Film, Dreams, and MMORPGs: Cultural Leakage and Digital Gaming Literacy in Inception

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Abstract

The confluence of art, technology, and texts is unavoidable and yet remains under-addressed in scholarship. Technological artifacts, while prevalent in digital gaming, are seldom examined in terms of their contribution to other artistic artifacts. Specifically, MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) as texts are rarely considered in terms of their relevance to digital and artistic literacy. Residing within are rich cultural discourses that address the entertainment of escapism and their affiliated connection to addiction, loss of identity, and violence resulting from prolonged immersion. Not surprisingly these tensions are reflected in other texts such as film. In the current examination, a rhetorical analysis uses a close reading of *Inception* to examine cultural leakages of digital gaming issues entering into and shaping film discourse. Implications and societal impact of issues such as dream worlds, fantasy attractions, and counter strategies are discussed both as recommendation and social commentary.

Keywords: *Inception*, MMORPGs, Digital Gaming Literacy, Cultural Rhetorical Analysis, Film Literacy, Artistic Experiences

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> Not all of our engagements with art are concerned with following the prescriptions issued
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> by the work at every step; not all of our engagements with art have the aim of interpreting
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> the work. Art is, among other things, an invitation to have personal extemporaneous and
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> reflective experiences, and this makes possible revealing reflections on ourselves as
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> experiencing subjects as well.[1]

In the above article, Nicholas Diehl speaks to the engagement of text, art, philosophy, and film in general, with a particular eye toward Christopher Nolan's movie *Inception*. The 2010 film *Inception* vividly portrays dream imagery as writer, director, and producer Christopher Nolan constructs a labyrinth of cityscapes, high-rise hotels, snow-bound fortresses, and endless beaches as representations of the unconscious mind. Nolan's characters are vastly empowered in these environments, changing the architecture at will, taking on finely-crafted identities, and immersing themselves in layer upon layer of time-stretching dream depth. In similar fashion, modern players of online games known as MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) enter virtual dream worlds of their own. While not necessarily created by users themselves, such games allow users to shape digital "worlds," giving them a sense of empowerment as they craft online personas, form relationships with other players, and battle through these often conflict-based game scenarios.

Certainly both of these textual artifacts would qualify as producing dream image "reflective experiences" by their respective audiences. Both experiences produce meanings extemporaneously as they are experienced, and yet as Diehl explains, important meanings and even "the central philosophical point" of a text "may only be available in the reflective

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[1]. Nicholas Diehl, "Socratic Film." *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 74, no. 1 (2016): 23-34.

experience."[2] Despite this, scholars produce little rhetorical guidance either to their

commonalities or to their consumption. The purpose of this article is to explore such rhetorical

guidance with a close reading of *Inception*. The resulting analysis brings to light linkages

between film, video games, and their treatment of immersive realities.

Tan contends that *Inception* "participates in a cultural discourse which represents the

human mind as a physical space which is conceptualized through technological metaphors."[3]

These factors may all reflect a nexus of leakage among common cultural texts.[4,5] Therefore, this

paper will examine *Inception* using a cultural rhetorical approach to explore these

commonalities. Similar to Bouchard and others, the cultural rhetorical approach seeks to address

texts as "large scale cultural ways of thought.[6]" Likewise the term rhetoric will be used because

it is less "cumbersome in prose."[7] Similarly, the terms video games and digital games will be

used interchangeably.

When one considers the artistic literacy of digital games it becomes readily apparent that

there are few studies that extend the interplay between digital game narratives and other art

forms. This interplay would seem to be intuitive, reflexive, and contributory to a deeper

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[2]. Diehl, "Socratic Film," 31.

[3]. Elizabeth Tan, "The Only Way You Can Dream: Interfaces and Intolerable Spaces in Christopher Nolan's Inception." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 30, no. 4, (2016): 409, doi:10.1080/10304312.2016.1141869.

[4]. Arianna Maiorani, "Reading Movies as Interactive Messages: A Proposal for a New Method of Analysis." *Semiotica*, no. 187 (2011): 167-88, doi:10.1515/semi.2011.069.

[5]. Arianna Maiorani, "'Reloading' Movies into Commercial Reality: A Multimodal Analysis of the Matrix Trilogy's Promotional Posters." *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies/Revue De L'Association Internationale De Sémiotique* 166, no. 1-4 (2007): 45-67

[6]. Matt Bouchard, "Playing With Progression, Immersion, and Sociality: Developing a Framework for Studying Meaning in APPMMAGs, A Case Study." *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology & Sociology* 6, no. 1 (2015): 9.

[7]. Bouchard, "Playing With Progression," 9.

understanding of cultural texts imbedded within a variety of artistic forms. Such an examination can be seen in other textual narratives analyses regarding science,[8] politics,[9] and film.[10] Indeed, such interplay is often suggested in digital game rhetorical models with terms such as signification,[11] functional interactions,[12] or a type of subjectivity.[13] One can speculate for reasons why digital games remain underrepresented in such analyses. These might include negative ethos associated with games as art, lack of methodological sophistication, or just a paucity of scholars who have expertise in both digital gaming and other artistic narratives.

There are a variety of ways in which an analysis could be undertaken that would address this gap. Most of the previously cited cultural rhetorical analyses engage in three fundamental practices. First, they provide context and standing of the cultural artifact as experienced. This often includes descriptions of the artifact, the perceived intentions of the rhetor, as well as the size and scope of the audience. Second, the narrative is positioned in relation to how it influences and is influenced by cultural determinants. For our purposes, this would include other artistic

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[8]. Isidore Kafui Dorpenvo, "Mapping a Space for a Rhetorical-Cultural Analysis: A Case of a Scientific Proposal." *Journal of Technical Writing & Communication* 45, no. 3 (2015): 226-242, doi:10.1177/0047281615578845.

[9]. Xu Shi, "China's National Defence in Global Security Discourse: A Cultural–Rhetorical Approach to Military Scholarship." *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 11 (2015):2044-2058, doi:10.1080/01436597.2015.1082423.

[10]. Kim Hensley Owens, "Reviews and Reactions: A Rhetorical-Cultural Analysis of The Business of Being Born." *Rhetoric Review* 30, no. 3 (2011): 293-311, doi:10.1080/07350198.2011.581947.

[11]. Óliver Pérez-Latorre, Oliva Mercè , and Reinald Besalú, "Videogame Analysis: A Social-Semiotic Approach." *Social Semiotics* 27, no. 5 (2017): 591, doi:10.1080/10350330.2016.11911.

