

## ABSTRACT

“Setting the Scene in Environmental Fiction: Kenneth Burke and the Frontier Myth”

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It is difficult to ignore the environmental problems facing the world as a whole. Humanity has always produced stories in response to cultural movements and global problems. Recent pieces of environmental media can give insight into how Americans see their environment, the issues facing it, and potential paths forward. I examine James Cameron’s *Avatar*, Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, and Bethesda Softworks’ *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and apply Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic pentad to the iterations of the frontier thesis found in the three media. I focus on the protagonists present in each work, determining how they are placed within the Burkean “scene” and concluding whether or not each protagonist is “successful” as an environmental hero.

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SETTING THE SCENE IN ENVIRONMENTAL FICTION:  
KENNETH BURKE AND THE FRONTIER MYTH

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Baylor University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Honors Program

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction and the Importance of Being Scenic

Humankind has had an endless fascination with the natural world since we gained the sentience to recognize it, and when humans have a fascination with something, they create stories about it. Some of the earliest stories of mankind – the Biblical Ark, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, even parts of *The Odyssey* – focus on the stereotypical theme of “Man vs. Nature.” Famous modern examples include Jack London’s “To Build a Fire,” Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, or Roland Emmerich’s *Day After Tomorrow*. Works like these produce fear – fear of killing cold, of starvation, of a catastrophic event that wipes out most of humanity, but clearly, whatever these works say resonates with audiences. *The Day After Tomorrow* netted over 500 million dollars over its effective lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Audiences enjoy seeing Man overcome all odds. However, over the past century, as mankind has become more and more aware of the impact its actions have upon the environment, the tone of the critiques of this genre have changed. Many pieces have begun to focus less on Nature’s power over us and more on the reverse – how we, as the globally dominant species, affect every ecosystem on the planet, often negatively. Authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, Wendell Berry, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Barry Lopez, and David Quammen have penned a variety of works expressing concern over anthropogenic impacts on the global ecosystem and attitudes towards the environment. The analysis

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<sup>1</sup> “The Day After Tomorrow (2004) - Financial Information,” *The Numbers*, accessed December 4, 2015, <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Day-After-Tomorrow-The>.

of such works eventually crystalized into a field known as ecocriticism in the early 1990s.

According to Lawrence Buell of Harvard University, an early pioneer in the movement, ecocriticism focuses on “understanding landscapes, regions, and place,” accurate scientific knowledge about the environment, and anthropocentrism within literature.<sup>2</sup> Climate scientists and human ecologists may scratch their collective heads and feel they have studied and referenced those topics for many years – at least 1988, when James Hansen gave a “dramatic Senate testimony” on the cause of hot weather in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The current consensus in the scientific community holds that humans do not have any special importance in the global ecosystem, and thus, any anthropocentrism present cannot fall under “accurate scientific knowledge” when considering works of fiction. The ecocritical movement has seen success from a literary standpoint – effectively accruing a list of themes, motifs, and other elements that should be present for a work to be considered “environmental” – but there is a dearth of rhetorical ecocriticism, i.e., how a piece of environmental fiction *functions*. How does it relate to and connect with its audience? How does it effectively construct an argument about the environment? What about one of these fictions makes us want to care about the environment? Through the examination of James Cameron’s *Avatar*, Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, and Bethesda Softworks’ *Skyrim*, this thesis presents a framework for rhetorically analyzing environmental fiction and answering those questions. Selecting works from three separate media types will make the framework

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Buell, “The Ecocritical Insurgency,” *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (1999): 706.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, “Challenging Global Warming as a Social Problem: An Analysis of the Conservative Movement’s Counter-Claims,” *Social Problems* 47, no. 4 (2000): 500, doi:10.2307/3097132.

broadly applicable, while a brief history of ecocriticism and the three works will serve as background and context. Each following chapter will focus on application of the framework to each piece. I employ the Burkean Dramatistic Pentad in conjunction with theories of the frontier myth in order to critically engage these texts.

### *A Brief History of Ecocriticism*

The word “ecocriticism” first appeared in a 1978 essay by William Rueckert. Unfortunately, Rueckert failed to provide a definition, so a unifying theme for the movement would not arrive until the mid 1990s. Until then, a variety of terms were used to describe the burgeoning genre, among them “ecopoetics,” “green cultural studies,” and “environmental literary criticism.”<sup>4</sup> Because the movement had no name, early studies in the discipline lacked a cohesive purpose; in fact, scholars frequently made similar arguments because they were not aware of any other scholars’ work.

Finally, Cheryll Glotfelty gave one of the first widely accepted definitions in 1996: “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.”<sup>5</sup> However, Greg Garrard presented a broader definition of ecocriticism in 2004; his definition put the focus of ecocriticism on the “relationship between the human and the non-human.”<sup>6</sup> Glotfelty purports to bring multiple disciplines under the banner of ecocriticism, but her definition and the three tenets she proposes – theories of nature and culture, reflections on fiction and drama, and

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<sup>4</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (University of Georgia Press, 1996): xx.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: xviii.

<sup>6</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism, The New Critical Idiom* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004): 5.



critical studies of literature – are inherently restrictive because of their focus on literary criticism. Many of the scholars and authors she presents in *The Ecocriticism Reader* work primarily with literature. The work in these early days preferred to interpret fiction through the lens of themes, metaphors, and narratives in literary contexts.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say the work done was *exclusively* literary, or that it should be devalued in any way; it is simply a reason for my own preference of Garrard's definition.

Garrard's definition therefore allows for critical study of newer media forms, such as video games, that land outside of more traditional circles of storytelling and scholarship. If I considered only *Avatar* and *Dune*, Glotfelty's definition would be perfectly adequate, but *Skyrim* and other RPG video games require a broader definition. Any ecocriticism based around Glotfelty's definition would fail in a serious attempt to analyze video games, primarily because video games do not follow narrative structures common in film and literature. Garrard's definition allows scholars to utilize a rhetorical approach that can more easily include newer media that presently have less scholarship associated with them, without sacrificing effectiveness. Modern ecocriticism, fortunately, has come to include fields outside literary studies – philosophy, anthropology, and theology have all begun to consider the ways the environment interacts with aspects of the respective fields, which, in fairness, Glotfelty points out.<sup>8</sup> Her contribution to the field should not be overlooked, and paved the way for Garrard to evolve ecocriticism. I build on this work by

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<sup>7</sup> Glotfelty and Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader*: xxvii-xxxii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid: xxi-xxii.

providing a comparative analysis of texts that span mediums from novel to film to video game.

### *The Framework*

The following section outlines the proposed framework. Each of the selected media creates a Burkean *scene* (the setting) and focuses on a particular character, the *agent*, through which we, the audience, experience the story.<sup>9</sup> First, they construct, using vivid descriptions or breathtaking CGI, a scene that the audience enters and is then allowed to explore in different ways. The audience is guided through a pre-created world in *Avatar*, asked to mentally create the world in *Dune*, or allowed to self-explore a pre-created world in *Skyrim*. Each method creates a specific relationship between the scene of the media and the consumer. In a movie, the director and cinematographer carefully choose exactly what the audience hears and sees. The dual relationship of the audial and the visual make film unique in its relationship to its audience, especially when compared to literature. In a novel, the author may choose words extremely carefully, but still relinquishes control over the image the reader experiences and allows them to create their own mental representation of the scene. A video game developer utilizes the audial, visual, *and* sensory to invoke the desired experience, making video games more immersive than film or literature.<sup>10</sup> That strange effect gives video games a place of paramount importance; they alone create a virtual reality around the player that the player can

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Burke and Joseph R. Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*, The Heritage of Sociology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989): 135.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Farrow and Ioanna Iacovides, "Gaming and the Limits of Digital Embodiment," *Philosophy & Technology* 27, no. 2 (June 2014): 221–33, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s13347-013-0111-1>.

influence and change. Role playing video games make an argument and formulate their narrative through player choice. This is not at all to say movies or novels do not involve some manner of *choosing* from the audience, but movies and literature do not allow any change in the inherent structure of the story as choice within a video game does. All of the rhetorical scenes, at their cores, evolve from the narrative environments of the media.

Next, how the audience *rhetorically* experiences the scene must be considered. To that end, a Burkean scene-agent ratio is appropriate for examining relationships with the scene, with the agent being each narrative's respective protagonist, as the audience views the environment from each protagonist's perspective. My purpose here is environmental criticism, hence the focus on the audience's relationship with scene. A proper scene-agent ratio will likely demonstrate a power dynamic like the one first described by Mary Parker Follett.<sup>11</sup> Follett's ideas are typically relegated to the area of organizational management, but in her analysis of Tolkien's epic *Lord of the Rings*, Susan Jeffers adapts the "power with," "power [apart] from," and "power over" relationships to ecocritical studies.<sup>12</sup> As such, I argue that the scene is the essential part of environmental media. The story should force the audience to reconsider their own relationships with the natural environment. Kenneth Burke defines scene as "the background of [an] act, the situation in which it occurred" and agent as "what kind of person performed the act."<sup>13</sup> The ratio of interactions and

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Parker Follett, Henry C. Metcalf, and Lyndall F. Urwick, *Dynamic Administration; the Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941).

<sup>12</sup> Susan Jeffers, *Arda Inhabited: Environmental Relationships in The Lord of the Rings* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*: 139.

agency between these two points of the pentad, I argue, are essential to understand for modern environmentalists. How we conceive of and relate to our environment determines how effectively we can act, as agents, to rectify environmental problems.

Unfortunately, here we run into a particular issue common to many fictional narratives – the presence of cultural myths. Specifically, each of these three media make use of both the Frontier Thesis, first described by Frederick Jackson Turner, and the White Savior Myth, carefully examined within cinema by Matthew Hughey’s excellent *The White Savior Film*.<sup>14</sup> The audience, inoculated with both of these myths, likely does not realize when the myths appear once again in media, or their implications. Within the bounds of environmental media, I argue that the presence of these myths problematizes and hampers the potentially positive impacts these media might have had. The audience, experiencing the story through the lens of “agent,” sees a white man saving both an indigenous tribal people (*Avatar* and *Dune*, certainly; *Skyrim* is interestingly less clear-cut) and fighting against civilization as a frontier hero. The interplay of these two myths connects the frontier with fairly overt racism; arguably, environmentalism can be seen as an effort to *protect* the wild frontiers, and connecting that potentiality with the White Savior Myth hurts the possibility of effective argumentation, and thus, action. Janice Hocker Rushing’s “The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth” describes the conflict brought about by “individual vs. community.”<sup>15</sup> Environmentalism must rely on society to effect useful change, and

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier In American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/turner/>; Matthew W. Hughey, *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption* (Temple University Press, 2014), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bsx29>.

<sup>15</sup> Janice Hocker Rushing, “The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth,” *Communication Monographs* 50, no. 1 (March 1983): 14.

forcing us to experience so-called “environmental protagonists” through this lens of rugged individualism works against what the environmental movement strives towards. The protagonists and stories I have selected, to be effective, should lead to one conclusion. The environment, as humankind’s scene, is worth saving on its own merit.

### *The Media*

#### *Avatar*

James Cameron’s *Avatar* takes its viewers through a beautifully rendered world called Pandora. Similar to *Dune*’s antagonists, the invading force is economically motivated. The male protagonist, Jake Sully, initially works for the primary unobtanium mining company as an Avatar “driver.” The Avatars are genetically engineered blends of human and Na’vi DNA that are mentally linked with their driver. Unfortunately for the native Pandorans, their home tree lies over the largest mineral deposit on the planet. Jake’s superiors order him to learn the Na’vi culture in order to find a “carrot” to move them, with the threat of a “stick” should he fail. During this cultural learning, Jake is instructed by a Na’vi named Neytiri.

Through her, Jake comes to accept the Na’vi culture.<sup>16</sup>

However, when compared to Paul Atreides’ acceptance of the Fremen culture, Jake’s acceptance of the Na’vi ideal falls short – his eventual respect for the environment is predicated on his affection for Neytiri. She respects the environment for its own sake, whereas Jake accepts it because of what it brings him – a relationship with Neytiri and prestige within the Na’vi tribes. Jake does not rely on

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<sup>16</sup> James Cameron, *Avatar* (20th Century Fox, 2010).

the environment to survive, as Paul does. In fact, the logical choice within the movie would have been for Jake to remain with the human company's security forces. He had no way of predicting the intervention of Pandora in the final battle. From a survivalist standpoint, he should have sided with the security forces, whereas Paul had no other choice. Jake's placement as both a frontier hero and White Savior smacks of overt paternalism, and I argue he fails as an environmental protagonist because of the interplay between those myths and his rhetorical domination and silencing of Pandora's forest.

### *Dune*

Frank Herbert's *Dune* has long been considered a pinnacle of environmental literature. Ronny Parkerson points out that the strength of the ecological themes of *Dune* is not that Herbert addresses them, but the multiple contexts in which he addresses them – science, yes, but also how the ecology of Arrakis influences the politics and economy of the empire present in the novel that revolves around spice, the culture that has sprung up around reviving the former greenery of the planet, and even the religion that stems from the worship of the ecological drivers of Arrakis, the sandworms.<sup>17</sup> Rarely has the environment been shown to so clearly affect multiple aspects of human life and society.

