the way in which contemporary video games created in the epic mode thematically innovate the prototype of the quest, calibrating it to suit current post-colonial, post-humanist problematizing of human ontology.

Admittedly, not every individual engages with another through the digital medium of a game. The fact that nearly two billion people play games does not mean that they all play with one another. For this particular investigation, it matters more that they play to begin with, given that the gamer collective has its own cultural specificities. Video game culture is defined by specific linguistic and behavioural patterns, channels of communication and interaction, dynamic game(r) typologies, but also aesthetic and functional horizons of expectations, all of which are precipitated,

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at least in part, by the history of video games to date, along with the ways in which they have been and can be played. There is ample possibility to conduct a Foucaultian analysis of the power relations established within/by the video game industry, as Adrienne Shaw rightly points out that the term itself has a number of meaningful ideological implications (404). As such, my focus is to produce a reflexive investigation which "looks at video games culturally, rather than video games as culture" (Shaw 418). We must not discard contemporary video game narratives as inconsequential either due to the media they employ for their transmission or because they more or less fall short of outdated cultural conceptualizations, such as "classic," "traditional," "artistic," "literary" or "canonical." To begin with, the latter terms are highly controversial and volatile. More importantly, all of these concepts can be and have been successfully applied by video game criticism. Scholars from a wide range of fields including philosophy, psychology, technology, media studies, anthropology, sociology, art history, and literary theory have stressed the relevance of video games more thoroughly than can be said here.

More importantly, video game developers have begun to rely, in their work, on cultural and literary tropes as a means to create more meaningful experiences for each playthrough. In other words, instead of merely showcasing gameplay mechanics, video games are increasingly appreciated for their potential to engender personal stories for the users who engage with them. The journey motif is, perhaps, the most widely employed to this end. Its distinguishing, essential element is the quest itself; without it, there is no reason for the journey to take place. In order to define the quest, it is first necessary to address the overlap of construals of this notion by literary theorists and game studies scholars. For the first group, the quest is a journey framework wherein a hero goes through a road of trials to search for some kind of treasure or favourable outcome. The motif is so central to the epic genre that it currently defines it beyond any other textual characteristics. For instance, both Georg Lukács and Northrop Frye understand the genre as a dynamic category. Instead of a typology, they suggest the existence of an epic mode, which is actually a way of looking at the epic hero from a relational perspective:

> The relationship between the protagonist and his world, the scale of that relationship, and the protagonist's range of action are more important than the particulars of that action or the form by which that action is mediated and narrated. (Arnott 13)

From the oldest known epics of the Middle East, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, to the Southeast-Asian *Mahabharata*, the all-too-known ancient European heritage, and even the oral tradition that survives in Africa to this day, the Indo-European relational aspect is, indeed, a paradigm that seems to persist across cultures and media. The universality of this scheme is also attested by the seminal work of Joseph Campbell, who has argued for a standard path of the hero. This course begins with departure from a world, is followed by acquisition of a source of power, and then concluded with a life-enhancing return (33). Admittedly, Campbell is adamant on extracting those details which seem more meaningful to him, as he is looking for the pattern of the monomyth in the stories of cultures that do not necessarily share a Judeo-Christian background. However, as this paper will later show, the formula of the rites of passage is not constant across time, culture, and individuals. Its connotation differs depending on what is sought, how it is obtained, who does the searching, and the one responsible for the interpretation of the story.

In game studies, on the other hand, Espen Aarseth has put forward the idea that quests are essentially a hunt for a specific outcome (*From Hunt the Wumpus* 2-3), in what he notoriously calls a "post-narrative discourse." According to him, one might understand the quest in the sense of an in-game task that may belong to one of the three basic typologies (place-, time-, or object-oriented). Depending on their connection to other missions, quests can also be classified as either chain-quests, a series of actions necessary for the completion of a larger assignment, or side-quests, activities which are not necessarily important for advancing the main story of the game. What are

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we to make of this "simple variation of skeletal patterns, consisting of a few elemental figures" (Aarseth 2)? In terms of procedural programming, quests are no more than what Aarseth indicates. However, by itself, this is not a complete definition. The larger, more pressing question regards how quests are meant to be played out, or how they actually end up contributing to one's experience of a game. In other words, procedural programming is not an end in itself, but is rather employed towards a more meaningful experience of the quest for the user who completes it. Game designers, such as the creators of *Andromeda*, for instance, strive to help their audience create evocative, personal stories. Thus, while Aarseth's definition of the quest does illustrate the procedural, self-similar pattern, it misses out on the panoptic, fractal nature of the fictional, narrative dimension. Zooming out of the algorithm, in-game quests are made with a purpose in mind and that purpose has never been restricted to the outcome of the quest (gold, experience). In actuality, quests are meant to perform a part in what we can refer to as the complex, narrative journey of playing a video game.