[12]. Malte Elson, Johannes Breuer, James D. Ivory, and Thorsten Quandt, "More Than Stories With Buttons: Narrative, Mechanics, and Context as Determinants of Player Experience in Digital Games." *Journal of Communication* 64, no. 3 (2014): 537, doi:10.1111/jcom.12096.

[13]. Sky LaRell Anderson, "The Corporeal Turn: At the Intersection of Rhetoric, Bodies, and Video Games." *Review of Communication* 17, no. 1 (2017): 20, doi:10.1080/15358593.2016.1260762.

expressions. Some form of narrative analysis would be performed to explore key features and

how their expression is amplified. This amplification takes place through the reflexive literacy

generated by the consideration of the narrative alongside other cultural artifacts. Lastly, the

implications of the intersection of the cultural influences and the artistic text under review are

discussed in light of their placement within a broader cultural context.

To accomplish this, close reading will be used to uncover the ways in which this film

serves as an illustration of experiences encountered by those who may lose themselves in the

"dream worlds" of MMORPGs. To provide context and standing, a brief synopsis of *Inception's*

plot will be followed by a description of the rhetorical situation and literature related to

MMORPGs. Afterward, a close reading analysis will be extended to the film's linkages that

reflect the interplay between the artistic and technological texts of film and MMORPGs. Lastly,

the implications are considered in how the texts inform each other and the broader cultural

context.

Inception as Narrative

Inception is centered around the character of Dominick Cobb, an "extractor" who uses

lucid dreaming techniques to enter the elaborate dream world of a sleeping target's mind as an

advanced form of corporate espionage.[14] Cobb is extremely skilled in his craft, but his

effectiveness is hindered by his mental image of his deceased wife Mal, a shadowy

personification who emerges unbidden from Cobb's mind and interferes during his extraction

work. While she was yet alive, Mal and Cobb used the same lucid dreaming techniques to enter

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[14]. Christopher Nolan , Leonardo DiCaprio, Ken Watanabe, and Joseph Gordon-Levitt. Inception. [DVD]. Burbank, CA : Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc., 2010.
Note – all film quotes and events described in this paper unless otherwise noted are drawn from this source.

limbo together. In this deep, nearly timeless layer of the dream world, Cobb and Mal shared a

lifetime of experiences in a world of their joint construction. After many perceived years,

however, Cobb decided that it was time to re-enter the real world and start a family with Mal.

Mal wished to remain in the dream state, so Cobb performed the near-impossible task of

"inception," successfully implanting an idea in his wife's mind without her knowledge. The idea

was simple: "the world you live in is not real." This initially worked and the couple returned to

waking reality mere hours after originally falling asleep. They started a family, but the idea

implanted in Mal's mind persisted, eventually driving her to suicide based on the persistent

belief that she needed to "wake up" yet again. Thinking that she needed to convince Cobb to

come into the waking world with her, Mal arranged her suicide in a manner that cast suspicion

for her death on him. Instead, Cobb was forced to flee the country and leave his children behind.

During his exile, Cobb is approached by Mr. Saito, a Japanese businessman who offers to

use his influence to reunite Cobb with his children if Cobb can complete the ultimate dream

heist: a flawless inception on a rival businessman. In order to complete this task, Cobb recruits

an elite dream infiltration team consisting of himself, Arthur: a loyal "point-man" with elite

strategic and tactical skills, Eames: a "forger" who can assume the identities of people familiar to

the dreaming target, Ariadne: a gifted "architect" with the ability to construct elaborate mental

structures and illusions, Yusuf: a "chemist" who creates the medicinal mixtures necessary to

induce the shared dream state, and Saito himself, whose presence in the dream is necessary as a

witness due to the otherwise unnoticeable nature of the work. The target is Robert Fischer: recent

inheritor of a vast corporation, and the goal is to place in his mind the idea of breaking up his

deceased father's business empire. The team ventures through layer after layer of Fischer's mind,

successfully performing inception, but only after Cobb fully makes peace with his memory of

Mal. The final moments of the film show Cobb returning home to his children, but audiences are left with a note of uncertainty. Before seeing his children, Cobb begins spinning a top, a "totem" with unique properties used to tell a dreamer whether they are awake or asleep. When Cobb sees his children he ignores the top, which audiences see briefly wobble then regain its stable spin just as the screen goes to black. Audiences are left to determine for themselves whether this final scene takes place in the "real" world, or in yet another lifelike dream. With the story of *Inception* in mind, we will next examine the rhetorical situation surrounding the film.

Rhetorical Situation

Producer and Writer as Rhetor

As a rhetor, Christopher Nolan has a reputation for constructing layered, compelling texts. Nolan is best known for films involving "cerebral, often nonlinear storytelling."[15] He began his career making small independent films, but later became well-known for his successful trilogy of Batman films and other popular films including *The Prestige, Interstellar*, and, most recently, *Dunkirk*.[16] Nolan's films are common subjects for academic interrogation. American culture scholar Patrick Kent Russell examines *The Dark Knight* trilogy, finding that the films' noir themes and aesthetic serve as an examination of social ills including corruption and the failure of government systems to adequately protect their citizens.[17] Film scholar Mark Fisher examines *Inception*, along with several of Nolan's other movies, and notes the common theme of

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15. "Christopher Nolan," *imdb.com*, accessed November 22, 2017, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0634240/.

16. "Christopher Nolan."

17. Patrick Kent Russell, "Christopther Nolan's *The Dark Knight* Trilogy as a Noir View of American Social Tensions," *The* Noir *Vision in American Culture* 33, no. 1 (2016): 179.

self-deception.[18] And as mentioned earlier, Nolan has a reputation for constructing narratives such that the full meaning cannot be immediately understood. Nolan's films, as noted, represent complexity that is appealing to academics, yet they do so while maintaining appeal to a broad audience.

Audience

Inception was well-received by both critics and popular audiences. As of January 6, 2011, the film had grossed more than $290,000,000 in the US and over $820,000,000 worldwide.[19] Rotten Tomatoes, a website that aggregates both critic and audience reviews, lists an average critic rating of 8.1/10, and an audience score of 4.2/5, both demonstrating that the movie is generally very well-received.[20] Well-known film critic Roger Ebert gives the film four stars, and praises it as "wholly original, cut from new cloth, and yet structured with action movie basics so it feels like it makes more sense than (quite possibly) it does."[21] Despite receiving significant acclaim, wide appeal, and clear connections to specific contemporary issues, *Inception* is an ideal example of how artistic texts are devoid of rhetorical guidance. While not unique, it is iconic in its use of digital literacy as context. As such, rhetorical analytical techniques such as close reading are both appropriate and useful in exploring this nexus of social construction.