Paul Atreides, the novel's hero, survives an enemy attack on his life by understanding and *respecting* the harsh environment in which he finds himself. The vile Harkonnen family murders Paul's father and drives the Atreides organization to isolation and death within the planet-wide desert in an attempt to secure the economic

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<sup>17</sup> Ronny Parkerson, "Semantics, General Semantics, and Ecology in Frank Herbert's *Dune*," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 67, no. 4 (October 2010): 403–11.

benefits of the spice, but Paul and his mother are rescued and taken in by the Fremen, natives of the planet. Paul utilizes his intelligence and Bene Gesserit training (a political order to which his mother belongs) to become one of the Fremen. As the novel progresses, Paul increasingly becomes “naturalized,” taking a Fremen name, wife, and subscribing wholeheartedly to their religion in his quest for revenge against the Harkonnens. Paul’s motivation for accepting the Fremen way is quite simple: it is the only way to survive in the desert. He recognizes it as his only option, as well as the best option, and this acceptance and respect leads to the defeat of the Harkonnens in the book’s climax.<sup>18</sup> Paul exists, like Jake, at the confluence of the frontier hero and White Savior myths, but unlike Jake, Paul experiences a lack of narrative choice. Stephen O’Leary’s Burkean analysis of Christian apocalyptic rhetoric, applied here as a study of generalized eschatological myth, reveals that Paul’s placement into these two normally problematic myths is more nuanced than Jake’s character, allowing him some small successes as an environmental protagonist.<sup>19</sup>

### *Skyrim*

Finally, we come to Bethesda Softworks’ *Skyrim*. *Skyrim*’s narrative centers around the return of evil dragons and the imminent destruction of the world by Alduin, the first of the dragons. The gamer takes on the role of the Dragonborn, a mortal born with dragon’s blood and the only one able to kill Alduin permanently.

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<sup>18</sup> Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: Ace, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Stephen D. O’Leary, “A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 4 (November 1993): 385.

The player meets multiple factions along the way that may either help or distract the player from the main quest.<sup>20</sup>

I will expand on this in the final case study, but *Skyrim* is unique because of its status as a role-playing, randomized game. While the overall storyline of the game does not change, the path to the conclusion changes each time the player begins a new character. Play style (warrior-like “bruiser” characters flow through the game very differently than a magic or stealth-centered character, for instance) can influence the player’s choice of the order in which they choose the narrative, and therefore the way the player experiences the story. I argue that *Skyrim* is an environmental fiction only when the choice to explore the created environment of the game is made by the player and not through characterization, as in *Dune* and *Avatar*. Due to the variable nature of the game, no one character is analogous to Jake or Paul.

*Skyrim*’s developers placed a multitude of ecosystems within the game: alpine forest in the area around Markarth, tundra in the northern reaches of the gamemap, plains surrounding the central town of Whiterun, and swamps outside of Riften. If the player chooses to dive down and explore the depths of a lake or the northern coast, they will find the developers made an effort to recreate a cold-water kelp ecosystem, complete with fish and walrus-like creatures called “horkers.” This realistic space the game creates allows players to more fully “incarnate” themselves within the game space.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Guy Carver, *Skyrim*, Elder Scrolls V (Bethesda Softworks, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Kris Pint, “The Avatar as a Methodological Tool for the Embodied Exploration of Virtual Environments,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14, no. 3 (September 2012).



*Skyrim* requires that players “level up” their characters’ skillset in order to advance, and this frequently occurs by seeking out particular objectives within the created environment. For example, two of these skills, Smithing and Alchemy, typically necessitate that the player find materials to craft either a piece of equipment (Smithing) or a potion that increases the player-character’s statistics by giving them more health or boosting their damage output (Alchemy). The player relies on the environment to provide either mined ore or plant ingredients and therefore the game inherently requires dependence on the created environment. Other games do not require this dependence. First person shooters (FPS), for example, have far less choice involved. Most are linearly designed – move here, shoot this, complete this objective in this way – resulting in a nearly identical iteration of experience each time the game is played. *Skyrim* leaves the choice to the player, combining characteristics of the Burkean agent with the player-character.<sup>22</sup> This produces a work that, through its inherent immersive characteristics, allows players to make choices that place them into an environmental scene, not experience it through the lens of dominator or lackey.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

In chapter two, I will examine Jake Sully’s relationship with his scene and the flawed myths that make up his character. Chapter three will look at Paul Atreides and the more nuanced placement of myths, while chapter four combines rhetorical

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<sup>22</sup> A brief note about terminology when discussing *Skyrim* and gaming theory: typically the term “avatar” is used, but in order to avoid confusion with Cameron’s use of the word in his film, I will substitute the phrase “player-character.” Player will refer to the human controller of the player-character.

analysis with theories of video game immersion and reveals even more complexity at the nexus of “who is agent?” The answer to this question has important implications for both rhetoric and the future of the video game industry, as well as the advent of virtual reality technology. Furthermore, environmentalism as a whole requires a precise knowledge of the scene-agent ratio; the entire movement is predicated on humankind’s interactions with its global environment. This thesis provides some examination of how we represent that ratio in fiction.

Ecocriticism as a field brings an essential component of self-reflection to the overarching environmental movement. Everyone lives somewhere, and ecocriticism, at a fundamental level, helps us tell stories about those places and our interactions with them, whether good or bad, whether in the realms of politics or imagination. I believe this project can contribute to both those areas of discourse, though on the surface it focuses only on one. Political conversations and their contexts are Burkean scenes, just like Arrakis, and understanding how we communicate in those very real spaces through a textual lens lends essential significance to this project.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Avatar* and Silencing the Forest

In 2009, James Cameron released *Avatar*, a gorgeous, CGI-rendered film set on a distant moon called Pandora that is populated by natives named the Na'vi. The epic science fiction follows Jake Sully, a paraplegic former Marine-turned-mercenary who is shipped light-years from Earth at the behest of a mysterious company called RDA – the Resources Development Administration. Jake must control an Avatar, a remotely controlled synthetic body created from a blend of human and Na'vi DNA. The film attempts to show Sully gradually gaining respect for the Na'vi way of life as he is carefully instructed by Neytiri, the Na'vi chieftain's daughter and eventually “becoming one of them.”<sup>23</sup> In this chapter, I focus on Jake's Burkean relationship to his scene in the scene-agent ratio and the cultural myths that affect it. The act is the saving of Pandora, the scene is Pandora, Jake is our agent, he acts through the use of his avatar, and he does it because of Neytiri.<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, from a rhetorical and ecocritical standpoint, the film fails here; Jake's motivations lie outside the immediate protection of the Pandoran forest for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, Jake fails to exhibit a power-with relationship; visually, he often exhibits a “power-over” relationship, seeking to dominate the environment.<sup>25</sup> An act of scene control inherently lacks respect for the scene. Second,

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<sup>23</sup> Cameron, *Avatar*.

<sup>24</sup> Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*.

along with other humans in the film, he often utilizes language or phraseology reminiscent of discrimination experienced by Native Americans during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and embodies the White Savior Complex. Third, once Jake has met Neytiri in the film, she becomes his *purpose*; most of his subsequent *acts* focus on gaining her approval.<sup>26</sup> Any environmental action Jake takes thus are motivated by her, and not care for the Pandoran forest. From the standpoint of an environmental critic, any Burkean motive other than protection of the scene results in a failure of the film.

These points combine to leave an impression of uselessness on the part of the environment; it is not worth saving on its own merit, but through Sully's affection for someone who *does* love the environment. The rhetorical scene that follows, the scene in which Jake *acts*, fails to motivate the audience to consider any greater environmental argument. A good environmental protagonist should exist within the scene but not dominate it, act to defend it, and be motivated by the scene in defending it. Jake certainly defends Pandora, but fails to live up to the other criteria. Signourey Weaver's character, Grace Augustine, builds up the Pandoran forest to be a character in its own right, and Cameron's visual direction backs up that conclusion. He clearly wants his audience to *believe* in Pandora, and thus, their own physical environment, but Jake's weaknesses skew the scene-agent ratio so far in one direction that the glorious scene cannot make up for the narrative failures. Augustine even describes this characterization as she tells the corporate executive how the forest communicates with itself and the Na'vi: "There's some kind of electrochemical communication

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<sup>25</sup> Susan Jeffers, *Arda Inhabited: Environmental Relationships in The Lord of the Rings* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2014): 17.

<sup>26</sup> Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*: 139.

between the trees... and the Na'vi can access it.” If only Cameron’s direction and Jake’s characterization backed up that statement.

*“Shut Up and Fly Straight!” – Domination of the Forest*

*Avatar*, from a cinematographic standpoint, broke new ground and exhibited a breathtaking ability to create scenes in which audiences would happily immerse themselves. Fifteen years in the making, the special effects were so realistic that some fans experienced “post-*Avatar* depression syndrome.”<sup>27</sup> The colors were vibrant, the creatures and forest (especially in 3D showings) were so carefully constructed that one felt immersed in interactions with Cameron’s created environment. The rhetorical possibilities with such an expressive, agency-laden environment were many; such a beautiful, immersive film could surely be utilized to create persuasive appeals for environmentalism. However, that strength also became the film’s downfall. Two scenes in particular evoke a sense of Jake’s domination over the forest, rather than his cooperation with it: Jake’s fight with his banshee and his capture of *Toruk*. These scenes contribute extensively to the film’s overall failure and the skewing of the scene-agent ratio. Burke states that a particular scene should “favor” the best agent for the job, but Jake’s actions actively work against the scene’s desires.<sup>28</sup> This contrast of a visually stunning scene and Jake’s pattern of physical and cultural domination exacerbate the failure of a film laden with environmental potential.

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<sup>27</sup> Katy Hall, “Avatar-Induced Depression: Coping With The Intangibility Of Pandora (VIDEO),” *The Huffington Post*, accessed February 4, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/12/avatar-induced-depression\\_n\\_420605.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/12/avatar-induced-depression_n_420605.html).

<sup>28</sup> Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*: 155.

In the first scene, new Na'vi hunters must climb up a sacred mountain and choose a banshee ("ikran" in the Na'vi language). Doing this proves their courage and strength as a hunter and member of the clan – Neytiri tells Jake he will have this opportunity "when he is ready."<sup>29</sup> There is an implication that he must prove himself to her before she will allow him to undertake the ceremony. In the scene where Neytiri expresses her approval of Jake, he has just killed a deer-like creature for food. The film then cuts to a breathtaking scenery shot; the small group of Na'vi climbs a floating mountain and Jake's voice tells us prospective hunters must "go where the banshees are." They reach the roost, and Jake's initiation into Na'vi culture begins. I chose this scene because of its importance to Jake's journey as a Na'vi hunter, and its placement directly after Neytiri, the best example of Na'vi culture the audience has, comes to believe he understands the Na'vi society and religion.

Neytiri tells Jake that the proper banshee, the banshee that "chooses" him, is the one who will try to kill him. However, the fight and subsequent flying scene still evoke a sense of domination in the audience. In fairness, the film implies that fighting the banshee is part of the experience, but the audience is never shown another Na'vi going through the initiation for context. The first thing Jake does is muzzle the banshee; the banshee cannot defend itself with natural defenses (teeth) and has no "voice." The human naming of the *ikran* as banshee is significant – banshees were mythical, ghostly women known for their piercing scream – and Jake instantly removes its metaphorical and physical voice. The *ikran* as a manifestation of the environment in this scene must bow to Jake's will. Jake also prevents the *ikran* from moving a few moments later by physically dominating it. His arms lock around its

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<sup>29</sup> Cameron, *Avatar*.

neck, legs curled around its face. He makes the connection (called *tsaheylu* by the Na'vi) between his neural headtail and the *ikran*'s, and the fight ends abruptly. Now, beyond the physical domination, we see mental domination. During his first flight with his new *ikran*, he initially struggles to control it, then screams, "Shut up and fly straight!" The *ikran* does, and now, finally, he is completely master of it. With "shut up," the *ikran* is mentally muzzled, and with "fly straight," it is physically controlled. Jason Edward Black examines the native and indigenous discursive voice, saying that the American Indian voice had an essential place in fighting the government's effort to remove them from ancestral lands.<sup>30</sup> The *ikran*, read as an essential part of the Na'vi voice, should not be silenced, as that would limit their power to fight for their own destiny. Furthermore, I contend that the silencing of the *ikran* is unnecessary from a narrative standpoint. The "horse" that Jake rides earlier in the film requires no muzzle, no "breaking in." It seems unnecessary to require that silence from the Na'vi in this scene; a training scene could have been developed without exhibiting paternalistic overtones.

Christopher Manes points out that modern environmental ethicists argue vehemently that treating nature as "silenced" has caused many of the current issues in the environment. Animistic societies rarely contributed to environmental destruction, primarily because they believed that each part of nature had a unique voice.<sup>31</sup> The Na'vi are unquestionably an animistic society that fights against environmental

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<sup>30</sup> Jason Edward Black, "Native Resistive Rhetoric and the Decolonization of American Indian Removal Discourse," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 80, doi:10.1080/00335630802621052.

<sup>31</sup> C. MANES, "NATURE AND SILENCE," *ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS* 14, no. 4 (1992): 339–50.

degradation. Their Gaia-like deity, Eywa, inhabits every part of their environment, and Neytiri instructs Jake in the “circle of energy” that constitutes the Na’vi religion. Black, in an analysis of the Squamish Nation Chief Seattle’s 1854 speech and its subsequent cooptation by Ted Perry, a preacher, notes that American Indian interests are frequently “controlled by Western Interests that tend to overlook the importance of the Native voice.”<sup>32</sup> Jake Sully, a white male representing a multinational cooperation that clearly has no great concern for the environment, becomes the lens through which the audience identifies with native concerns; but his concerns are not the Na’vi’s, and therefore, neither are the audience’s. The exploration of Jake as a white messiah will be dealt with later, but Jake’s physical and mental silencing of the *ikran*, an essential part of Na’vi culture, has profound rhetorical implications that appear later in the film.