In addition to the structure itself, video game epics resemble their traditional counterparts by means of the intermediality they seek to achieve in their performance (Ryan, "Narration" 10). The multimodality accomplished by the participation of more than one sensory channel to a given work serves to overcome some of the deficiencies that exclusively belong to text narrative, such as, for instance, its ability to respond to reader feedback or to render large expanses of detailed space without having to sacrifice time. Paradoxically, the new interest in multimodality has triggered the re-appraisal of previously "overlooked modes, such as the gestures of oral storytelling, the soundtrack of film, or the choreography of actor movements on stage" (Ryan, "Narration" 30). Particularly because of the new interest in transmedial narration, it has become imperative that we assess the way in which video games exert their influence on the epic mode, as they are the first productions of this genre that require the reader to actively participate in the narrative in order to make sense of it. The chronotope of the epic genre is thus experiencing a shift from being internally oriented on hero-characters and their communities to being outwardly focused on reader practices and interactions. Through the latter development, the epic has thus become not only a register of a community at a certain point in the history of humanity, but also a record of how members of that community behave(d) over a certain amount of time – more specifically, during their days, months, or years' worth of gameplay. The technology and multimodality of video game epics reverberate upon the significance and impact of the epic mode. One immediate consequence of this is that the relevancy of epic works is increasingly given by forces belonging to market economies, namely to what extent and in what numbers users chose to participate in the performance of a video game to the detriment of another. In other words, video game developers are increasingly demand- and profit-oriented. In addition, producers of video game epics are now capable of tracking the experience of users, from the decisions they make to the resources they chose to accumulate, and even when and where they play the most. These outcomes following the transition of the epic certainly deserve more attention and further investigation not only in game studies, but in future studies of the genre itself.

BioWare, the producers of several outstanding titles, including *Andromeda*, have just recently updated their mission statement to reflect precisely this understanding of possible worlds coming into being: "We create worlds of adventure, conflict, and companionship that inspire you to become the hero of your story" (Hudson 4). This shows that the developers would at least like their audience to think that their products are created with the player in mind. The organization's classic games, to borrow a literary term, such as the previous instalments in the *Mass Effect* and *Baldur's Gate* series, have played a crucial role in the growth of the video game industry as a whole, and an important reason why this is the case is the fact that they offer an interpretation of the hero's journey archetype – the *only* myth, according to David Leeming: "The hero's whole life from birth to apotheosis is a quest, whether for an actual place or object in this world, (…) or for eternal life in another world (…)" (152). Developers of other paradigm-changing series such as *Halo*, *The Legend*

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of Zelda, *Half-Life*, *God of War*, or *The Elder Scrolls* (Perry 5) have also relied on this widely-employed archetype from fiction and literature. The fact that each of these games was part of a series of successful titles, some of them spanning over three decades' worth of releases, speaks to their ability to deliver immersive, heroic narratives, as well as to their engaging gameplay mechanics against the background of a memorable possible world. In the history of video games, some of these titles have served as an acknowledged inspiration for numerous other noteworthy successes, creating a chain of artistic productions and responses that would require the minute attention of a historian to be completely accounted for. In and of themselves, these digital universes are created to make sense, first and foremost, from the perspective of the user and not that of the algorithm, particularly since the latter's purpose is to meet the former through the UI (user interface).

Moreover, it is those titles that provide an immersive narrative involvement for their players through both their content and mechanics that deliver the most memorable gameplay experiences. Nick Yee, a game studies scholar who has collected a decades' worth of player feedback, has narrowed player motivation down to achievement, social, and immersive components, all of which are integrated, in one way or another, into the personal narrative of the hero behind the screen (5). Since Leeming shows that we can interpret the heroes of the epic mode as a symbolic search for humankind's identity (152), it follows that one of the reasons why video game epics have achieved great success may be their ability to offer a means of psychological development and identity exploration for the individual user. Both in multiplayer and single-player, video games provide us with the means to self-actualize our individuation process.