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[18]. Mark Fisher, "The Lost Unconscious: Delusions and Dreams in *Inception*," *Film Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2011): 38-39.

[19]. "Box Office / Business for Inception," *imdb.com,* accessed November 22, 2017, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1375666/business?ref_=tt_dt_bus.

[20]. "Inception (2010)," *rottentomatoes.com*, accessed November 22, 2017, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/inception/.

[21]. Roger Ebert, "Inception," *rogerebert.com*, accessed November 22, 2017, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/inception-2010.

Digital Literacy and the MMORPG

Literacy in the digital age extends well beyond the fundamentals of reading

comprehension. Lasley argues that semiotics, or the study and interpretation of symbols and

signs, is an essential part of the gaming experience.[22] Continuing, Lasley argues that

"comprehension of videogame text increases concept understanding through gaming experiences

with similar semiotics," pointing to examples of games such as SimCity, which familiarizes

players with reading city financial statements, and Skyrim, which encourages the players to

engage with "hidden stories" woven into the game world which enhance a player's

understanding of the game's central quest.[23] Not only do video games increase literacy with

game worlds. Video games may even promote literacy in the area of moral decision-making.

Weaver and Lewis examine players' moral decisions in the game Fallout 3 and argue that such

games may provide valuable spaces in which players can reflect upon moral behavior.[24] Barnett

and Archambault point to economic components of the MMORPGs Diablo II and World of

Warcraft and contend that playing these games can facilitate students' understanding of

economic concepts.[25] Sourmelis, Iounnau, and Zaphiris review literature related to MMORPGs

and suggest that such games "are spaces in which a variety of 21st Century Skills can be

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[22]. Elizabeth A. Lasley, "Twenty-first Century Literacy, Game-based Learning, Project-based Learning," *Journal of Literacy and Technology* 18, no. 3 (2017): 42.

[23]. Lasley, "Twenty-first Century Literacy," 42.

[24]. Andrew J. Weaver and Nicky Lewis, "Mirrored Morality: An Exploration of Moral Choice in Video Games," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 15, no. 11 (2012): 613, doi: 10.1089/cyber.2012.0235.

[25]. Joshua H. Barnett and Leanna Archambault, "The Gaming Effect: How Massively Multiplayer Online Games Incorporate Principles of Economics," *TechTrends* 54, no. 6 (2010): 34.

fostered."[26] With the MMO gaming market predicted to expand from $26.9 billion in 2016 to an estimated $44.6 billion by 2022, these games clearly possess an ever-expanding cultural footprint.[27,28] To provide a sense of scale, the 2016 revenues are roughly equivalent to United States Football, Baseball, and Basketball revenues combined.[29] The ever-increasing appeal of MMORPGs inform and are informed by the culture around them. As such, the confluence with other cultural artifacts, such as film, is particularly relevant.

Video games often serve as an intersection of the culture and other forms of visual art. For example, Nick Paumgarten of The New Yorker points to the craze surrounding Fortnite, a third-person battle-royale style online multiplayer game. Paumgarten identifies similarities to stage acting in the way players behave in the game's warm-up area, points to elements of cable television and big-screen cinema in the way the game integrated a "season" of content based on the Marvel franchise, and draws parallels between spectatorship of game sessions on the online streaming platform Twitch and spectatorship of arena sports.[30] Jeroen Bougonjon, Geert Vandermeersche, and Kris Rutten note that three of the same basic motivations which compel

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[26]. Theodoros Sourmelis, Andri Ioannou, and Panayiotis Zaphiris, "Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) and the 21st Century Skills: A Comprehensive Research Review from 2010 to 2016," *Computers in Human Behavior* 67 (2017): 45, doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2016.10.020.

[27]. Business Wire. "Global Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) Gaming Market - Forecast to Reach $44.6 Billion by 2022 - Research and Markets," *Business Wire (English)* (November 15, 2011), https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20171115005641/en/Global-Massively-Multiplayer-Online-MMO-Gaming-Market.

[28]. Games, Newzoo. "Global Games Market Report: An Overview of Trends and Insights." (2016), https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/700740/Reports/Newzoo_Free_2016_Global_Games_Market_Report.pdf

[29]. Kutz, Steven. "NFL took in $13 billion in revenue last season–see how it stacks up against other pro sports leagues." *MarketWatch* (July 2, 2016), https://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-nfl-made-13-billion-last-season-see-how-it-stacks-up-against-other-leagues-2016-07-01

[30]. Nick Paumgarten, "How Fortnite Captured Teens' Hearts and Minds," May 21, 2018, *newyorker.com*, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/21/how-fortnite-captured-teens-hearts-and-minds.

artists to create in other art forms also shape videogame development.[31] The first motive of

mimicking reality is evident in the constant technological innovation game developers pursue to

create increasingly photorealistic images, a trend artistically counter-balanced by developers of

games such as Fez who have embraced limited realism in order to produce unique aesthetic

experiences. Likewise, the second motive, the expression of beliefs and emotions, is evident in

games such as This War of Mine and Papers, Please, which construct narratives to evoke

complex feelings and force players into moral decision-making. Thirdly, the motivation to

transform the arts is evident in games such as The Graveyard, which developers have described

as "an interactive painting rather than a game" because of their decision to avoid traditional

game mechanics such as shooting, racing, or building.[32] These examples point to the visual,

emotional, and transformational elements present in video games which clearly intersect with

visual art forms such as films and paintings. Given the increasing number of overlapping

narratives between artistic forms, such as video games and films, mutual constructions are

becoming more evident. The creators of these texts have access to intersecting rhetorical

strategies. Given these intersections, it is no surprise to see cultural leakage between games and

films.

Context as Pretext to Identity

 Inception rhetorically enters into a cultural context informed by characteristics often

attributed to digital media in general and gaming specifically. In fact, a degree of digital literacy

was required for audience members who wished to engage with the earliest stages of the film's

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[31]. Jeroen Bourgonjon, Geert Vandermeersche, and Kris Rutten, "Perspectives on Video Games as Art," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 19, no. 4 (2017): 2-10, doi:10.7771/1484-4374.3024.