The second scene dealing with Jake’s domination involves the *Toruk*, visually similar to the *ikran* and even more important to the Na’vi cultural history; that history results in overt cultural imperialism on Jake’s part when he wrestles the *Toruk* into submission. Earlier in the film, Neytiri and Jake examine a *Toruk* skull and she tells him that the *Toruk* will choose someone when the Na’vi people are in great need. In order to save the Na’vi, he coopts their myth without acknowledging the element of “choosing.” Jake sees himself as a savior for the Na’vi people without realizing they are capable of saving themselves from human encroachment. Jason Edward Black, in his analysis of racist college mascot stereotypes, points out that the ideation behind the co-optation of Native culture is rooted in “cultural imperialism, [which] seizes

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<sup>32</sup> Jason Edward Black, “Native Authenticity, Rhetorical Circulation, and Neocolonial Decay: The Case of Chief Seattle’s Controversial Speech,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 15, no. 4 (2012): 636.



and processes vital cultural resources.”<sup>33</sup> Here, Jake takes an important piece of Na’vi history and co-opts it for his own ends, specifically fulfilling his overwrought perception of his necessity to the Na’vi’s survival. Laurie Ann Whitt also defined cultural imperialism as a “remaking” of those cultural resources into “the image and marketplace of the dominant culture.”<sup>34</sup> Combining those definitions, we see that Jake clearly, despite his Na’vish appearance, acts as an extension of cultural imperialism. Black also argues that cultural imperialism seeks to “silence the native voice;” as Jake silenced the *ikran*, so now he silences the Na’vi culture.<sup>35</sup> The myth of *Toruk Makto* (the rider of the *Toruk*) is spoken of with great respect because of the “choosing.”

If we assume the Na’vi ideal of complete interconnectedness on Pandora is accurate (and we have no reason as the audience not to), then *Toruk* acts as an extension of Eywa’s will and choice. The previous *Toruk Maktos* were chosen by her, but Jake is not. He merely utilizes the myth because he believes he alone has the power and ability to save the Na’vi from human encroachment, but he needs the Na’vi to believe the same thing – thus, he appropriates a treasured myth in order to convince them that he is their protector. In the process, unfortunately, he falls into the White Savior Myth (also known as the White Messiah Complex). The scene results in not only a sense of domination of *Toruk*, but of Na’vi culture as well. That culture relies heavily upon spiritualism, and the *Toruk* myth is an extension of this. Burke helpfully gives an example of the scene-agent ratio in a religious context, saying,

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<sup>33</sup> Jason Edward Black, “The ‘Mascotting’ of Native America: Construction, Commodity, and Assimilation,” *The American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2002): 611, doi:10.1353/aiq.2004.0003.

<sup>34</sup> Laurie Anne Whitt, “Cultural Imperialism and the Marketing of Native America,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 19, no. 3 (January 1, 1995): 3, doi:10.17953/aicr.19.3.75725415011514r1.

<sup>35</sup> Black, “Native Authenticity, Rhetorical Circulation, and Neocolonial Decay.”

“The agent contained by this scene will partake of the same supernatural quality.”<sup>36</sup>

As an outsider, Jake has no supernatural qualities of which to speak, and thus is not contained by this particular scene. Both contribute to Jake effectively dominating the larger Burkean scene (Pandora) through his acts. The Na’vi, *ikran*, and *Toruk* (to the audience) represent the expression of Pandora’s natural environment, but Jake visually and culturally silences all of them. To succeed as an environmental protagonist, Jake’s acts should be consistent and contained within the scene, but they seek to control the scene.<sup>37</sup>

### *I’m White; Listen to Me! – The White Savior Complex*

Though Jake believes he acts in the best interest of Pandora and the Na’vi, the film rhetorically constructs a White Savior Complex around him. This makes it extremely difficult for the audience to identify his motivations (along with his muddled relationship with Neytiri, which will be explored in the next section). *Avatar* clearly critiques the imperialist nature of white society and attempts to subvert it, but ends up recapitulating the message that only white people can save native cultures.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the frontier myth and hero narratives augment the already-problematic messiah narrative. One critic went so far as to say Jake’s whiteness “represses the heroes’ participation in the same project as the villains in order to afford these heroes

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<sup>36</sup> Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*: 151.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid: 146.

<sup>38</sup> Dominic Alessio and Kristen Meredith, “Decolonising James Cameron’s Pandora: Imperial History and Science Fiction,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 13, no. 2 (2012), doi:10.1353/cch.2012.0015.

all the rewards of colonialism with none of the guilt.”<sup>39</sup> Jake’s final speech in front of the Na’vi, before the ultimate battle, finally combines the white savior and frontier hero narratives. Contrasted with Dr. Augustine’s scientifically-based respect for the Pandoran environment, Jake relies on his military training to determine that all out war is the only remaining option, forgetting that he himself was recently opposed to the Na’vi. The myth in American culture involves the process of becoming *more* American through the exploration and conquering of the unknown, and now that he has conquered the forest and the Na’vi, Jake simply turns the desire to conquer back towards his former people, and in the process Americanizes the formerly peaceful Na’vi.<sup>40</sup>

The Avatar program in the film dedicates itself to uncovering the scientific unknown, and the wildness of the Pandoran environment brings to mind other famous iterations of frontier – consider the original (and most subsequent spinoffs) of *Star Trek*, *Dances with Wolves*, and the *Lone Ranger*. Both Dr. Augustine and Col. Quaritch assign Jake the task of uncovering the social unknown – Na’vi culture through Neytiri – for scientific purposes and tactical purposes, respectively. The “new frontier” is a common motif in Cameron’s work, notably *Alien* and its sequel, *Aliens*. John F. Kennedy asked of the nation if we “had the nerve and the will” to conquer the New Frontier.<sup>41</sup> A frontier requires a hero with that nerve and will, and Jake Sully

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<sup>39</sup> John Rieder, “Race and Revenge Fantasies in Avatar, District 9 and Inglourious Basterds,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4, no. 1 (2011): 47.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel P. Perry, “Douglas MacArthur as Frontier Hero: Converting Frontiers in MacArthur’s Farewell to Congress,” *Southern Communication Journal* 77, no. 4 (September 1, 2012): 266, doi:10.1080/1041794X.2012.659791.

<sup>41</sup> “American Rhetoric: John F. Kennedy -- 1960 Democratic National Convention Address,” n.d., <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfk1960dnc.htm>.”

generally fulfills the identifiers of the quintessential frontier hero set forth by Janice Hocker Rushing. Rushing identifies an “evolving frontier” in *Alien* and *Aliens* as a “patriarchalized heroine” kills a representation of the lost, sacred feminine.<sup>42</sup> Her version of the new frontier as evolving into masculinized space can be applied to Jake as a disabled character, not someone the audience normally sees in the genre.

Rushing identifies other characteristics of the frontier hero that also speak to the tension the hero feels between savagery and civilization. As a paraplegic, Jake experiences difficulty in his struggle and sacrifices his humanity at the end of the film, and friends when Grace and Trudy die. He does not give in to the temptation of “getting his legs back” and tries to extend the indolence of peaceful coexistence with Pandora as long as possible. However, he falls into the Na’vi way until the humans threaten his “town” (Hometree).<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, he also attempts to express reticence to violence, though he knows violence will result anyway, based on the video recordings Quaritch shows Selfridge.<sup>44</sup> Cameron’s efforts to have Jake side with the “savage” and showcase their virtues fall flat because of Jake’s status as the White Savior.

The connection to the frontier myth has particular importance to a Burkean analysis, particularly with respect to scene. Michael Ray Fitzgerald, in a study of the classic Western show *The Lone Ranger*, claims that “the land is the prize; who

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<sup>42</sup> Janice Hocker Rushing, “Evolution of ‘the New Frontier’ in *Alien* and *Aliens*: Patriarchal Co-Optation of the Feminine Archetype,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75, no. 1 (February 1989): 19.

<sup>43</sup> Ronald H. Carpenter, “Revisiting Janice Rushing About ‘The Western Myth’ (More Important Now Than Ever Before),” *Southern Communication Journal* 71, no. 2 (July 1, 2006): 181, doi:10.1080/10417940600683539.

<sup>44</sup> Perry, “Douglas MacArthur as Frontier Hero.” 273.

controls it... is the primary issue.”<sup>45</sup> Both frontier hero and white savior, Jake recognizes the importance of land (scene) and does his best to subjugate it in a pseudo-respectful fashion – he believes he carries out the will of Eywa in defending the Na’vi as he does. He decides he knows the best route forward for the Na’vi – first in Grace’s school (white socialization, essentially), then in removal and recolonization when the humans attack Hometree.<sup>46</sup> The savior motif comes to a head in the scene before the epic, final battle, referencing the Christian Messiah’s supplication to God before the crucifixion. As Jesus prayed to God for help before the Crucifixion, Jake prays to Eywa for assistance before the battle. “They chose me for something. I will stand and fight. You know I will. But I need a little help here,” he says. Of course, the forest listens, and just when all seems lost, it begins to fight for the Na’vi, violently expunging the white humans from Pandora.

The film presents this as Eywa listening to Jake’s prayer – Neytiri even screams joyfully that “Eywa has heard you!” Conversely, during the prayer in front of the Tree of Souls, she informs Jake that “Eywa does not take sides; she protects only the balance.” It seems odd, then, that suddenly, Eywa *does* take sides. I contend that she does not, and the film only implies that she does, leaving the audience with an impression of Jake-as-Savior. If Eywa does, in fact, protect the balance of nature, and humans upset that balance, then it seems probable that Eywa would have intervened *with or without* Jake’s prayer. Unfortunately, the audience sees only Jake’s status as white god, saving the noble savages through his own deeds and words and not their

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Ray Fitzgerald, “The White Savior and His Junior Partner: The Lone Ranger and Tonto on Cold War Television (1949–1957),” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 85, doi:10.1111/jpcu.12017.

<sup>46</sup> Alessio and Meredith, “Decolonising James Cameron’s Pandora.”

own deity. Indeed, after Jake has co-opted the *Toruk* myth, he arrives in front of the Na'vi at their moment of need, parting "the crowd like Moses parting the Red Sea, and awakens them from their defeatist stupor."<sup>47</sup> Their savior has arrived to lead them in times of sorrow. Neytiri, earlier in the film, points out that Eywa has sent a sign in the form of "seeds from the sacred tree," but this is before Jake has even begun his education in Na'vi custom. Why choose Jake? Another aspect of the white savior myth, I argue, lies in its ability to interpret the actions of non-white characters through the lens of white characters while also providing a point of identification for a predominantly white audience. We understand Jake's desire to protect what he sees as his; he has conquered the forest, after all, so why *not* protect it with war tactics learned in a futuristic Marine Corps, even though the scene is perfectly capable of protecting itself.

If we read Eywa (and all other native Pandora flora, fauna, and culture) as representative of the Burkean scene, than Jake's White Savior Complex and frontier-hero colonization of the Na'vi supplants the scene's constrictions with his own desires. Cameron, whether intentionally or not, created a scene that, based on the film's conclusion, should need no outside actor to act in its defense. An agent would obviously be permitted to act within it, but not to change it, yet Jake does. Much like his domination of the *ikran* and the *Toruk*, his status as white, frontier savior prevents him from working within the established scene. I argue that the scene-act and scene-agent ratio in *Avatar* are dramatically eclipsed by the agent-act ratio, to the detriment of the film's environmental message. Jake and his actions hold the audience's

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

attention above all else. Two readings of the Na'vi mirror Jake's status as white messiah and frontier hero and substantiate the overuse of act-agent.

First, Cameron employs the “noble savage” archetype; the archetype is common within the frontier myth (alongside the ignoble, cruel brute).<sup>48</sup> Cameron created a stereotypical “mystical” native society, interesting only because of their “otherness” to white-ness, further appropriated by the literal inhabiting of scientifically manufactured native bodies by white characters. Jason Edward Black states that a central tenant of colonization is the “colonizers' appropriation of land, bodies, and labor.”<sup>49</sup> As the white frontier hero, Jake, though his intentions seem to be worthy, inserts himself into Na'vi land, takes Neytiri's body sexually (and the camera certainly does not shy away from the mostly-nude Na'vi bodies, either, which in turn makes the Na'vi seem primitive and sexually available),<sup>50</sup> and controls their “labor” by the end of the film, sending squads of Na'vi on suicidal missions during the final battle, particularly the ground forces, which are decimated by Quaritch's powered exosuit soldiers. Na'vi bodies have value only in their instrumental value to the white hero's personal narrative; never mind that they are a people in and of themselves and an expression of the scene.

Secondly, the Na'vi, because of their literal connection to the forest can also, much like the *ikran* and the *Toruk*, represent the expression of the forest/Eywa. Their ability to “upload memories” to Eywa and connect with their ancestors who are “with

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<sup>48</sup> Danielle Nicole Devoss and Patrick Russell Lebeau, “Reading and Composing Indians: Invented Indian Identity through Visual Literacy,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 43, no. 1 (February 2010): 49.

<sup>49</sup> Black, “Native Authenticity, Rhetorical Circulation, and Neocolonial Decay.” 638.

<sup>50</sup> Alessio and Meredith, “Decolonising James Cameron's Pandora.”

Eywa” provide a point of reference for the audience to also identify with the forest, especially when we discover our white protagonist can do the same. In Burkean terms, they are agents that represent the scene, unfortunately eclipsed by Jake as our primary agent. Through the reading of Jake-as-Messiah, the environment-as-scene loses its voice, and the Na’vi lose agency accordingly. The *ikran* is physically silenced, but Jake-as-Messiah rhetorically silences the entire scene through that physical. The audience believes that Eywa, the sentient expression of scene, acts under Jake’s authority. Burke points out that agents can easily represent the scene they inhabit.<sup>51</sup> Jake takes this too far by dominating the scene, and his acts begin to redefine the scene as a damsel needing salvation.<sup>52</sup> Burke says “one may deflect attention from scenic matters by situating the motives of an act in the agent.”<sup>53</sup> Cameron manages to do this by focusing on the relationship between Jake and Neytiri, rather than giving the audience a wider picture of the Na’vi.