Yet a kernel component of the quest is the journey itself, namely the process of travelling from one place to the next, and so on. Is it possible to overcome the barrier of the body staying in one place and still recreate the experience of journeying? Both neuroscience and game studies indicate that it is so. On the one hand, over the last two decades, medical research has verified the existence of mirror-neurons that have the ability to replicate bodily states within our frames without them actually taking place. It often takes nothing more than our imagination to trigger a simulacrum of feelings, sensations that lack an immediate, external origin, but that are entirely real (and, therefore, experienced as such) for the subject. This is why the workings of mirror neurons is also called an "as-if loop" by some researchers. From an evolutionary perspective, this organic development is conductive to social living (Damasio 155). On the other hand, contemporary virtual environments have evolved to such an extent that they are now able to deliver a high degree of verisimilitude in their construction of space, managing to achieve player immersion precisely through "exploration, discovery and wish fulfilment" (Nuenen 205) in a possible world. The overwhelming amounts of detail meant to deliver tactile, visual, and auditory experiences make it very easy to suspend one's disbelief. Furthermore, due to the dynamics of the player character/avatar and the real-life user, most video games engender emotional investment on the part of the latter. When one must spend relatively long periods of time getting from point A to point B, the interval required to complete the journey testifies for the immersion and engagement elicited by the virtual world. Most games reward this initial patience with better travelling possibilities later on.

We have thus established that quests are developed on the pattern of a journey, the self-same design which is reiterated under different arrangements until a coherent and extensive configuration of the game world can be framed. The structure closely follows the literary archetype in the new media, as most of the core stages of Campbell's monomyth are easily recognizable, but it does not necessarily involve a hierarchy, even when one is specified by the design team. From the point of view of narratology, the stories emerging from video game epics which employ the quest arrangement resemble Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. The "image of thought" (16), resulting from the narrative aggregate are *acentred* fictional possibilities waiting to be rooted by the player. Once this happens, a hierarchic tree that applies a structure of power re-organizes the rest into a trunk and crown, but each component of the latter can, in turn, burst into another rhizome (17). As such,

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quests are developed with a visible and explicit emphasis on the player themselves, in an attempt to create a customizable, physical, psychological, and emotional engagement between the individual and a digital artefact. As my illustration on *Andromeda* will show, a determining factor for maintaining this bond is the story that the virtual world makes possible, as well as the player's possibility to become a hero within it. According to Marie-Laure Ryan's summary of Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*, this story is composed of several rhizomes, including the kernel narrative script designed into the game's algorithm, whether it can be shaped by user choice or not, the back-story of every non-player character (NPC), the cut-scenes narrative, the strategy that is used to "lure players to the game," as well as the narrative each "player makes out of the material provided by the game" (4), in those instances when the narrative is not told, but rather discovered by accessing various items, areas, and dialogues. Although it may sound overpowering, these nuclei seamlessly work together during gameplay. The analysis will follow Arnott's model of total art criticism, in an attempt to start a discussion on the constituent parts of this work for its own "merits and with the appropriate attention with relation to the whole" (28).

Without doubt, the journey motif is employed in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), where it develops the same archetype of the hero's quest. To begin with, in a noteworthy break from the previous releases in the *Mass Effect* series, the choices made in the original trilogy have absolutely no repercussion in the current game, which sets it up as neutral ground for discovery. In what concerns the chronotope, the events take place somewhere between the action of the second and third game, still in the 22nd century, in what seems to be a side-quest to what was then considered the main story, namely the galaxy's struggle against the threat of extinction at the hands of the reapers. In the event that this war did not go well, the four races governing the Milky Way had decided to give their peoples a back-up solution by sending in a total of five colonizing arks to the Andromeda galaxy. This is an appropriate exemplification of the way in which one of many in-game quests can become the basis of another story by employing their self-same pattern, reiterated on a larger scale. The journey and struggle for survival continue, but in another format and in a different place. Yet, without diversification of the framework, the action can become too repetitive. In fact, one of the major drawbacks of *Andromeda* is a lack of ingenuity in terms of plot. In an identical manner to the previous BioWare game, the new galaxy had been home to a race of ancient beings who left behind powerful technology, the game world suffers at the hands of a race whose very *raison d'être* is to colonize and eventually end organic life as we know it, and the latter are essentially working for a mysterious, evil figure. Again, it is up to humanity to save the day and restore peace and order to the game world.