[32]. Ibid., 6.

marketing. *Inception* was first marketed virally with vague posters about "mind crime" that

featured QR codes offering participants access to a website that outlined the film's central

concepts in the style of a conspiracy theory.[33] Escape to online environments to construct

inferred and created narratives is a natural entry point for many game genres and augments the

game both in representation and affiliation.[34] Researching the effects of playing video games,

Granic and colleagues detail a number of psychological benefits that are readily apparent in a

large number of participants. These include cognitive, social, and emotional factors.[35]

Furthermore, the same article details opportunities for implementation of video games as unique

catalysts mitigating some of the limitations of cognitive behavioral therapy.[36] But while a degree

of benefit and utility is evident, a growing body of evidence suggests that some online

interactions may be harmful as users may face the possibility of addiction. This is especially

important as identities are co-constructed between individuals and the environments in which

they spend time residing.

Education and psychology scholars Mustafa Savci and Ferda Aysan argue that internet

addictions to online media such as digital games, social media, and smart phones are important

predictors of social connectedness, and suggest that adolescents should be encouraged to spend

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[33]. Mark Eisenberg, "'Inception' Viral Campaign Posters Get Real," June 6, 2010, *screenrant.com*, https://screenrant.com/inception-viral-campaign-posters/.

[34]. Malte Elson, Johannes Breuer, James D. Ivory, and Thorsten Quandt, "More Than Stories with Buttons: Narrative, Mechanics, and Context as Determinants of Player Experience in Digital Games," *Journal of Communication* 64, no. 3 (2014): 521-542.

[35]. Isabela Granic, Adam Lobel, and Rutger C. M. E. Engels. "The Benefits of Playing Video Games," *American Psychologist* 69, no. 1 (January 2014): 66-78.

[36]. Granic, Lobel, and Engels, "The Benefits of Playing," 66-78.

time interacting with their peers in a "real social environment" rather than online.[37] Otherwise, adolescents face challenges both developing new relationships and maintaining existing ones.[38] There are multiple forms and various degrees of dysfunctional media immersion, but because of their similarity to the dream worlds of *Inception*, the genre of online games known as MMORPGs is particularly relevant.

So while MMORPGs have a variety of traits that appeal to gamers, these same traits contribute to the addictive nature of the genre and consequentially their impact on identity formation. Much of this appeal is the ability for players to create their own online personas and relationships. According to psychologists Zaheer Hussain, Mark D. Griffiths, and Thom Baguley, MMORPGs allow players the ability to customize their character's appearance and race (often including fantasy races such as elves, trolls, etc. in addition to human racial traits) as well as the ability to develop friendships by socializing with other players.[39] MMORPGs also provide players with a sense of escape. Psychologists David Hagström and Viktor Kaldo point out that MMORPGs allow players to escape from negative elements of their daily lives.[40] Vasilis and colleagues cite C.B. Freeman who describes MMORPGs as games that allow large groups of players to simultaneously interact with an evolving online world while developing their own

[37]. Mustafa Savci and Ferda Aysan, "Technology Addictions and Social Connectedness: Predictor Effect of Internet Addiction, Social Media Addiction, Digital Game Addiction and Smart Phone Addiction on Social Connectedness," *Dusunen Adam: The Journal of Psychology and Neurological Sciences* 30, (2012): 212, doi:10.5350/DAJPN2017300304.

[38]. Savci and Aysan, "Technology Addictions," 212.

[39]. Hussain Zaheer, Mark D. Griffiths, and Thom Baguley, "Online Gaming Addiction: Classification, Prediction and Associated Risk Factors," *Addiction Theory & Research* 20, no. 5 (2012): 359, doi:10.3109/16066359.2011.640442.

[40]. David Hagström and Viktor Kaldo, "Escapism Among Players of MMORPGs-Conceptual Clarification, Its Relation to Mental Health Factors, and Development of a New Measure," *CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking* 17, no. 1 (2014): 24, doi:10.1089/cyber.2012.0222.

virtual characters.[41] Unfortunately, these aspects of the games make them so enjoyable to some

players that they engage in prolonged and numerous immersions so as to compromise other

developmental activities in regard to their identity and place in society[42].

It is not surprising that scholars conclude that playing MMORPGs is a consistent

predictor of internet addiction (IA), and also conclude that "more hostile adolescents were found

to present higher IA symptom severity."[43] Likewise, psychologists Dario Bachhini, Grazia De

Angelis, and Angelo Fanara conclude that MMORPG players are "associated with a troubled

path in the process of identity formation," and find that in comparison to non-players, regular

MMORPG players consistently exhibit higher levels of "reconsideration of commitment," an

identity formation trait associated with "a wide range of maladaptive behaviors such as

aggression, depression, and academic failure."[44] As some gamers become more involved with

games, their commitment and potential for addiction to an MMORPG may increase. Hussain,

Griffiths, and Baguley point out that variables including "employment status, years of gaming,

and total time spent playing online" are all cumulative potential risk factors of addiction, and

point to in-game reward systems and competitive elements as other potentially addictive

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[41]. Vasilis Stavropoulos, Daria J. Kuss, Mark D. Griffiths, Peter Wilson, and Frosso Motti-Stefanidi, "MMORPG Gaming and Hostility Predict Internet Addiction Symptoms in Adolescents: An Empirical Multilevel Longitudinal Study," *Addictive Behaviors* 64 (2017): 295-7, doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2015.09.001.

[42]. Dinh Thai Son, Junko Yasuoka, Krishna C. Poudel, Keiko Otsuka, and Masamine Jimba. "Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG): Association between its addiction, self-control and mental disorders among young people in Vietnam." *International Journal Of Social Psychiatry* 59, no. 6 (2013): 570-577. doi:10.1177/0020764012445861.

[43]. Stavropoulos et. al, "MMORGP Gaming and Hostility," 298.

[44]. Dario Bacchini, Grazia De Angelis, and Angelo Fanara, "Identity Formation in Adolescent and Emerging Adult Regular Players of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG)," *Computers in Human Behavior* 73 (2017): 197, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2017.03.045.

factors.[45] Hagström and Kaldo define negative escapism as "escape from negative aspects of real

life, or avoidance behavior," and argue that this can occur when players use MMORPGs "to

avoid negative experiences in everyday life" and is connected to symptoms such as

psychological distress and internet addiction.[46] This context is not meant as commentary on the

benefits of gaming or lack thereof. Rather it is critical to the examination of cultural texts that are

consistent with and by extension serve to inform the narrative offered in *Inception*.