### *I Have Eyes Only For You – Neytiri as Purpose*

It seems reasonable to expect that protagonists within environmental cinema would be motivated by their love for the environment-as-scene; to require a protagonist to “save the environment” for any other reason than the environment itself is foolish, and rings of anthropomorphism. As the perpetrators of environmental disaster, we should fix the damage we have done for the environment’s sake, not only ours. Nature has value apart from humanity and our usage of it. Jake sees value in his

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<sup>51</sup> Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*: 151.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid: 153.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid: 154.



environment only through Neytiri and his affection for her. Even given the conflation of the Na'vi with the scene discussed in the previous section, Cameron makes it difficult to read the Jake-Neytiri romance through a lens of environmentally motivated action. Rather, *Avatar* reads more like a Pocahontas retread.<sup>54</sup>

Consider the sequence of events throughout the film. Jake arrives, meets and begins to “drive” his avatar. The animal attack forces him to survive for a night in the forest, and the sign from Eywa requires that Neytiri save him. She does and begins his education. He uses this as an opportunity to spy on the Na'vi, but changes his mind as the film progresses. The humans attack, Jake fights for the Na'vi, and the humans are beaten back off the planet. *Fin*.

However, the timing of these events in the film speaks volumes. When Neytiri brings Jake to her father for judgment, his orders still require the assessment of Na'vi military capabilities in case they refuse to move. Eventually, he and Neytiri “mate,” and only then does Jake reveal his change of allegiance by destroying the bulldozer. After that, Quaritch removes Jake from human society (the frontier hero's status as “apart from society”)<sup>55</sup> and he begins to become a part of the Na'vi by appropriating their *Toruk* myth. Though it takes place before his encounter with Neytiri, Jake seems to know what the ceremony of “becoming a man” entails. Neytiri explains that he may “choose a woman,” and Jake has clearly thought about his choice – every woman Neytiri references, he knows, and has considered why they may or may not make a good mate for him. Our rugged savior does not want a singer, or huntress, but

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<sup>54</sup> “‘Avatar’ = ‘Pocahontas’ In Space (PICTURE),” *The Huffington Post*, accessed April 13, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/04/avatar-pocahontas-in-spac\\_n\\_410538.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/04/avatar-pocahontas-in-spac_n_410538.html).

<sup>55</sup> Carpenter, “Revisiting Janice Rushing About ‘The Western Myth’ (More Important Now Than Ever Before).”: 181.

Neytiri, and seems to have wanted her for some time. The rest of the film proceeds from the destruction of the sacred grove after their encounter.

Remove Neytiri from the equation, and consider Jake's potential journey. Another Na'vi would have instructed Jake in the way of the forest, and presumably been present at the salient plot points. Would the motivational factor, Jake's purpose, been the same? Based on his long-standing affection for Neytiri, we could have ended up with a very different movie. Jake may have decided that giving up, in a literal sense, his humanity was not worth it without the promise of love on the other side. With the Na'vi (as a people) read as expressions of scene, as I stated in the previous section, scene does not seem to factor into Jake's motivations. His only interactions with other Na'vi are fairly antagonistic in nature pre-finale. Essentially, he does not interact with a prominent part of the scene he finds himself in. Burke discusses how "shifts in political exigencies" do not change individual agents' behavior, but the type of agent that can act properly within in the scene.<sup>56</sup> Based on that, we can argue that without Neytiri Jake may not have been an appropriate agent at all. Neytiri-as-purpose functions only within Jake's specific scene. He cares for the Pandoran forest, but only in the context of Neytiri – through his relationship with her.

### *Conclusion: Failed Potential*

James Cameron created a world full of persuasive potential that falls incredibly short from a critical standpoint. Jake's physical domination of scene, his status as white messiah/frontier hero, and his focus on Neytiri have an effect on the

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<sup>56</sup> Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*: 155.

audience that deviates from what Cameron intended. Cameron admits that he intended to write a story about a single character, and that he wanted to:

Do the mythic, heroic story with a sense of destiny and big epic battles and all that, but at the same time have the dystopian, cautionary component in play, too. Have one be the spoonful of sugar to the other.<sup>57</sup>

He certainly succeeds on the first front, but it is in his desire to have both where he fails to consider the rhetorical implications. The audience focuses more on Jake and less on the cautionary tale Cameron desired; the “mythic” story overshadows the scene in which the journey takes place. The misplacement of dramatic motivation in Jake’s actions in particular negates the glorious scene that Cameron created and a terribly skewed scene-agent ratio. In Herbert’s *Dune*, for instance, though he is the main character, Paul Atreides often takes a backseat in the narrative to Arrakis. The desire to control the planet and its riches permeates every facet of the novel. Cameron simply could not let Pandora be its own character and have its own voice. He tried; the need for unobtainium in the *Avatar* universe attempts to be equivalent to the need for spice, but in *Dune*, Herbert shows the full, galaxy-spanning implications of spice. Interstellar trade and travel would cease and the human-computer Mentats could not perform their function sufficiently. We the audience never see what happens if unobtainium production ceases, and this speaks to the larger issue of scene-silencing.

Jake, as representative of that silencing, fails as a protagonist seeking to “save” or help the environment, or to reverse the damage that humanity has done to nature. We see everything through the lens of problematic cultural myths, and

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<sup>57</sup> FreeMan4096, *James Cameron Full Interview (Audio)*, accessed February 8, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=8pvUQeVmQB8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=8pvUQeVmQB8).

therefore we see only Jake's physical and rhetorical silencing of the expressions of Pandora. Black admits that when it comes to Native voices, "authenticity is a sticky subject."<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, Cameron misses the mark because of Jake's frontier hero, white messiah status. Perhaps in the sequel, the scene of Pandora will find a new voice. Cameron has certainly done the worldbuilding required, along with an aesthetically pleasing interactive experience, but that makes it all the more frustrating to watch a film so devoid of scenic agency. As an environmental film, *Avatar* fails to motivate its audience to any substantive reconsideration of their own scene-agent and scene-act ratios between themselves and their environments.

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<sup>58</sup> Black, "Native Authenticity, Rhetorical Circulation, and Neocolonial Decay.": 642.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Dune and the Apocalyptic Frontier

Frank Herbert's *Dune* series totals six books and sprawls across 3500 years. The first book, *Dune*, appeared in 1965, when it tied for the prestigious Hugo award and won the inaugural Nebula award. The book immediately garnered positive critical reception and became one of the best selling novels of all time. As a whole, the series ranked #4 in NPR's "Top 100 Science Fiction/Fantasy" lists, coming behind the giants of *Lord of the Rings* and *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.<sup>59</sup> NPR's survey was conducted in 2011, nearly fifty years after the release of *Dune* and following multiple film and miniseries adaptations; the complex, political plot and extensive worldbuilding clearly resonates with readers then and now. It was particularly well received with environmental groups. Rachel Carson's seminal work *Silent Spring* hit shelves three years before and sparked modern environmentalism, bringing to light the dangers of chemical pollutions and anthropogenically-caused changes to natural ecosystems.<sup>60</sup> Carson showed the United States the potential impacts humanity could have on nature, while *Dune* showcased the power of environmentalism in fiction. Herbert's focus on and knowledge of planetary ecology in particular struck readers. Arrakis, the primary scene of the novel, seems alive and near sentient, regardless of the planet-wide desert.

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<sup>59</sup> "Top 100 Science-Fiction, Fantasy Books," *NPR.org*, accessed February 19, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2011/08/09/139248590/top-100-science-fiction-fantasy-books>.

<sup>60</sup> Ralph H. Lutts, "Chemical Fallout: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Radioactive Fallout, and the Environmental Movement," *Environmental Review: ER* 9, no. 3 (1985): 211, doi:10.2307/3984231.

Unlike Pandora's vibrant jungle, Arrakis harbors little plant life and less animal life in its desert wastelands. Giant sandworms, drivers of the desert ecosystem, rule the median latitudes of the wilderness. Paul Atreides, the protagonist, finds himself stranded here with his mother, Lady Jessica, after the vile Harkonnens and Padishah Emperor conspire against his father. He manages to survive, of course, and builds an alliance of native Fremen in order to take back his planet and avenge his father. The young Atreides' ability to inhabit the scene in which he finds himself without dominating it separates him from other ecological protagonists like Jake Sully from *Avatar*. However, like Sully, Paul exhibits aspects of the frontier myth and the White Savior Complex, but Paul's connection with the scene results in a different iteration of both myths.

In this chapter, I argue that Paul's status as a destined, genetic messiah puts many of his choices beyond his control. While Jake is a fairly unsuccessful environmental protagonist read through criteria derived from Burke's pentad, Paul's connections to the mythos of his environments result in a more balanced scene-agent ratio and therefore, a more successful environmental protagonist. Paul makes decisions based on the scene around him, rather than trying to influence the scene. This chapter will begin with a brief summary of the book and move to an examination of Paul as genetically destined within the apocalyptic tradition, frontier hero, and white savior. I conclude with an examination of the pentadic ratios throughout each of these myths and the implications those ratios have on Paul's success as an environmentally conscious protagonist.

*Genetic Destiny – It's Not My Fault!*

In *Dune*, the Arrakeen Fremen believe that Paul Atreides will fulfill an old prophecy to lead them to paradise.<sup>61</sup> He is Mahdi, or Lisan al-Gaib, the “Voice from the Outer World.” The Fremen believe that the Mahdi will help them to transform Arrakis into a green paradise, an idea that arrived several years before Paul’s presence on the planet. A former global ecologist, Pardot Kynes, discovered a way to reshape the desert planet by altering a few things here and there within the planetary ecosystem (a vast oversimplification, but sufficient for this analysis).<sup>62</sup> This dynamic scene needs more water to shift dramatically into paradise, but interestingly, “man is used as an ecological tool” to reshape the face of Arrakis through that water.<sup>63</sup> The Fremen connect Pardot’s promise of greenery to an old legend, planted by the same Bene Gesserit that created Paul, of paradise, and are a requisite part of Kynes’ new ecological formulae. This dynamism, and the Fremen’s ability to renovate the ecosystem as natives of that system, results in a more equitable scene-agent ratio between Arrakis and Paul.

Thus Paul arrives on Arrakis, already responsible for an entire planet’s transformation through his destined leadership of the Fremen, though he does not realize this immediately. He does, however, recognize his natural affinity for survival on the planet. In an early scene, his father clumsily suits himself in protective gear, requiring Pardot’s son, Liet Kynes, to adjust the suit extensively. Paul’s suit requires

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<sup>61</sup> Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: Ace, 1990): 47.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid: Appendix I.

<sup>63</sup> Donald Palumbo, “The Monomyth as Fractal Pattern in Frank Herbert’s *Dune* Novels,” *Science Fiction Studies* 25, no. 3 (1998): 433–58; John Ower, “Idea and Imagery in Herbert’s *Dune*,” *Extrapolation* 15, no. 2 (May 1, 1974): 136.

no corrections, and Liet's surprise at this is evident.<sup>64</sup> As a native, Kynes knows the legend – “He shall know your ways as though born to them” – and instantly realizes Paul is the al-Gaib.

Rhetorically, Paul's status as prophesied messiah means that, unlike Jake Sully, the scene creates that status; Jake chooses to dominate the natives and environment he finds himself in, but Paul is thrust into the role without choice. Paul possesses a supernatural ability to see the future after ingesting the all-important spice (frequently called “prescience” in the book), but this ability manifests itself without any influence or choice from Paul. He begins the book having prescient dreams.<sup>65</sup> We find out later that Paul is the end product of a massive, millennia-long breeding program by the Bene Gesserit sisterhood that attempted to produce something called the “Kwisatz-Haderach,” or “the one who can be many places at once.”<sup>66</sup> Essentially, this being will be able to see down both male and female lines of genetic memory through consumption of spice; the Bene Gesserit themselves can only see down the matrilineal line.

Therefore, Paul's supernatural abilities that make him the leader of the Fremen stem from genetics (fate, in other words), not Paul's choice. Burke describes “principles of selectivity” in the dramatistic pentad: “A given political situation may be said... to favor, or bring to the fore, certain kinds of agents.”<sup>67</sup> The Bene Gesserit, acting as an extension of *Dune*'s overall political scene, have called forth the need for

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<sup>64</sup> Herbert, *Dune*: 109-110.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid: 4, 24.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid: 12.

<sup>67</sup> Kenneth Burke and Joseph R. Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*, The Heritage of Sociology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989): 155.



Paul's existence; the scene here may be said to contain other agents and purposes, but they develop and inhabit Paul's specific scene. Recall Eywa's intervention in *Avatar*. In the entity's duty to preserve the balance, it seems likely the forest would have fought back with or without Jake's intervention – the scene did not require or call forth Jake. In *Dune*, however, the human race approaches stagnation and a lack of progress that the breeding program was designed to reverse.<sup>68</sup> Paul fulfills this need – an apocalyptic necessity, created by others.

Combining with Paul's created destiny as humanity's savior, the Bene Gesserit also seeded a prophecy that ensures his leadership of the native Fremen. Called the Missionaria Protectiva, the prophecy was intended to assist any Bene Gesserit agent that found herself on a hostile planet with no support.<sup>69</sup> Paul's mother, Lady Jessica, recognizes specific phrases planted centuries ago and manipulates the native Fremen in order to take advantage of the prophecy. All this occurs without Paul's knowledge, so we may say that the circumstances surrounding his mantle of the White Messiah are external to his own choices and motivations. Fate demands Paul accept the mantle, and thus creates a mythic tradition of "prophetic" around him that lends nuance to his motivations. Janice Hocker Rushing describes the quintessential frontier hero's attitude towards fate as "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."<sup>70</sup> It is important to understand that the White Savior myth is fundamentally

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<sup>68</sup> Herbert, *Dune*: 22.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid: 47, 54.