The kernel narrative script sees the hero, Ryder (Scott or Sara, depending on the player's choice of sex), awakening on the human ark, while the call to adventure involves their assignment to lead expeditions on planets within the Heleus Cluster in order to ascertain their suitability for establishing a colony. The mentor position is a disputed one. Although it may seem that the hero's father, who sacrifices his own life to save the protagonist, is also their mentor within the journey structure, the tutelage actually happens by means of a highly advanced AI technology named SAM. By dying, Alec Ryder, the father and mentor, makes their progeny the pathfinder, which is to say the de facto leader of the human expedition. The promotion also comes with an upgrade to the hero's neural implant, which gives the protagonist's organism better access to their father's AI technology, a range of classified information, and the previous pathfinder's memories. This course of action suggests some conflict of interest, given that a different apprentice was specifically training for the position. Indeed, the player discovers that the precipitated growth of the hero is brought about by their father's unwillingness to share the reason why SAM was developed in the first place. The road of trials begins when a crew member of the first land expedition is killed by the kett, an enemy race. The world-dominating confrontation between the latter and the combined races of the Milky Way galaxy is made explicit, whereas the descent into the abyss is aptly represented

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through the exploration of the first remnant vault, which actually causes the incident that leads to the mentor's death.

There are several differences between *Andromeda*'s quest and the widespread cultural archetype. The first is that the abyss stage, represented by the alien structure, is actually duplicated and reinforced by a personal one, a dive into the individual's unconscious as they sleep and recover from the incident. During this time, quite appropriately, their implant is upgraded to achieve the supernatural level of pathfinder. Furthermore, the mentor itself only continues their guidance through SAM, the Simulated Adaptive Matrix artificial intelligence, which fuses with the crew member's identities by means of a neural biotic implant. The latter greatly bolsters cognitive and physiological functions of the human body, providing characters with numerous sensorial boosts, mostly related to awareness, information processing, and problem solving, as well as the possibility to interact with the ancient technology, in the case of the hero. The fact that this cyborgian enhancement is a two-way feedback loop, meaning that SAM has the power to induce external modifications in the bodies bearing the biotic implant, has several crucial repercussions on the entire structure of the journey, as well as the ideology that it purports. First and foremost, the hero is naturally transhuman, since they are endowed with a corporeal interface that improves them to the extent that they can no longer be identified as *homo sapiens*. Because the entire mentorship is mediated through SAM, the journey motif is morphed from a humanist into a post-humanist myth. Indeed, according to David Leeming,

> Prometheus's defiant cry is man's assertion that he possesses immortality within – that self-identification is the means to eternal life. The quest myth to be drawn from all of these stories – stories of the summer of life – is firmly based in that assertion. The quest myth is the humanistic myth. (153)

The quest in *Andromeda*, however, reflects neither an animist, nor a theist understanding of the universe. The Weltanschauung of the game is essentially a rational(ist) one. Both the hero and their mentor achieve immortality not from within, by means of a state of enthusiasm (*en theos*), but from without, through their merge with a synthetic form of life. The remarkable aspect about this plot is that, while the hero is undergoing a transhuman modification, the player is also subject to networks of distributed cognition (Boulter 13), so that the content reflects, at least in part, the phenomenology of contemporary role-playing games. To further augment this idea, one of the endings of *Mass Effect 3* sees the same ideology of universal merge between organic and inorganic as a way to solve potential conceptual and material conflicts that may exist between the two ontologies. This, however, is an easy solution for such a complicated problem. Thus, a major question regarding this novel aspect of the quest concerns the posthumanist aspect of this journey, which can easily be interpreted as human supremacism in the *Andromeda* universe. As one reviewer pointed out, "what *Mass Effect: Andromeda* presents isn't about the proper way to intimate first contact; the subtext is far more insidious and unsettling. It presents a world that can only be saved by outsiders" (Goldberg 12), in this case, the player character's race, the humans. Despite traversing the world alongside the angarans, who seem to have equal technological and biological possibilities, as well as other races from the Milky Way, the fate of this new galaxy lies, once more, in the hands of the human protagonist, whose actions are unexplainably more influential and impactful than other characters' from the game world. Certainly, there was room to develop this idea from an ethical standpoint, and BioWare is known to approach such topics in their games, but in *Andromeda*'s case, it was one of many loose ends the designers could no longer deal with because of poor organizational management.

Nevertheless, *Andromeda* continues to follow the basic structure of the monomyth, as Ryder's second threshold is represented by their dealing with the anti-AI group located on the Nexus, the spaceship headquarters of the Andromeda initiative, which tries to sever the

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protagonist's connection to SAM. Next, the third threshold sees the hero gaining the trust of the local rebel initiative comprised of the angaran race. Significantly, the hero does not necessarily have to make a sacrifice in order to emerge favourably from the climax, but rather one is made for them in the beginning, when their mentor dies according to the narrative script. Yet, similarly to the centrality of the human protagonist to the fight for survival, this may not be a consequence intended by the game designers. As one comprehensive article on the development of the game has pointed out, developers of *Andromeda* faced a host of issues, from lack of necessary funds and professionals, to issues with the Frostbite game engine, office politics, and even poor organizational management (Schreier 66). According to several anonymous sources and one assumed statement, the creative team were under unreasonable time constraints to design the narrative, dialogue, and the storyboards themselves, as the project emerged out of post-production awkwardly late compared to the 2017 deadline for release, and in a manner that was unfit for actual game design. This may, at least in part, account for the numerous loose ends the game sets up and never addresses.