Close Reading as a Rhetorical Tool

Rhetorician Barry Brummett defines close reading as "the mindful, disciplined reading of

an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings."[47] These meanings can take a

variety of forms. Accounting scholars Russell Craig and Joel Amernic perform a close reading of

a CEO's letter by making "several examinations of text to identify and interpret the metaphors,

ideology, and rhetoric deployed."[48] Likewise, Brummett suggests the examination of "turns" in

imagery that cue a reader not to take an image literally, but to see it in terms of something else.[49]

Education scholars Diana Sisson and Betsy Sisson elaborate upon the long history of close

reading in both literary criticism and theology, and argue that one of the key benefits of the

approach is "the power of deconstructing text into its constituent parts as a means to come to a

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[45]. Hussain, Griffiths, and Baguley, "Online Gaming Addiction," 367.

[46]. Hagström and Kaldo, "Escapism Among Players," 24.

[47]. Barry Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2010), 3.

[48]. Russel Craig and Joel Amernic, "Exploring the Public Accountability Communications of a CEO Through 'Close Reading' Analysis: A Teaching Primer," *International Journal of Management Education* 8, no. 2 (2009): 76, doi:10.3794/ijme.82.280.

[49]. Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading*, 75.

deeper understanding and more finely-honed interpretation of the text as a whole."[50] Brummett

suggests a parallel approach by encouraging close readers to examine form, arguing that

techniques that examine narrative, genre, and persona allow readers to explore the formal

elements of a text.[51] The diversity of both methodology and text found in close reading literature

argues for the great flexibility of this approach, an approach which encourages rhetoricians to

allow the text to shape their methodology. Rhetorician Michael Leff applies a close reading to

Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, allowing the presence of "past, present, and future

tenses" that appear in the introduction and body of the speech to guide a close reading that

focuses on temporal relationships in the text.[52] In some cases it may be ideal to focus on

narrative elements in a text. Brummett highlights the importance of narrative coherence, a

concept which consists of elements such as the "overall theme, effect, tone, or meaning created

by a text."[53] These diverse lenses make close reading useful for a broad range of texts and is thus

a natural fit for this examination of the cultural intersection of texts. Complex but significant

constructions, such as those involved with MMORPGs and dream states, have precedent but few

specifics regarding societal impact, particularly in terms of narrative production.

Close reading is considered useful in its ability to examine a variety of societal

predilections. Historian Eivind Engebretsen performs a close reading of two public appeals for

alms from seventeenth-century Paris and finds that hunger is described in relation to a threat of

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[50]. Diana Sisson and Betsy Sisson, "The Renaissance of Close Reading: A Review of Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," *The California Reader* 47, no. 4 (2014): 8-9.

[51]. Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading*, 51.

[52]. Michael Leff, "Dimensions of Temporality in Lincoln's Second Inaugural," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism,* Third Edition, ed. Carl R. Burgchardt (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2010), 200.

[53]. Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading,* 56.

"the loss of humanity," but argues that "this threat changes in nature depending on gender, place, and rank."[54] Brummett provides close readings of a variety of texts but often focuses on advertisement, in particular examining transformations such as turns and metaphors in advertisements for everything from cars to liquor to tiles.[55] For our purposes close reading is also applicable to virtual environments. Sociologist Joseph Clark uses close reading to examine the visual and spatial elements of the "multiuser virtual environment," similar to an MMORPG, known as Second Life. He finds that while the Splash Aquatics area in the game does provide users with the opportunity to interact with realistic depictions of nature, it also encourages "commodification and anthropocentrism" regarding nature rather than an ecocentrism.[56]

So, while useful for examining many artifacts, close reading is particularly useful for examining film. Film scholar Robert William Miklitsch applies close reading to *I Was a Communist for the F.B.I...* He notes that visual elements that allude to Abraham Lincoln attempt to convey to African American audiences the idea that the Communist Party was exploiting African Americans by stirring up unrest among them. Ultimately suggesting this as a means of facilitating communism's rise in America.[57] Film scholar Mia Mask argues for a closer reading of the movie *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push"* by Sapphire, pointing out that while critics assail the film because it attaches numerous social ills to African American characters, a closer

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[54]. Eivind Engebretsen, "The Catholic Counter-Reformation and the Idea of Hunger: A Close Reading of Two Appeals for Alms from the Paris Area in the Year 1662," *Social History* 38, no. 4 (2013): 495, doi:10.1080/03071022.2013.846993.

[55]. Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading*, 74-82.

[56]. Joseph Clark, "The Environmental Semiotics of Virtual Worlds: Reading the 'Splash Aquatics' Store in Second Life," *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 8, no. 3 (2011): 48-61.

[57]. Robert William Miklitsch, "Fear of a Red Planet: I Was a Communist for the F.B.I . and 'Black Film,'" *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 41, no. 1 (2013): 52-53, doi: 10.1080/01956051.2012.694380.

reading of the film sees past archetypes and finds a level of cinematic complexity that gives

depth to the fictional central character's experience.[58] Film scholar Mary M. Dalton performs a

close reading of the film *Bad Teacher*, highlighting the importance of a closer examination of

characters who do not live up to the archetypes they seem to represent.[59] When examining such

films, rhetoricians using close reading may uncover meanings not necessarily intended by the

creator of the work.

Though it is often valuable for rhetoricians to consider authorial intent, close reading is

more primarily focused on finding reasonable, plausible, defensible, and, most significantly in

this cultural rhetorical examination, socially shared meanings present in a text.[60] While Nolan

may have not made statements explicitly linking *Inception* to the topic of internet addiction or

MMORPGs, close reading allows for the exploration of meanings in a text. Regardless of the

creator's intentions they still need to fit the above criteria. Indeed close reading has been adapted

to help explain societal barriers reflected in "grievable" and "ungrievable" lives depicted in both

video games and other movies such as *Black Hawk Down*.[61] In an interview with Robert Capps

on film website "WIRED," Nolan remarked that he had seen some online discussion of

Inception, and while audiences were picking up on many of the intentional cues he placed in the

film, he also stated that "there are interpretations to be imposed on the film that aren't

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[58]. Mia Mask, "The Precarious Politics of *Precious*: A Close Reading of A Cinematic Text," *Black Camera* 4, no. 1 (2012): 113-4.

[59]. Mary M. Dalton, "Bad Teacher is Bad for Teachers," *Journal of Popular Film & Television,* 41, no. 2 (2013): 81-6, doi:10.1080/01956051.2013.787352.

[60]. Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading*, 7.