<sup>70</sup> Carpenter, "Revisiting Janice Rushing About 'The Western Myth' (More Important Now Than Ever Before).": 181.

racist; I argue here only that this myth was created around Paul and therefore lends nuance to his status as environmental protagonist.

### *The Desert Apocalypse*

When it comes to literary genre, *Dune* clearly falls into the swath of “epic science-fiction.” *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* uses Darko Suvin’s definition of the genre: “A literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.”<sup>71</sup> Paul’s genetic power leads to his estrangement, he clearly exhibits increased powers of cognition (as do the Mentats, Guild Navigators, and Bene Gesserits), and Arrakis, quite simply, was not Frank Herbert’s “empirical environment.” This genetic power in *Dune* possesses some similarities to prophetic, fantastical fate. Prophetic fate as an *overt* literary concept perhaps appears more frequently in the fantasy genre, but it has its place in science fiction: consider Anakin Skywalker’s status as “the Chosen One” in the somewhat regrettable *Star Wars* prequels, the destined search for “Earth” in *Battlestar Galactica*, and how Ender Wiggin finds himself treated by the high-ranking members of the International Fleet in Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game*. In *Dune*, Paul exists at the confluence of this prophecy and human’s need for him.

However, *Dune*’s rhetorical genre provides a more interesting lens of analysis. Stephen O’Leary, in his Burkean analysis of Christian eschatological rhetoric, argues that apocalyptic rhetoric “reflects the demands of its historical situation” and “creates

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<sup>71</sup> John Clute and Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, Reprint edition (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995): 311-314.

its own demands and expectations.”<sup>72</sup> The stagnation of the human race in *Dune* requires the demand for a savior, and Paul clearly fulfills the function of the Kwisatz Haderach myth. Paul’s relationship with the Fremen also reveals the presence of the apocalypse. Apocalypse in Greek means “unveiling” or “uncovering.” Again, the Bene Gesserit created Paul in order to “uncover” the place within their genetic memory they fear. The Fremen, too, look to Paul to uncover their future. John Gager, Princeton theologian, is quoted in Leary saying that myth “is the machine through which the believing community comes to experience the future as present.”<sup>73</sup> The Fremen believe that Paul’s fulfillment of their religious myth will bring about the future of Arrakis as a green, watery paradise.<sup>74</sup> The combination of these things means we can safely place *Dune* within the apocalyptic tradition, and Paul as the bringer of the apocalypse.

Along with his dramatistic pentad, Burke also developed the theory of “framing” aspects of the pentad as either comic or tragic. In the Burkean context, Paul exhibits aspects of both a tragic and comic hero, but ultimately falls more on the side of tragedy. The narrative of a tragic hero moves from happiness to misery, while the comic hero must move in the opposite direction. Furthermore, destiny plays a different role in both; the tragic hero does not control his own Fate, while the comic hero relates to destiny as Fortune.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> O’Leary, “A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric.”: 385.

<sup>73</sup> John Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall College Div, 1975): 55.

<sup>74</sup> Herbert, *Dune*: 137, 483.

<sup>75</sup> Stephen D. O’Leary, “A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 4 (November 1993): 392.

Overall, Paul's personal narrative moves downward throughout the novel. His father dies and House Atreides falls within the first half of the book. While he does find a brief respite in his Fremen lover, Chani, and in the leadership position he is thrust into, the novel ends with Paul reluctantly taking control of an Empire he never wanted in an attempt to subvert the Fremen Jihad and giving up public recognition of his true love, Chani, for a wife he does not desire, Irulan.<sup>76</sup> He also experiences a profound sense of loneliness once he understands he must lead the Fremen when once-proud warriors are reduced to "worshippers."<sup>77</sup> Compared to Jake's eagerness to take power, the reluctance Paul shows indicates that he feels fated to make that choice. He feels more of an obligation to the environment as scene, rather than a desire to control it for his own purposes.

Paul's status as "fulfilled prophecy," both genetic and religious, does indeed indicate a sense of destiny as Fate rather than Fortune. He recognizes this at several points throughout the book, but most notably after he and Jessica crash-land in the deep desert in an attempt to flee the Harkonnen massacre, and later after he imbibes the "Water of Life," a chemical used to induce prescience in Fremen Reverend Mothers.<sup>78</sup> He foresees the Fremen Jihad, sweeping across the known galaxy in his name in an effort to prevent racial stagnation, and eventually understands the jihad will happen with or without his intervention.<sup>79</sup> Strictly limited to the apocalyptic tradition, Paul exists as the charismatic authority, or prophet, of the apocalypse.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Herbert, *Dune*: 473-474.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid: 455.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid: 191-193, 431.

### *The Tragedy of the Frontier Prophet*

At the intersection of Paul's genetic destiny of the Fremen Messiah and the forthcoming apocalypse of jihad lies, once again, the frontier myth. At the core of the frontier is the conflict between savage and civilization, individual and community. The archetypal hero exists at the intersection between these, often emerging from the wilderness to fight for civilization, then retreating once more into individuality after reluctantly agreeing to fight for their selected civilization.<sup>81</sup> Paul, like Jake, fulfills these requirements. The narrative focuses on his journey as an individual, his "arrival to town" (Arrakis), his existence in the wilderness, reluctance to engage in the Fremen jihad, and temporary acceptance of the community to which he belongs (in the sequel *Dune Messiah* Paul deserts this community and returns to the wilderness). Along with being a tragic, apocalyptic, messianic hero, we can safely therefore say that Paul also fulfills the frontier hero archetype. Establishing Paul as a frontier hero affects how he relates to the environment as frontier-scene, and therefore, how we, the audience, read the scene-agent ratio and apply it to our own conceptions of environment-as-scene.

However, when these various myths combine, Paul emerges as something altogether different from Jake Sully. Though admittedly limited by the shorter medium of film, Cameron fails to provide Jake with much character development; essentially, the film and Jake's arc provide no surprises and little rhetorical

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid: 195-467.

<sup>80</sup> O'Leary, "A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric." 400.

<sup>81</sup> Ronald H. Carpenter, "Revisiting Janice Rushing About 'The Western Myth' (More Important Now Than Ever Before)," *Southern Communication Journal* 71, no. 2 (July 1, 2006): 181.

complexity. The end result of Paul's narrative, we expect; of course our hero must avenge his murdered father, regain the family honor, and overthrow the corrupt regime that allowed his father to fall in the first place, but the details of Paul's journey are less expected.

The complexity of Paul's scene lends endurance to *Dune* that continues to ensure its relevance. *Dune*'s complexity emerged from a formative time in American history. Carson's *Silent Spring* had brought the public's eye towards environmentalism. United States citizens needed a myth to follow the science, a reframing of an issue they did not yet fully understand. The concept of myth has been well studied across a variety of disciplines; Lincoln Geraghty briefly examined myth in *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, arguably the two most famous science fiction series of all time. He understands myth as a representation of national, political, and social agendas.<sup>82</sup> Richard Slotkin corroborates this in another form, saying that myth is the "primary language of historical memory: a body of stories that have... been used to summarize the course of our collective history."<sup>83</sup> Taken together, these two definitions combine to form one that holds myth as a way to examine a society's assumptions about the world; the frontier myth originally helped Americans understand their place in the rapidly opening West.<sup>84</sup> As I stated in the last chapter, Jake assumes a problematic function in the frontier myth – one of domination. Paul's existence at the confluence of multiple myths shifts his inhabiting of the frontier myth

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<sup>82</sup> Lincoln Geraghty, "Creating and Comparing Myth in Twentieth-Century Science Fiction: *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*," *Literature Film Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (July 2005): 192.

<sup>83</sup> Richard Slotkin, "Myth and the Production of History," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>84</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier In American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921).

to a less problematic iteration, particularly when it comes to the specific environmental reading. Once Paul seemingly recognizes his own place at this mythic nexus, he embraces his destiny and the environment he exists in, fully accepting the scene-agent ratio dealt him by the Bene Gesserit.

Frank Herbert utilizes the dynamism of the Arrakeen ecosystem to symbolize a similar movement of myth in Paul's character versus the Fremen. Arrakis is a desert wasteland, with little life other than the massive sandworms, which represent change as well. Consider their nickname of "Old Father Eternity," the physical manifestation of time – change.<sup>85</sup> Jake's journey and its details take no sharp turns along the way, an outsider who thinks he knows best. I argue that Paul, while *technically* an outsider, represents a different iteration of the frontier hero archetype because of the intersection of myth, specifically the interplay of apocalyptic rhetoric with the frontier thesis. While Paul himself is a tragic character, with a downward arc (particularly when *Dune Messiah* enters into consideration; Paul eventually is blinded and walks into the desert and exile), the overall narrative of the book is one of comedy, and so the reader experiences a kind of liminal space between the tragedy of Paul and comedy of the Fremen and understands the narrative as environmentally complex.<sup>86</sup> Comedy moves the narrative arc upward, towards a "happy ending," requiring the narrative to move towards a redemption through "recognition of fallibility."<sup>87</sup> The reader's experience is dynamic, rather than static, and Paul's downward arc showcases another aspect of the prominence of scene in *Dune's* scene-agent ratio.

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<sup>85</sup> Ower, "Idea and Imagery in Herbert's *Dune*." 132.

<sup>86</sup> Frank Herbert, *Dune Messiah* (New York: Ace, 1987).

<sup>87</sup> O'Leary, "A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric." 392.

The Fremen as a people inhabit Burke's comedic frame along with the scene of Arrakis; certainly, they are analogous to the Na'vi of *Avatar* in their relationship with the pentad. Like the book, their specific narrative moves upward, and they come to recognize their own fallibility – they must turn to outsiders in order to shift the planet's ecology towards a prosperous oasis. The book ends with the Fremen – under Paul's leadership – retaking their planet, and essentially the Imperium.<sup>88</sup> However, they still inhabit the apocalyptic tradition; they deal with prophecy, destiny (though theirs is Fortune, not Fate). They expose the vanity of the Harkonnen desire to control Arrakis by proving only the natives truly understand the planet; Duke Leto calls this “desert power.”<sup>89</sup> Importantly, the Fremen accept Paul and ascribe “charismatic authority” to Paul-as-prophet.<sup>90</sup> The scene, therefore, firmly grants Paul his authority, rather than Paul taking it, as Jake does. However, Paul-as-prophet also possesses a fundamental lack of choice, but able to see the future, he accepts the genetic destiny because he has no other choice.<sup>91</sup> The Fremen as personifications of scene exert as much influence over Paul as he does on them, leading to a more equitable balance of the scene-agent ratio. Paul's apocalyptic interactions with the Fremen reframe the frontier myth to a less problematic version, one where the traditionally “savage” people have a connection to their scene that is fully explored through the ecological dynamism and its power over the inhabiting agents, unlike the relatively static Pandora. The scene calls into being Paul, and the Fremen accept him and ascribe

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<sup>88</sup> Herbert, *Dune*: 479.

<sup>89</sup> O'Leary, “A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric”; Herbert, *Dune*.

<sup>90</sup> O'Leary, “A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric.” 401.

<sup>91</sup> Ower, “Idea and Imagery in Herbert's *Dune*.” 132.



charisma to him because of that “scenic destiny.” Paul-as-prophet falls apart without understanding the apocalyptic aspect of *Dune*, and therefore the reframed frontier myth cannot be properly understood. I argue that a successful frontier prophet receives direction from the scene, allowing it to speak for itself and following that voice. Note here Paul’s prophetic title – the Lisan al-Gaib, “the Voice.” It seems that Paul’s prophetic duty is to interpret the will of the frontier.

### *The Dynamic Frontier*

Arrakis, from an ecological perspective, shows incredible dynamism and ability to change for a desert planet. I have already shown how Herbert used this to compare the downward journey of Paul and the upward journey of the Fremen. In returning to Burke’s pentad, the changeability of Arrakis and its influence lends a freedom of scene that is absent from *Avatar*. Paul’s set and involuntary destiny contrasts the Fremen conception of freedom as the scene personified. Burke says:

The scene-agent ratio, if strictly observed here, would require that the “brutalizing” situation contained “brutalized” characters as its dialectical counterpart. And thereby, in his humanitarian zeal to save mankind, the novelist portrays characters which, in being as brutal as their scene, are not worth saving...this restricting of the scene call in turn for a corresponding restriction upon personality, or role.<sup>92</sup>

I argue that Herbert did the opposite and partially “freed” the scene by placing Paul at the confluence of Arrakis’ dynamism, the Fremen acceptance of the apocalyptic and Paul’s genetic destiny, and the reframed frontier myth. The rhetorical call for Paul’s

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<sup>92</sup> Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*: 152.

existence somewhat alleviates the white savior myth, and the frontier hero, while present, is less problematic than Jake's iteration.

The rhetorical constitution of Paul as a frontier prophet lends a divine aspect to his character. Burke writes, "From the godlike nature came a godlike act that acted upon God himself."<sup>93</sup> Nature, however, is God-like on Arrakis and in *Dune*, and the scene acts upon Paul as the scene's voice: the spice that sparks his prescience, the respect for the sandworms' power, and the predetermined genetic destiny he must inhabit to save humanity from stagnation. By freeing Arrakis rhetorically, Herbert allows the reader to rhetorically understand the frontier myth as something new and different, something called forth by the scene, something that allows its hero to be influenced by instead of influence.