Moreover, there is mounting evidence to suggest that *Andromeda* was initially intended to be much more complex than the final product, which illustrates the tension between the nuclei of the initial, over-arching body of the project and the persistent, unruly one of what it would have taken to achieve it. From the initial ambition to create an authentic exploration game to implementing a procedurally generated game universe, the multitude of mechanics glitches, subpar animation that had to be addressed in post-release patches, and an overall surprising lack of micro-narratives throughout the journey, the game delivers a sensation of being finished in a rushed manner, or rather being left unfinished. Furthermore, the game's complex dialogue system, whereby the player is given a choice between four different conversation options (moving the conversation forward, requesting more information, being friendly, or flirtatious), as well as the possibility to control the tone of their responses from the perspective of the NPCs they interact with (emotional, logical, professional, and casual), suggests an entirely different approach to the structure of gameplay. All of these options, however, have little purpose when the outcome of the game is the same, which is yet another neglected aspect of its development. Many players have complained about this lack of meaningful choices and decisions, which is related to the customization possibilities that the narrative algorithm offers readers in terms of creating unique playthroughs. In retrospect, it is understandable that the game would display such issues – the story and gameplay possibilities had to be significantly simplified to meet the release deadline, and the easiest way to do so was to limit player involvement in terms of game narrative, which irreparably rendered a scripted, inflexible experience. Some loyal fans were prepared to overlook these aspects in order to be a part of the game universe, but the fact that even the enemies spawn in the same exact locations when players later visit them was deemed unbearable. Without any variation, in either mechanics or story, the self-same pattern creates a sensation of repetition that is intolerable, one that evidently extinguishes any promise of play and transforms the journey motif into something that resembles assembly line work for an intended outcome.

The likeliest explanation for *Andromeda*'s shortcomings is that it was set up to be exactly what it had promised, a video game epic that would redefine industry standards. This much is obvious from the range of ideas the developers started to implement, but never had a chance to refine, or had to scrap altogether. Their aim was to deliver an artefact which deploys the journey motif wherein the player would be free to explore a galaxy at their own leisure, creating the sensation of an unprecedented virtual freedom in terms of customizing one's playthrough and story. The psychological implications of such an open and equally complex game world are yet to be fully explored in anthropology, philosophy, or literary theory. Their interpretation and use of the monomyth, perhaps the oldest archetype in human culture, was on par with contemporary thought in what concerns the nature of human identity and existence, but was not driven towards a conclusion.

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Nevertheless, alongside many other RPGs, *Andromeda* has relied on an interpretation of the hero's quest in order to deliver an engaging digital artefact for its users. It is no small feat that this archetype, dating back as far as four millennia, remains productive in an age that is radically different from the first historically attested accounts of it. To begin with, this paper has revealed how *Mass Effect: Andromeda* employs this framework, down to great detail, in its emplotment. However, the pattern of the journey has seen several mutations within contemporary virtual environments, a series of shifts that may be subsumed to the umbrella terms of posthumanism, object-oriented ontology, and new materialism. Most notably, transhumanist themes are brought to the fore, as human bodies are ripe with implants, tools, and advancements that enable them to expand their powers beyond what was initially possible from a biological perspective. It follows that the humanistic myth (the only myth) is now converted into a post-humanist one through the merger of organic and synthetic life forms, which is sadly far from being the only dynamic process left rather unexplored due to extra-diegetic issues that the developers faced during the production of the game. In addition, the chronotope and performative aspects of the transmedial journey are emphatically altered by their focus on user-experience and interaction, rather than on the achievement of internal coherence. Furthermore, insights from within the organizational structures of the developers permit us to see how the capitalist ideology permeated the game world, despite an initial vision that sought to implement entirely different possibilities within *Andromeda*. This also enables us to understand the producers' emphasis in their work. When faced with the necessity to decide between greater profit and challenging the horizon of expectation of its audience, in this instance, BioWare executives opted for the former. Aside from going against the wishes of many of the developers involved in the project, they thus curtailed what could have been a ground-breaking, posthumanist epic into an entertaining experience that left users "dreaming about the game it could have been" (Juba 2017).

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