[61]. Pötzsch, Holger. "Borders, Barriers and Grievable Lives: The Discursive Production of Self and Other in Film and Other Audio- Visual Media." *NORDICOM Review* 32, no. 2 (2011): 75-94.

necessarily what I had in my head."[62] So while not overtly addressing the addiction aspect of

online technologies, it is entirely plausible to draw parallels between the immersive dream

worlds Nolan constructs in *Inception* and the way that highly immersed players are mentally

involved with MMORPGs.[63]

Analysis

Because the addictive dream worlds in *Inception* greatly resemble many of the traits of

MMORPGs, it seems appropriate to examine the film for major themes related to this concept. In

fact, this article proposes that to more fully understand the messages in *Inception*, one must

examine the film in light of other relevant cultural texts. This necessitates digital literacy with

videogame texts. Just as in MMORPG worlds, the dream worlds of *Inception* do not follow the

typical "rules" of reality but have physical laws, logic, power structures, architecture, and even

morality of their own. Thus, special consideration is given to narrative coherence as presented in

these dream worlds. Specifically, the question is posed: How does *Inception* reflect problems

related to fictional worlds such as those found in MMORPGs? This analysis will be divided into

four major themes. We will first address three problems presented in *Inception*: the addictive

nature of dream worlds, the violence present in dream worlds, and the distortions of identity in

dream worlds. We will conclude by discussing some solutions to these issues presented in the

film.

Nature of Dream Worlds

First, *Inception* presents characters who are drawn in by the addictive nature of lucid

dreaming. Ariadne initially leaves after training with Cobb, afraid to open her mind to Cobb with

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[62]. Robert Capps, "Q&A: Christopher Nolan on Dreams, Architecture, and Ambiguity," *wired.com,* accessed November 22, 2017, https://www.wired.com/2010/11/pl_inception_nolan/.

[63]. Capps, "Q&A: Christopher Nolan."

his issues, but Cobb knows she'll come back, and eventually she does. "I tried not to come," she

tells Arthur, "but there's nothing quite like it," he finishes. She tells him she's drawn to the "pure

creation." Likewise, MMORPGs offer players a similar sense of creation. Though MMORPGs

do not necessarily allow players to create the game world itself, games do allow players to

customize various aspects of their experience as they create characters, choose in-game factional

allegiances, forge social bonds, and otherwise interact with the game world. This creativity can

lead to a sense of escape.

Inception speaks to the dangers of online escapism. When Cobb approaches Yusuf to

recruit him as a chemist, Yusuf gives evidence of his skill by showing Cobb the back room of his

chemist shop wherein a dozen or so elderly and infirm people inhabit a shared dream. Yusuf

explains that they only dream three or four hours, but perceive nearly forty hours due to the time-

altering nature of dreams. Yusuf explains that they come there to escape. The lucid dream has

become their reality. Additionally, Yusuf's dreamers also lose the ability to dream naturally,

leading to an inability to survive without the artificially-induced dreams. These dreamers serve

as a clear metaphor for players of online games. As the literature suggests, individuals who are

addicted to online games often play for a sense of escape from the negative aspects of their lives,

but as a result they may lose the ability to find meaning or deal with challenges in the natural

world. In extreme cases, addicted players may find it difficult to survive without the artificial

stimulus afforded by the game world, just like the dreamers in Yusuf's shop.

The dangerous nature of fictional realities is again demonstrated in Ariadne's reckless

approach to dream manipulation. When first learning from Cobb how to alter a dream, she makes

changes too quickly and too drastically, evidently enthralled by the potential of her newfound

abilities. Cobb tries to warn her that "projections" of his subconscious will painfully attack her

because of her manipulations, but she presses on. In the film, non-dreamer denizens of a dream

are projections of the subconscious mind. These projections reject the intrusion of outside minds

as the dreamer begins to realize he or she is in a dream and become increasingly hostile to point

of homicidal assault. Cobb again warns Ariadne not to use real places in her dream construction,

but she refuses to listen to him until his subconscious image of Mal appeals and violently stabs

her, killing her and waking her up. Ariadne is physically unhurt, but she is emotionally shaken

by the experience. The capabilities afforded to Ariadne by the dreaming technique appeal to her

sense of creativity and give her incredible power to shape fictional reality, but when she abuses

that power she endures real suffering as the result. Similarly, online games give players access to

capabilities which they don't have in the real world and the ability to shape the virtual spaces

they encounter. It may not matter in any physical sense whether or not a player is successful.

Virtual avatars don't experience real pain and virtual events don't dictate real ones, but the

emotional consequences for someone who becomes too wrapped up in a fictional reality can be

just as real as for a person who experiences emotional fallout from real events. *Inception* seems

to offer a word of caution as to the dangers of this power by demonstrating the pain that Ariadne

suffers in coming back to reality. In addition to their addictive nature, *Inception* also illustrates

the violent nature of fictional realities.

Unrealistic Coherence and Violence

Violence is common in the dream worlds of *Inception*, and follows an alternative and

unrealistic coherence. *Inception* casts a particularly violent image of the subconscious mind. The

dream worlds of the film operate under their own set of rules: their own coherence that differs

from waking reality. For example, one of Saito's dreams is styled after a conflict in a Middle

Eastern setting. Angry mobs of projections rampage through the streets. In this manner,

Inception portrays the subconscious mind as inherently violent towards other minds. In a similar

fashion, game designers also create worlds with their own alternative coherences of violence.

Games are frequently set in worlds in which players' progress by defeating enemies in combat,

gaining experience that allows them to increase their character's level which in turn increases the

character's capability in combat and allows them to face more challenging foes. Like the

projections, the inhabitants of MMORPG worlds oppose the presence of the player. And just as

Fischer's mind has been trained to resist extraction and therefore his dream projections have a

more militaristic capacity for violence, players who have invested more time in a game typically

control characters who have a greater capacity for violence. Not only does *Inception* present a

world with a unique coherence of violence; it similarly presents a unique coherence of pain.

Similar to MMORPGs, *Inception* presents dream realities in which pain and death lack

real-world consequences. This violence is evident in the actions of Cobb's projection of Mal. She

knows that people feel pain realistically in dreams, so she shoots Arthur in the leg to persuade

him to give up information. Conversely, dreamers who die simply wake up in the real world. To

prevent Arthur from talking and to end his pain, Cobb shoots his friend in the head. This "kills"

Arthur in that dream, but doesn't actually harm him. Instead, he calmly wakes up in a higher

layer of the mutli-layered dream. While the bullet hit can be seen in the film, there's no

excessive explosion of blood or brains. Arthur simply drops dead in the dream and wakes up in

another dream, one layer closer to reality. While the action film genre or MPAA guidelines could

be as responsible for this toned-down portrayal of violence as much as any other factor, this

casual portrayal of death also serves to convey that violent death in *Inception's* dream worlds is a

commonplace part of the coherence of the world, rather than a horrifying reality. In another

scene, Cobb explains that killing projections doesn't even harm the dreamer's mind because they

are mere projections of the subconscious, not the subconscious itself. Their deaths have no

consequence and therefore lack any moral weight. At another point, Arthur explains that the

shared lucid dreaming technique was developed for military application, so that soldiers could

"shoot and stab and strangle each other, then wake up." Though the film eventually introduces

consequences to dying in a dream while sedated to increase the stakes, overall *Inception* crafts an

alternative coherence in which pain is viscerally felt but death presents a relative lack of

consequence. Similarly, many online games are based around violence that lacks consequences.