In contrast, Pandora's static nature mirrors its hero's personality and rhetorical character. Jake's need to save the Na'vi at the end can be read as the scene not respecting itself. Indeed, Neytiri eventually tames the tiger-like creature that initially kills Jake at the beginning of the film, and a human eventually kills it. Recall that the scene-agent ratio in *Avatar* is dramatically skewed, and we only experience the scene's voice after Jake has called it into being with a prayer. Herbert here has created the opposite type of scene, with an agent that understands the power of the environment in which he exists. *Dune* never shows a sandworm dying or being permanently tamed, and Paul Muad'Dib understands why.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid: 156.

### *Conclusion: The Complexity of Myth*

Frank Herbert created an enduring saga in *Dune*, a complex and rich world with rich potential for academic criticism, both of the sci-fi genre and ecological fiction. Its historical placement near *Silent Spring* provided a kind of mythic release for the American public. While not perfect, Herbert's protagonist, Paul Atreides, is an improvement on other environmental protagonists, namely Jake Sully of *Avatar*. Paul leaves choice to the expressions of scene on Arrakis, the Fremen. His existence at the intersections of the frontier myth, apocalyptic traditions, and Burke's dramatistic pentad as an agent called into being by scene allow for a more successful environmental protagonist than Cameron's Sully. Furthermore, the presence of apocalyptic rhetoric in *Dune*, a forerunner of environmental fiction, has some application within scientific rhetoric today, as an apocalyptic theme often appears in conversations regarding climate change and species extinction.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to argue that Maud'Dib is an altogether *successful* environmental protagonist. The elements of the white savior complex run rampant throughout *Dune*, and unlike the frontier myth, which is frequently problematic but can exist in an otherwise "good" fashion, the white savior complex is difficult to read as anything other than racist. The formula, popularly interpreted as "white man enters into scene and saves 'savages' from exterior threat through intelligence or strength granted him seemingly by virtue of his whiteness," certainly exists within both *Avatar* and *Dune*, and in much of science fiction. Note the pervasive whiteness of other sci-fi and fantasy media: *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Firefly*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, *Hunger Games*, and *Harry Potter*. The frontier hero has traditionally been white, and

sometimes visually depicted as divine, much like Paul.<sup>94</sup> While Paul's iteration of the white savior myth is *less* problematic, once the myth appears, the piece of fiction in question automatically runs into significant rhetorical issues, particular in a Burkean concept. Native peoples, typically depicted as having some greater connection to their environment-as-scene, are often silenced within the white savior narrative, and therefore the narrative inherently dampens the scene's voice. When the white savior character is constructed for the audience, the audience has only two choices – consume or ignore the media. They often choose to consume it without a critical lens.

What if a shift in media gave the audience another choice, however? What if the character was fully realized by the audience, and not the creator? In video games, particularly role-playing games (RPG), often times, a developer will utilize a character creation screen in which the player chooses the race, gender, and appearance of their player-character. *Skyrim* utilizes this formula and thus provides the choice Paul lacks to the audience and consumer. The player's ability to inhabit the scene in *Skyrim* provides a unique opportunity for rhetorical study. Does the immersiveness of the game provide a different experience of Burke's pentad, and does it allow the player to experience the game's environment in a unique way? I argue in the next chapter that it does, and that video games may be a key factor in the future of environmental fiction.

In conclusion, *Dune* offers a more nuanced examination of scene-agent ratios than does *Avatar*. The presence of problematic cultural myths remains, and critics of fiction must keep in mind the presence of these myths in political discourse as well.

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<sup>94</sup> Michael Ray Fitzgerald, "The White Savior and His Junior Partner: The Lone Ranger and Tonto on Cold War Television (1949–1957)," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 79–108: 82.

Believing, for example, that the United States alone can solve global issues, like climate change, references the white savior narrative and cultural imperialism. Iterations of the frontier myth mystify the environment, and I argue that the environment as scene must become familiar to us in order to have any hope of changing our own scene-agent ratios. We must think of our environment as the Fremens see theirs: a terrifyingly powerful force existing in a delicate ecosystem, capable of sheltering us from the worst of storms even as it creates them – Old Father Eternity.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Skyrim* and Immersion into the Scene

Bethesda Softworks' *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* was a hotly anticipated video game title in 2011. The *Elder Scrolls* franchise, known for its role-playing elements and carefully designed game worlds, outdid itself with this single-player title. Winning a number of Game of the Year awards, the game received praise across the board. Popular gaming publication IGN gave the game a 9.6 out of 10 overall rating, matched by over 18,000 player reviews that gave the game an average of a 9/10 from Gamespot.<sup>95</sup> Clearly, the game resonated with players – many of the reviews (player and professional critics alike) focused on the extensive nature of the created world and free-flowing nature of play. Unlike many linear games, *Skyrim* as a role-playing game (RPG) allowed players to complete storylines, quests, exploration, and character progression (leveling up) at an individually determined pace. I could play the game in a completely different order than my older brother, and even successfully finish the same quests in a different fashion, based on personal choice and playstyle; my assassin, stealth-based character played fundamentally differently than his magic-centered play, while another friend preferred a “warrior” playstyle with large swords and shields. This difference in both the overall narrative difference and individual experience forms the basis of my analysis in this chapter. I will give a brief overview of *Skyrim*'s metanarrative, connect that narrative to the frontier myth, and describe

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<sup>95</sup> “The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Reviews - GameSpot,” accessed April 3, 2016, <http://www.gamespot.com/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/reviews/>.

By Charles Onyett, “The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Review,” *IGN*, accessed April 3, 2016, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2011/11/10/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim-review?page=1>.

the implications video game theory has on the game's rhetorical function. As in the previous chapters, Burke's dramatic pentad provides the basis for my theoretical arguments. Rhetorical scholarship has left video games fairly unexplored, and the unique relationship between player and digitally created world provides an interesting landscape for dramatistic analysis.

Furthermore, the Burkean pentad allows me to place the agent in a particular liminal space between player and player-character. This relationship makes the scene-agent ratio even more complex, especially when we consider the ability of the player to choose some aspects of the narrative, but not all, and therefore choose to embrace or reject problematic cultural myths, unlike film or literature. Video games, then, have exciting potential, both in rhetorical studies and environmental media; the construction of a video game that presents choices with significant environmental implications and forces the player to experience the consequences of those could conceivably revolutionize the genre.

*Welcome to the End of the World, This Time with Snow!*

In *Skyrim*, the player navigates the northernmost country of Tamriel, the continent on which previous *Elder Scrolls* games take place. A combination of snowy plains, boreal forest, and frigid mountains, the environment was a stunning accomplishment for video game design, and has held up well over the past five years. The online gaming library Steam reports that some forty thousand people still play it *concurrently*, an impressive achievement for a single player game.<sup>96</sup> *Skyrim's* narrative revolves around the player-character's status as "Dragonborn," a prophesied

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<sup>96</sup> "Steam Charts - Tracking What's Played," accessed April 3, 2016, <http://steamcharts.com/>.

individual that possesses a peculiar power to absorb the souls of defeated dragons. The dragons are under the command of Alduin, the firstborn dragon, who seeks to devour the souls of all mortals on Tamriel – a familiar apocalyptic narrative, involving prophecy and the potential for either comic or tragic resolution. Furthermore, the player must eventually choose sides in a brutal civil war in order to complete the game, helping either the Stormcloak rebellion or the Empire. Nords, the native humans of Skyrim, feel the Empire exists merely as a sycophant of the Thalmor, the elven ruling class. As the game begins, the Empire is transporting the player-character, along with several rebels, to their execution. Alduin attacks, allowing the player-character to escape and eventually find the Greybeards, who teach the player-character how to use the Dragonborn powers and explain the apocalyptic stakes the player-character faces. The player-character eventually travels to Sovngarde, the Nord’s afterlife, and defeats Alduin, subverting the apocalypse.<sup>97</sup> The particular scene experienced here heavily relies upon Norse myth, contributing to the aspects of apocalyptic rhetoric.<sup>98</sup> We begin to see the scene here as heavily reliant on myth and the digital creation of wilderness and exploration, similar to *Avatar*’s reliance on spiritualism to define the Na’vi.

As the game progresses, the player-character levels up their chosen skills through use and the assigning of “talent points,” which increase the effectiveness of a particular skill. A player can also engage in a number of side quest lines, or extended sequences of missions for factions that have no impact on the main quest line (other

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<sup>97</sup> Carver, *Skyrim*.

<sup>98</sup> Sun-ha Hong, “When Life Mattered The Politics of the Real in Video Games’ Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual,” *Games and Culture* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 35–56, doi:10.1177/1555412014557542: 43.



than powerful items that make the main quest easier to complete). However they choose to complete the game, players are required to explore and interact with the detailed environment. I have briefly explained the apocalyptic narrative above; here I will quickly bring up the frontier myth; for this chapter, it is merely the presence of the myth I want to touch on, rather than its implications for a character or narrative, as in the last two chapters. The player takes control of a character that has been ostracized from society initially, as a committer of an unknown crime, but is forced back into civilization by the pressing needs of an apocalypse. The apocalyptic narrative takes a more fundamental role here than in *Dune*; rather than a distant, genetic squandering of humanity's potential, in *Skyrim* the player faces a literal ending of the physical world, and so the frontier narrative takes a lesser role, depending on the player's choices throughout the main narrative. I will return to the player's ability to choose in the next section.

The player-character can choose great sacrifice, both as a literal commitment of time (the main quest-line alone of *Skyrim* can require as much as thirty hours of gameplay) and the potential killing of a mentor to secure the help of a group of dragon-killers.<sup>99</sup> The gamespace, too, exists as a frontier. *Skyrim* as a country is extremely wild and unsettled, with only five major cities and four minor ones in a massive area of gameplay. A player-character can walk for hours of real-time and not encounter anything larger than a few hovels clustered together. The map as the player-character begins is also unmarked, only being filled in as new locations are physically discovered. With the release of the second expansion, *Hearthfire*, the

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<sup>99</sup> Ronald H. Carpenter, "Revisiting Janice Rushing About 'The Western Myth' (More Important Now Than Ever Before)," *Southern Communication Journal* 71, no. 2 (July 1, 2006): 180.

rhetorical similarities to the frontier become even more pronounced. *Hearthfire* allows the player-character to buy a plot of previously unsettled land and build a house on it, along with a small farm. The player-character can even adopt a child to complete the “settling” of Skyrim’s frontier. Finally, as Hocker states, once the player-character has explored and “filled in” Skyrim’s map, the landscape becomes “confining and familiar.”<sup>100</sup> The potential presence of these two myths, as in *Dune* and *Avatar*, indicates their prevalence in Western media, and particularly science fiction and fantasy. I examine now the ability of the player to opt in or out of white savior narratives and the myth of the frontier hero.

### *Choosing Our Myth*

In *Skyrim*, the player can choose, firstly, their race, gender, and skin color. They can select a range of humans, humanoids (like elves or orcs), or two “beast races,” similar in appearance to anthropomorphized cats and lizards, respectively. The nature of this choice has the immediate potential to eliminate the white savior narrative. Each playable race receives certain benefits, like upgrades to skills or racially based powers. The selection process, unique to RPGs, has the potential to help solve the problem of ethnic representation in video games. Furthermore, players can enter into same-sex relationships with NPCs, and both hetero- and homosexual relationships confer the same in-game benefits – a player’s spouse can run a shop that brings in money for the player, and sleeping in the same bed as the spouse gives the

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<sup>100</sup> Janice Hocker Rushing, “Mythic Evolution of ‘The New Frontier’ in Mass Mediated Rhetoric,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3, no. 3 (September 1986): 265.

player a boost in player-character statistics.<sup>101</sup> These options contribute to player representation, and prevent the white savior narrative from becoming ubiquitous, but the frontier myth remains a problem.

One of the most important choices in *Skyrim* involves the resolution of the civil war overtaking the country. I earlier gave a brief overview of the situation surrounding the civil war; to briefly recap, the player can choose to fight for the Stormcloaks, natives to *Skyrim* (analogous to Vikings), or the Empire, supporters of a regime based outside the country and presumably controlled by yet *another* regime, the non-human, elf-dominated Thalmor. This particular sub-narrative bears uncomfortable similarities to the United States' pattern of imperialism from the nineteenth century onwards, with the United States playing the role of the Thalmor. However, in an odd shift, the Nords who feel oppressed by the Thalmor, due to the elimination of a foundational god in their pantheon, are primarily white. The player who chooses to help the Empire partakes in an imperialistic narrative, while the side of the Stormcloaks seems to fit within the savage/civilization conflict within the frontier thesis; the player chooses between the ability to self-determine and proxy governments.<sup>102</sup>

The frontier narrative, like the white savior narrative, can also be altered through the player's choices. The foundational narrative of the player-character (starting as a criminal, outcast from society) is reminiscent of the frontier hero's status as socially outcast, but the individualism espoused by the heroic myth can be

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<sup>101</sup> "How Diverse Are Video Gamers—And the Characters They Play?," *Nielsen*, March 24, 2015, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2015/how-diverse-are-video-gamers-and-the-characters-they-play.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Rushing, "The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth."

rejected. Throughout the game, players have the ability to join a variety of factions, choosing community over individuality without the prospect of “riding back out of town.” Ron Carpenter notes that erasure of this tension between individualism and community is typically cause for alarm within the frontier.<sup>103</sup> *Skyrim* rejects this proposition and situates the power of experiencing the scene fully within community, without requiring a subsequent (and violent) exit from the community. However, the player must choose to take this opportunity.

Allowing the player to choose in these particular instances (i.e., a more substantive choice than “go left or right in a fight”) temporarily shifts agent status entirely onto the player. More importantly, the player sees the results of their action, and the complex social and political exigencies brought about by the game; the Stormcloak leader is unabashedly racist, forcing non-humans to live outside of cities controlled by the Rebellion, but the Empire’s stranglehold on free speech and religious freedom runs counterintuitive to how most players (particularly in Western countries) would perceive politics and democracy. These attitudes, Burke says, are “a state of mind that may or may not lead to an act.”<sup>104</sup> Here I will alter that statement to read “a variety of attitudes may lead to one act or another, both of which, inevitably, have consequences.” In *Skyrim*, the choice is forced upon the player in order to complete the game, and while in “real life,” one may choose to act or not act, not acting in a direct sense is an act in and of itself, with particular motivations and attitudes warranting a lack of action. It is commonly said that not voting is as good as

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<sup>103</sup> Carpenter, “Revisiting Janice Rushing About ‘The Western Myth’ (More Important Now Than Ever Before).”: 180.

<sup>104</sup> Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*: 157.

a vote literally cast. Here we have a similar situation. In the context of environmentalism, *not* acting for the sake of the environment (a “business as usual” attitude) is, in fact, an act that can be examined in a Burkean sense. As one of the agents in *Skyrim*, a player acts within his or her nature, directing a player-character down one path or another.<sup>105</sup> This provides a dramatically different narrative experience than a movie or novel, and one that brings up interesting implications for environmental fiction and media in the future.

*Just How Matrix is the Matrix?*

The study of video games has generally concerned itself with the psychological and social implications of immersion into a fictional world and how players use their created characters online to interact with other players. I concern myself with only the first, as *Skyrim* has a limited online involvement with other players. However, it should be noted that the critical study of video games is in its nascent stages, and firm conclusions on many aspects of theory are still be debated, including the status of narrative in video games, players’ relationships to their player-characters, and embodiment within digital space and the implications; essentially, scholars from multiple fields are still not certain how video games operate on a number of analytical levels. This switch from well-studied media forms like film and literature results in a very new kind of rhetorical analysis. It also requires more nuanced conceptions of scene, agent, and how we, as both author and audience of the narrative, experience the pentad.

Since its inception, the video game industry has dedicated itself to forming increasingly complex methods of “embodying” the player within the fictional world

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid: 156.

created by the game. Game developers often explicitly attempt to create a sense of “real-enough,” allowing the player to become immersed in the game to whatever extent current technology allows. Sun-ha Hong here defines *real enough* as the ability “to play as if we [the players] believe this could have been real.”<sup>106</sup> How developers do this varies, but in *Skyrim*, the primary “hook” into immersion is the environment.

The pristine graphics, first-person view, chance for exploration, and the ability to create a detailed player-character allow a player to easily slip into the digitized snowy country. The human player must feel “embodied within that world” for immersion to be successful, usually feeling some manner of control of the player-character through competency with the game’s controls.<sup>107</sup> Hong argues that one specific way many games accomplish the “real enough” requirement is through the use of myth or ritual. Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) like *World of Warcraft* make use of literal calendars of in-game festivals to give players a “sense of time,” maintaining a “porous fidelity” between the “real enough” and the real.<sup>108</sup> Hong only considers in-game rituals and myths, but I argue that both can be accomplished through a specific rhetorical ritual; the player often achieves “competency” and therefore embodied immersion through a ritual of instruction, where the game teaches the player how to control and exist within the game space while maintaining a narrative. In *Skyrim*, a novice player learns the basic controls through following a non-player character (NPC) through the ruins of the first city

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<sup>106</sup> Hong, “When Life Mattered The Politics of the Real in Video Games’ Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual.”: 37.

<sup>107</sup> Robert Farrow and Ioanna Iacovides, “Gaming and the Limits of Digital Embodiment,” *Philosophy & Technology* 27, no. 2 (June 2014): 226.

<sup>108</sup> Hong, “When Life Mattered The Politics of the Real in Video Games’ Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual.”: 40, 39.

Alduin attacks. An experienced video game player expects this ritual of brief instruction through narration. For another example from a different genre, consider *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. The player learns game controls while immersed in a narrative of a new special operations team member being tested by the commanding officer.<sup>109</sup> Hong states that the player must be “prepared for initiation” into the game, with the game communicating “how it should be approached and what is possible in [the game] world.”<sup>110</sup> This expectation of ritualized and narrativized instruction changes the player’s relationship to that portion of the game’s rhetorical scene. We expect it, and so the relevant ratio changes from scene-agent to scene-act; the game requires the act. We, as the agents, cede a kind of agency to the scene, much like Paul in *Dune*. This exertion of scenic power also stands in stark contrast to Pandora, which instead cedes agency to Jake.

Other than competency and ritual, games, and *Skyrim* in particular, have one other aspect that contributes to “real enough.” Farrow and Iacovides believe that an important feature contributing to player immersion is some kind of “meaningful activity,” a concept first espoused by Merleau-Ponty and elaborated upon by the authors as choice leading to outcome that varies from player to player; i.e., unique, individual experience of the game based on personal choice.<sup>111</sup> This kind of choice, which I name here lusory choice after Bernard Suits’ witty treatise on game definition, is bounded by the porous fidelity that Hong describes. Suits describes a

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<sup>109</sup> Jason West, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007).

<sup>110</sup> Hong, “When Life Mattered The Politics of the Real in Video Games’ Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual.”: 43

<sup>111</sup> Farrow and Iacovides, “Gaming and the Limits of Digital Embodiment.”: 230.

“lusory attitude” when playing a game, or an attitude that all players must accept before playing; essentially, the players accept rules that restrict them to less-than-efficient means of completing an agreed upon goal.<sup>112</sup> Lusory choice, then, is a choice within a video game that affects the end goal – here, beating *Skyrim* – made within the bounds of these rules, and seeking both real-world and game space effects – the satisfaction of winning the game (real-world) and experiencing the narrative of the game in new and exciting ways. The game, contrary to the instructional ritual, has returned agency to the player in a fundamental way, particularly after a number of playthroughs, encouraging different choices by the player the more times it is played. This allows the player to experience different outcomes based on new choices. We, as players, again have agency to choose our own path.

Here, though, the presence of an immersive narrative, whatever the choices made along the way, is important; Farrow and Iacovides state, “worlds that are convincing are also worlds in which we have something at stake.”<sup>113</sup> In a nutshell, like any other narrative, the game has to make us *care*. Let me briefly return to *Call of Duty* as a personal example. I enjoy playing the game, and other titles in the series; the game mechanics are well crafted, the action feels smooth, but as a player I have zero stake in the game (one could argue that *Call of Duty* suffers from the genre of first person shooting, but I would direct that person to the *Halo* franchise and its extension into spinoff films and novels; the audience clearly possesses personal stake in the narrative of *Halo*). I did not create my player-character, I know nothing about

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<sup>112</sup> Bernard Suits and Thomas Hurka, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press, 2005): 54-55.

<sup>113</sup> Farrow and Iacovides, “Gaming and the Limits of Digital Embodiment.”: 231.



the background or personhood of my player-character, and I make no decisions regarding the fate of my character – no leveling up, no selection of skills or physical attributes, as in *Skyrim*. Games like *Call of Duty* possess no immersive narrative, evidenced by their lack of self-determination in the identity of the agent. This project has focused on the importance of the relationship between agent and scene. In *Halo*, the Master Chief is our effective protagonist. In *Skyrim*, and many other RPGs, the protagonist is me. I have greater control over the narrative of an open-ended RPG than over that of a book or film. To some extent, the line between author and audience is drastically blurred in this kind of video game.

*Me, Myself, and I... and Burke*

This notion of immersion of the player into the game as the player-character reveals an indistinct point on Burke's pentad that must be clarified in order to continue this project's examination of scene-agent ratios. Who is the agent: the player-character, or the player? A book or movie boasts relatively clear-cut agents, with clear motives, agencies, and purposes, but video games are less clear; does the player-character perform narrative actions, or is it the player's choice? In answering this question, another one arises – are video games narratives or not? Marie-Laurie Ryan argues that narrative is perfectly possible within games (though not all games; *Tetris*, for example, does not contain a narrative), and particularly easy to find the more the game "simulates" or immerses the player:

In the type of game that I call narrative, on the other hand, winning and losing are linked to the kinds of events that matter intrinsically to the experiencer, such as acquiring valuable objects, averting dangers, and

fulfilling missions, but the experiencer is the avatar and not the real -life persona of the player. In other words, players win or lose because avatars reach their concrete goal or fail to do so. It is precisely because all the unpleasant experiences that occur during games —killing, getting hurt, or dying —do not count in the real world that games are enjoyable.<sup>114</sup>

It can be argued that a human player *cannot beat Skyrim*. The main quest line can be beaten, but the game automatically generates new quests, and players have reported continuing to play the game long after the major quests have been completed.<sup>115</sup>

Furthermore, the knowledge that the player-character is the true “experiencer” of the events of the game means immersion goes only so far for the player; to some extent, they are always aware the game is make believe, and therefore similar to cinematic or literary narratives.<sup>116</sup> It therefore seems reasonable to then say that games possess extensive narrative features, though they are different (to some extent) from the narratives that other media utilize. The player simply possesses more choice over the direction and order of the narrative.

We have our narrative, but the question still stands – who is interacting with the scene as agent, player or player-character? I argue that the potential exists for both. Video games purposefully do not clearly delineate between player and player-character. Because of the control over the player-character, the player also has control

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<sup>114</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, NED - New edition, vol. 17 (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv622>: 189-190.

<sup>115</sup> Paul Tassi, “The Solitude of ‘Skyrim’ Remains The Remedy For An Overly-Connected Age,” *Forbes*, March 7, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2015/03/07/the-solitude-of-skyrim-remains-the-remedy-for-an-overly-connected-age/>.

<sup>116</sup> Ryan, *Avatars of Story*; Hong, “When Life Mattered The Politics of the Real in Video Games’ Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual.”: 40.

over the game's narrative. Burke states, "For there to be an *act*, there must be an *agent*."<sup>117</sup> If video games are narratives, with actions performed within them, then both the player-character and player possess some agent-like characteristics, and we can ascribe Burkean motives to both. In *Skyrim*, the player might wish to complete the main quest lines, or simply explore the diverse world created for them, and therefore acts accordingly. The player-character, however, wants to defeat Alduin as the prophesied savior of Tamriel, also acting accordingly. Remove the player, as is frequently done in online videos that allow a viewer to experience the game's story without actually *playing*, and what remains is a perfectly valid and often engaging narrative without the influence of the viewer. In video games, the Burkean agent exists in a space between player and player-character. Many of the dramatic ratios can be thought of in the same space; I have already touched on the agent/purpose ratio above, but an act/agency ratio or agent/agency ratio also function similarly. The player utilizes a gaming console and controller as a method of performing the narrative, and even within the game makes use of the player-character's powers or weapons at the same time the player-character does (Hong terms this "interface").<sup>118</sup>

However, there is one aspect of the pentad that remains the same, whether we consider the player or the player-character the agent. The scene is the game world, the snowy country of *Skyrim*. Narrative functions take place within the scene, as do all actions that affect the narrative, whether performed by the player or player-character. In the previous chapters, I examined Jake's relationship of domination with his scene

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<sup>117</sup> Kenneth Burke and Joseph R. Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*, The Heritage of Sociology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989): 135.

<sup>118</sup> Hong, "When Life Mattered The Politics of the Real in Video Games' Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual.": 40.

and Paul's relationship of mutual respect with the myths created around him by Arrakis. Here, I believe the salient point of analysis is the ability of the player to act as agent and affect the outcome of the narrative through the scene/agent relationship. I argued that Paul's status as white savior and frontier hero was less problematic than Jake's because of the rhetorical construction of scene around him – i.e., he had no choice because of the “apocalypse” of human genetic viability he was meant to prevent. *Skyrim* and many other next-generation video games (the *Mass Effect* trilogy, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, for example) require the player to make a narrative choice that affects the scene; both potential agents and their actions fall within the scene. Because of this, I argue the gamespace-scene of *Skyrim*, the digitally created world, acts as the “essential term” from which all other terms stem.<sup>119</sup>

This status as “essential term” affords an opportunity for environmental critiques. Such a focus on scene and the ability to choose to respectfully interact with that scene allows us to understand a fundamental fact about environmentalism: scene rules all. I do not suggest that we seek to skew the scene-agent ratio towards the scene, opposite Jake-Pandora in *Avatar*; merely that we understand as environmentalists and ecocritics the importance of scene in media and social discourse about our environment. Within the real world, our scene is what sustains us and what we seek to protect, and so in fiction, we must understand that environmental fiction relies, firstly, upon effective construction of scene, and secondly, an agent that acts with respectful motivations towards that scene. I contend that *Skyrim* easily

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<sup>119</sup> Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*: 145.

provides the first and allows players to opt into the second, which is yet another powerful argument for warranting that scene is our focus.

Returning to video games as immersive experiences, and keeping in mind the variability of agent in *Skyrim* and scene as our essential term, the ability of the player to choose parts of the narrative opens up a new kind of experience. Providing agency to the player forces them to choose to be environmentally minded or not by selecting participation in white savior narratives or frontier myths. These myths both make it difficult to develop an effective environmental narrative because of domination, as Jake proves in *Avatar* and to a lesser extent Paul in *Dune*.

#### *Conclusion: The Potential of Video Games for Environmental Storytellers*

The immersive nature of video games like *Skyrim* allow a player to inhabit the role of a “player-character,” forcing the human player to make particular choices that affect the scene created within the video game. I argue that through pentadic analysis, the interplay between agent (both player and player-character) and scene (the game space that allows the player to choose) provide environmental media as a whole with a new rhetorical space to examine. *Skyrim*, unlike *Avatar* and *Dune*, does not have overt environmental tones. However, the ability of the video game industry to create space for its players broadens the term “environmental media.” A central point of general environmentalism is the protection of wild spaces, and *Skyrim* has created a huge, digital wilderness that players experience first hand. The game requires players to rely on the environment to level up certain skills, and thus, in a roundabout way, teaches the fundamental precept that humans rely on the environment, no matter how far removed into urban jungles we may be.