When characters die, they simply "respawn" to continue the adventure. Enemies in the game

represent challenges and opportunities for a player to increase their level, rather than beings with

realistic pain responses and motives. Enemies simulate pain responses, but given that they are

simply "projections" their suffering carries no consequence to the player. Likewise, killing an

enemy is a means of advancement. Dead enemies may simply disappear after falling in battle.

Were the consequences of violence strictly relegated to fictional worlds, there would perhaps be

little reason for concern, however, *Inception* demonstrates that violence in dream worlds does

not always remain confined to those worlds.

Inception portrays the ways in which violence in imagined worlds can become violence

in the real world. After completing his first mission for Saito, Cobb spins his top: a "totem" that

helps him determine whether he is dreaming or awake. While the top spins, Cobb casually lifts a

gun. While he stops short of pointing it at his head, his stance suggests he is prepared to do so

should the totem indicate he were dreaming. Once the top falls, he sets the gun back on the table,

seemingly satisfied that he is in the real world. Ultimately, and rather disturbingly, Cobb's life

comes down to the spinning of a top. The spinning of a top is all that Cobb has to indicate for

him the distinction between waking and dreaming. This is all that maintains the thinnest of

boundaries between the alternative dream coherence of death and the real one. Through the

tragic character of Mal, *Inception* portrays the consequences of a breach in that thin boundary.

Because of the idea Cobb planted in her mind, Mal commits suicide based on the delusion that

she must wake up into reality. Her willingness to engage in an act of real-world violence towards

herself is based on her false understanding of what is real and what is not. As literature above

states, internet addiction in adolescents is correlated with a higher propensity towards aggression.

So while it would be inappropriate to suggest a causal link, it is not difficult to imagine the

possibility of a player who struggles to maintain the distinction between a real world coherence

of violence and a fictional one. Indeed, it is this very narrative that propagates societal debates

regarding video game violence and an individual's suspension of the distinction. Violence,

however, is not the only thing distorted in *Inception*. Nolan also presents the distortion of

identity.

Distortions of Identity

As described above, one of the attractive features of MMORPGs and in fact video games

in general is their ability to allow for identity realignment. *Inception* demonstrates similar

constructs that parallel the way virtual worlds routinely allow for identity distortion. The primary

example of this is Eames. Eames is the team's "forger," an expert in mimicking voices,

mannerisms, and appearances to fool a target into thinking he is someone who the target knows

or trusts. To infiltrate Fischer's mind, he takes on personas including an attractive young woman

and Peter, Fischer's trusted confidant. Eames's portrayal of Peter causes Fischer to be more

suspicious of Peter in the next deeper layer of the dream. When Eames is adopting one of these

identities he looks into a mirror and practices the mannerisms of the person he is portraying.

Rather than his own reflection, the mirror contains the image of the person he is becoming.

MMORPGs similarly allow people control over the persona they adopt. Players control the appearance and actions of their character, in a sense forging a new identity. While certainly a useful skill for a dream infiltrator, the ability to present a false version of one's self is clearly used to deceive in *Inception*. Similarly, MMORPG players are not required to represent themselves accurately online. The anonymity of such games and the extent to which a character can be customized may not be inherently deceptive given that other players are aware of the customization aspect of the game, however it would certainly be possible for a person to misrepresent themselves through other forms of in-game communication such as messaging and chat. Eames's ability is not the only form of deception in the film.

Cobb adopts engages in a similar practice of distortion by taking on the false identity of "Mr. Charles." Mr. Charles is a persona Cobb created to pose as a dream security expert who is allied with the target's mind. By persuading Fischer that Mr. Charles is a helpful projection of Fischer's own mind, Cobb turns Fischer against his other mental projections. Combined with Eames's portrayal of Peter, Cobb is able to use the Mr. Charles persona to turn Fischer against his own mind. As the literature above states, MMORPGs appeal to players' natural senses of competition and reward. Because players who are engaged in a game are players who will spend money on the game, game developers are understandably motivated to produce games that keep a player involved. In a sense, these games are designed to do what Mr. Charles does, taking the natural and beneficial desire to be successful in life's challenges and hijacking it to keep the player engaged in the game. MMORPG players find in *Inception* a warning about those who understand and make use of the mind's characteristics. These deceptions are not inconsequential, and again *Inception* uses the character of Mal to demonstrate the most tragic extent of an issue.

Mal serves as a major argument for the consequences of losing one's sense of identity.

When Mal and Cobb spent their years together in limbo, she became enamored with the world

they created and chose to hide from herself the fact that it was not reality. She willingly became

lost in the dream, unable to recognize it for what it was. Then, because of Cobb's inception, she

lost her sense of place in the world which led to her acting harmfully towards her children and

her husband, as well as her suicide. Cobb's guilt and lack of acceptance of Mal's death caused

him to create a projection of her which is dark and insidious, nothing like the woman he actually

loved. Because of the dreams, Mal lost her sense of reality and Cobb lost his true memory of the

woman he loved. If MMORPGs are viewed through *Inception*, social commentary narrative

warns against the substantial risks of personal identity being too strongly affiliated with an online

world or persona. Similar to the psychological research presented earlier, such affiliation cannot

help but have harmful elements for the individual, and also painful implications for that person's

loved ones. However, as demanded by most film narratives, problems presented in *Inception* are

ultimately connected to potential solutions for the protagonist.

A Cautionary Tale with Redemptive Solutions

While this paper has examined some of the darker textual themes of MMORPGs, its

ultimate goal is to examine how the film at hand resolves the societal dilemma of their existence.

Specifically, *Inception* casts a cautionary portrayal of the dangers inherent in human negotiation

of fictional realities. However, a close reading of *Inception* also suggests some potential

solutions that may be equally applicable for MMORPG players who find themselves lost in

"limbo." To be clear, the nature of this paper evaluates neither the veracity nor the validity of the

solutions but offers them as cultural artifacts in and of themselves.

One of these solutions is the "kick." In the film, a kick refers to the feeling of falling that is used to waken a dreamer. When Yusuf creates the chemical compound necessary for the team to enter a deep enough dream state to accomplish their goal, he does so in a way that it will leave the inner ear, and thus the sense of balance, completely active. Hussain, Griffiths, and Baguley propose a similar solution, suggesting that gamers be forcibly logged out after a certain duration and citing research that suggests that gamers could otherwise be penalized for excessive play time.[64] It seems plausible that there are other ways in which a kick could be created, either by game developers or by the players themselves. Like Yusuf, who crashes a van in the dream world to induce a kick, players who understand the addictive "chemistry" of online gaming could design a kick for themselves to stay grounded in the real world. Kicks are not the only thing, however, that can keep someone from getting lost in a dream.

Likewise, throughout the film, a character who is outside of a dream will place headphones on a dreaming character and begin playing a familiar song. The sound of the music is distorted due to the stretched perception of time that takes place in every deeper layer of the dream, but this audio cue gives dreaming characters ample warning as to the time remaining before they will be awakened by a kick. Perhaps self-aware gamers could enlist those around them to fulfill this role: someone outside of the influence of the game world to keep them grounded and to let them know when it is time to "wake up." In some cases, however, a musical cue may not be enough to bring someone back to the real world. A friend may have to be willing to do much more than press the play button.

Inception also portrays the ability of a strong relationship to bring someone out of their fictional world. Ariadne's relationship with Cobb proves critical in bringing him back to reality.

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[64]. Hussain, Griffiths, and Baguley, "Online Gaming Addiction," 369.

At one point, she comes upon Cobb already dreaming and enters his private dream. Therein she

discovers that he is continually dreaming about his memories of Mal, despite his earlier caution

to Ariadne to not utilize memories to construct dreams. Cobb is using something akin to a cage

of memories to keep his projection of Mal prisoner, leading Ariadne to confront Cobb about the

events that led to his wife's death. Cobb insists that these "are moments I regret, they're

memories that I have to change," despite the obvious irrationality of such a statement. While

dreamers in *Inception* can influence present dreams, they cannot change either their memories or

past events.

Another hint to Cobb's avoidance of confronting Mal's death is the design of his dream

world. With his memories organized as different building floors accessed by an elevator, Cobb's

memory of Mal's suicide is accessed by pushing the "B" on the elevator panel, presumably for

"basement." This basement imagery may be symbolic of the memory's placement deep in

Cobb's subconscious. On the other hand, it may simply reflect the dark, foreboding nature of

basements and the unwanted status of items discarded there. In either interpretation, it is clear

that this is not a place Cobb frequents himself, let alone one which he would be comfortable

sharing with someone else. After breaking into this area, Ariadne takes the first step in a process

that is instrumental in helping Cobb confront the reality of his wife's death and banish her dark

projection. Ariadne tells Cobb that either she will accompany him on the heist, or he must show

Arthur these memories so he will understand the nature of the threat these dark memories of Mal

represent. Cobb opts to have Ariadne join the team, rather than disclosing his personal struggle

to Arthur, a sign that he is resistant to sharing the depth of his struggle with Mal even with a

trusted associate. Throughout the various levels of dreams they explore, Ariadne stays close to

Cobb. She asks him questions and pushes him towards a necessary confrontation. Cobb finally

confesses to his projection of Mal that it was he who performed the inception that led to her

death. The projection invites him to stay with her, but Cobb refuses for the sake of the other

people sharing his dream. He confesses to this projection of his wife that his memory of her

could never live up to the complexity of the woman he loved in the real world. Eventually, Cobb

finds the strength to perform the same role for Saito that Ariadne performed for Cobb. In the

final moments of the film, Cobb searches through the near-endless world of limbo to bring Saito

back to reality. *Inception* demonstrates the way in which a friend who is willing to be

confrontational can help bring a lost dreamer back to the real world. Cobb's remarks about Mal's

projection affirm the value of staying grounded in the real world. The projections found in a

virtual world lack the nuance of reality. Cobb's realization would not have been possible without

Ariadne's willingness to force him to acknowledge this truth. Though *Inception* portrays grave

dangers present in leaving reality, it also shows that characters who take precautions and

maintain strong relationships with people around them are capable of successfully navigating the

dream world while remaining grounded in the real one.

Conclusion

This close reading of *Inception* finds that the film cautions individuals who enter virtual

worlds, such as those found in MMORPGs, regarding a variety of hazards. Being literate in both

film and digital entertainment enhances artistic understanding of the former with application to

the latter. Applying a cultural rhetorical approach to examine the interactions between the

technological texts of film and MMORPG, analysis reveals the darker side of immersive online

worlds. While dream worlds offer benefits such as unparalleled creativity, they also operate

under an alternative coherence of violence. This portrayal of the human subconscious as

inherently violent towards others highlights how that violence can bleed over into the real world

when someone loses the ability to distinguish between reality and dream. This also reflects the

societal fear that those who highly identify with alternative personas are driven to deceive others,

simultaneously risking the loss of their own identities and harm to those they love.

Moreover, a close reading of this text reveals recommended safeguards for those who

approach fictional realities. These elements are consequential for examination, explanation, and

discussion of dialectical tensions often found related to video games.[65] Nolan depicts how

planning ahead and the intervention of others can help an individual retain or regain a sense of

reality when navigating alluring dream worlds. Society is coming to grips with elements of

immersive worlds such as MMORPGs, and leakage of those tensions is reflected in a range of

artistic artifacts such as philosophy, film, and literature.[66] These increasingly prevalent online

diversions, while benign artistic experiences to many, for some are dangerous and problematic.

Fortunately, digital literacy also enables the comprehension of counter-strategies such as self-

monitoring and outside intervention. MMORPG literacy expands and aids in the comprehension

of these messages which are otherwise difficult to comprehend. As such, they encourage literacy

regarding both MMORPGs and the broader cultural context in which they reside. More than

ever, this points to an increasing need for scholarly examination of appropriate literacies for

engaging with digitally-informed texts.

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[65]. Michael J. Blouin, "A Western Wake: Difference and Doubt in Christopher Nolan's "Inception," *Extrapolation* 52, no. 3, (2011): 318-37, doi:10.3828/extr.2011.52.3.4.

[66]. Nicholas Diel, "Socratic Film." *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 74, no. 1, (2016): 23-34.

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