With the ever-increasing popularity of video games, video game developers have the chance to influence players through games' immersive characteristics. Incorporating choice as *Skyrim* does, a more openly environmental game could have widespread effects on how players look at and treat the environment. I argue, essentially, that forcing a player to inhabit an environmental scene, as *Skyrim* does, can have lasting, real world affects on how they might treat a physical wild space. The educational power of certain video games has been well studied; the UK School Health and Education Unit published a study as early as 2002 examining the educational benefits of games on learning-impaired students.<sup>120</sup> Why, then, could developers not create a similar game for environmentalism? A game that so focuses on the glory of scene, so immerses the player and allows them to choose the fate of that scene, can only be good for the movement. More so that novels and films (though I do not mean to imply that one type of media type is better or worse than the other), video games provide an immersive experience where actions can be made to *matter* because they happen to *you*, the player.

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<sup>120</sup> Mark Griffiths, "The Educational Benefits of Videogames," *Education and Health* 20, no. 3 (2002): 47–51.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion: Ubiquity of Myth

*I was a warrior who dreamed he could bring peace. Sooner or later, though, you  
always wake up.*

- Jake Sully<sup>121</sup>

*And take the most special care that you locate Maud'Dib in his place: the planet  
Arrakis... Arrakis, the planet known as Dune, is forever his place.*

- Princess Irulan<sup>122</sup>

*What you learn here will last you a lifetime.*

- Savos Aren<sup>123</sup>

Here, at the close, I feel a strange urge to turn Burke's pentad upon myself. What was my purpose, my agency, my motive? At over sixty pages, I find myself asking, "Why should anyone else care?" I am under the impression that an Honor's thesis is intended to be a culmination of my undergraduate career, a massive reflection on my academic journey. Stories and narratives that run through them into other stories are important, and this project is a culmination of that conclusion, made at the end of a poorly written paper I penned freshman year. I hope this project contributes, in some small way, to the overall conversation about the importance of cultural narratives and how they function in environmental fictions, the genre's weaknesses in reliance on common myths, and the future of the genre.

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<sup>121</sup> Cameron, *Avatar*.

<sup>122</sup> Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: Ace, 1990): 3.

<sup>123</sup> Carver, *Skyrim*.

Utilizing the lens of the scene-agent ratio, I examined three environmental fictions from three different media, hoping to determine whether or not a pentadic analysis could function as a general benchmark in determining the success or failure of an environmental work. In *Avatar*, Jake Sully exhibits a pattern of rhetorical domination and silencing of the environment. Paul Atreides, in *Dune*, exists in a variation of the same myths Jake does, and is more “successful” in making an environmental argument, but still falls into the “White Savior” narrative and thus is fundamentally flawed as a protagonist. Finally, in *Skyrim*, I determined the status of “agent” can shift between the player and the player-character, and that the choices afforded by the game space (scene) reveal a new facet in rhetorical analyses, particularly dramatistic criticism, and puts the onus of “environmentalist” on the player’s choices. I chose to closely examine the protagonists of each story because it simplified the dramatistic analysis, and characters within media are often what we relate to; we feel the characters’ pain, understand their motivations, and do our best to emulate them. Young children do not pretend to be Krypton; they pretend to be its son. They love Superman.

The focus on protagonist, furthermore, led me to consider how they all interacted with their respective scenes. Environmentalism concerns itself with humanity’s interactions with this planet, our literal scene, and so in examining environmental media and their protagonists also required that I examine the scenes of each piece in order to have any applicability and connection to the environmental movement. As the project progressed, the scene-agent ratio revealed Burkean “representative anecdotes,” examined by Barry Brummett in 1984. Brummett applied



dramatistic analysis to the media (media as a news gathering and reporting service), but his identification of the same “Xeroxing” narratives in a variety of post-Cold War fictions provided an important tool for me at the end of this project as I examined which representative anecdotes I believed I had discovered.<sup>124</sup>

Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis provided a useful analytical tool for mythic analysis in each media. The Frontier Thesis appears frequently in American fiction and the cultural consciousness. Famously resituated to a political point in John F. Kennedy’s 1960 “New Frontier” speech, where he termed the frontier “not a set of promises. It is a set of challenges.”<sup>125</sup> The frontier myth is so pervasive in American discourse that we often completely overlook it; I myself did not intend to come across it when I selected the three stories. Efforts to overturn it are sometimes successful, but more often fail; the amount of scholarship on movies like *Django Unchained* speak to this difficulty. The myth is sunk deep into the American consciousness, and science fiction and fantasy works are no exception. Jake Sully in *Avatar* seems to wholeheartedly accept his place as a frontier hero, with the white savior narrative that goes along with it. His challenge in the film is “becoming native” and “saving the Pandoran forest,” but in doing so, he only ends up imposing his will upon it and silencing it, rather than allowing it to protect itself, as it eventually does.<sup>126</sup> Paul Atreides, our next protagonist, exists at a kind of “nexus” of the white savior myth, frontier hero status, and apocalyptic rhetoric, acting as a genetically

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<sup>124</sup> Barry Brummett, “Burke’s Representative Anecdote as a Method in Media Criticism,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1, no. 2 (June 1984): 161.

<sup>125</sup> “American Rhetoric: John F. Kennedy -- 1960 Democratic National Convention Address,” <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfk1960dnc.htm>.

<sup>126</sup> MANES, “NATURE AND SILENCE.”

destined prophet who has no real choice throughout the narrative. Stephen O’Leary’s analysis of apocalyptic rhetoric provided an extra aspect of my framework here. I felt it was important to place Paul into a “fated Messiah” role.<sup>127</sup> Paul’s choices in his narrative were more limited; it was not his fault the Atreides family went to Arrakis, he was forced into the Fremen culture, or that he had prescient abilities. He was essentially created by the apocalypse of human genetic stagnation and limited by the future. Unlike *Avatar*, where the scene would have survived quite ably without Jake’s meddling, *Dune* requires Paul’s existence to save humanity, calling him forth out of exigency.<sup>128</sup>

Finally, *Skyrim* placed us, the player, within the role of the Burkean agent, alternating with our player-character. The game, with a beautifully crafted scene, allowed us to explore the country while choosing our narrative pathway and which “myth” we wanted. A player’s choice in the first play-through, when the direction of the narrative is still unknown, can reveal much about the player’s own attitudes towards these pervasive myths and the complexities surrounding them. The rhetorical ability of video games to do this relies upon their immersive nature; Pint points out that the player-character allows a player to “experiment, try out alternatives, and reformulate the initial problem.”<sup>129</sup> I argue that this aspect of gaming could revolutionize the way we experience narratives and solve problems as a species.

Technology companies are in the process of developing virtual reality headsets that

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<sup>127</sup> Stephen D. O’Leary, “A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 4 (November 1993): 392.

<sup>128</sup> Kenneth Burke and Joseph R. Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society*, The Heritage of Sociology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989): 153, 155.

<sup>129</sup> Kris Pint, “The Avatar as a Methodological Tool for the Embodied Exploration of Virtual Environments,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14, no. 3 (September 2012): 5.

take immersion to a new level, and fiction is beginning to explore this as well; Ernest Cline's 2011 novel *Ready Player One* describes a virtual reality world where players can don "haptic suits" that allow them to feel even the smallest breeze or drop of water.<sup>130</sup> Imagine a game like *Skyrim* or *Mass Effect* where players can see the impact their choices have on the outcome of the game, and combine that with immersion into problems like climate change and other environmental disasters.

I note here some conceptions of rhetorical scene in modern environmental discourse. While the focus of this thesis was environmental fiction, the environment's politicization has resulted in two differing warrants regarding the environment that appeared in the works I critically analyzed: intrinsic versus instrumental value. Jake's conception of the scene is one of instrumental value; it exists to serve him in some fashion. Paul, at least, understands Arrakis as something more than its ability to produce the all-important spice; he, like Kynes, sees the green potential in Arrakis and strives to help the Fremen gain control over their physical land in order to bring about the environment's intrinsic value. Denizens of the Global North would do well, then, to imitate Paul Atreides' attitude towards his environment, so in some small way, *Dune* succeeds as a catalyst for changing its readers' attitudes towards their environments. *Skyrim* leaves the choice up to the player, and in a sense more realistically represents the average American's attitudes towards their environment.

Duke behavioral economist Dan Ariely sums up one of the issues the modern environmental movement has consistently run into, saying:

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<sup>130</sup> Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One: A Novel*, First Paperback Edition edition (New York: Broadway Books, 2012).

If you had to design a problem that people would not care about, it would be global warming. It's far away in the future, it could happen to other people, it starts not in North America, the real implications, and anything we do is a drop in the bucket... all of those are recipes for not caring.<sup>131</sup>

Video games, I argue, at least have the potential, when constructed properly, to show us the consequences of actions in a way fiction or movies cannot, because those characters are not *us*. There remains a fundamental disconnect between audience and rhetor, even when the rhetor is a character; we are always aware, in other words, of the arresting strangeness that Tolkien described. Christian ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda recently released a book in which describes the disconnect between the Global North and the Global South; it is difficult to understand the plight of those we unintentionally harm through our everyday environmental impact.<sup>132</sup> Could video games potentially bridge this gap? I do not mean to imply that video games are superior to literature or film in any way, merely that they can perform a particular function better than the other options, forcing people to immerse themselves in the consequences of their actions and choices. This would be invaluable for environmentalism.

Not only do video games seemingly have practical problem-solving applications, they also can provide an important step in the examination of cultural consciousness. Again, during this project I was surprised at both the ubiquity of

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<sup>131</sup> CorporateKnights, *Dan Ariely: The Polar Bear and the Prius*, accessed April 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFIXgSkvslI>; Dan Ariely, *The Upside of Irrationality: The Unexpected Benefits of Defying Logic*, Reprint edition (New York; Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2011).

<sup>132</sup> Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).

narratives like the Frontier Hero (and the White Savior narrative, which often goes hand in hand with the frontier) and the difficulty fictional works have in overcoming it. Even *Dune*, a complex work with a variety of other myths influencing the frontier hero, cannot eliminate it. Immersive experiences like video games have the potential to further subvert these cultural narratives by allowing players to “choose away” from them. Science fiction and fantasy deal with inherent “frontiers,” as in unexplored territory or the rhetorical strangeness of their content, but video games like *Skyrim* provide the ability to choose *away* from the problematic whiteness and maleness that has dominated the myth since its inception.

I firmly believe that video game studies opens up an important area for rhetoricians to study in the coming years. Questions raised by Pint, Hong, Farrow and Iacovides bear revisiting, particularly the concept of immersion when it comes to online interactions and interactions between the player and player-character. Famed rhetoricians, like Burke, have yet to be applied to game theory. Each rhetorician might ask questions like these: Charland: how do video games constitute their audiences of one and appeals to broader gaming audiences? Buber: what can video games teach us about human relationships and the way we communicate them? Aristotle: what *topoi* do video games utilize in their construction? Public memory, media vs. messages, rhetoric as immersive – the possibilities, to me, seem endless. Video games, in and of themselves, seem to be a kind of frontier; digital space and how we inhabit it continue to be an untapped scene.

In a larger sense, I was intrigued by a number of other questions that arose during this thesis and were not considered. An analysis comparing advocates of the

environmental movement with their opponents in the political realm would be able to draw upon my “protagonistic” framework. I originally became interested in the lack of effective communication between the scientific community and the general public, and so a critical look at the divide between the two groups may begin to resolve the rhetorical disconnect. Some have claimed that Burke was an early environmentalist, so a broader application of his criticism and analysis to ecocriticism and scientific communication may yield useful results as well.<sup>133</sup> An examination of other cultural narratives that make up our environmental media may contribute to the understanding of this rift as well. A more detailed speech analysis of Jake’s rallying speech before *Avatar*’s final battle could lend an important dimension to critical analyses of white savior rhetoric. Aspects of native cultures and ecojustice also arose, and rhetorical conceptions of what ecojustice means could identify important opportunities for societal change. Finally, a detailed study of gender interactions with the myths in *Avatar* and *Dune* I have identified may lead to a greater connection with movements like ecofeminism.

All of these analyses would, like this thesis, fall into ecocriticism. A 2015 Gallup poll revealed that 57% of Americans were sympathetic to or active participants in the environmental movement, and only 11% were unsympathetic.<sup>134</sup> Ecocriticism examines the stories we tell ourselves about the environment; I think that rhetorical ecocriticism specifically examines how we tell them and why we tell them in a particular fashion. Until now, I have attempted to avoid political statements

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<sup>133</sup> Marika A. Seigel, “‘One Little Fellow Named Ecology’: Ecological Rhetoric in Kenneth Burke’s ‘Attitudes toward History.’,” *Rhetoric Review* 23, no. 4 (October 2004): 388–404.

<sup>134</sup> Gallup Inc, “Environment,” *Gallup.com*, accessed April 11, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1615/Environment.aspx>.

about environmentalism's politics. Garrard, who defined ecocriticism for us in the introduction, also states that ecocritics "generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda."<sup>135</sup> In large part, the relationship of humans to their scene is the product of cultural narratives that have many causes; Lynn White famously argued Christianity was to blame, for example.<sup>136</sup> It would be difficult to pin down the actual cause, but that is not the point.

The point is to develop cultural narratives that will help solve White's "ecological crisis," both in the personal realm and political realm, as Garrard recommends. Clearly, the white savior narrative is unqualified for the job, but I believe the frontier thesis and its corresponding hero has potential. It would be presumptuous of me to claim the frontier myth as the new flagship of the environmental movement's fiction, but it cannot be discounted; the frontier thesis is embedded deep within our cultural consciousness, and utilizing a myth already within our culture, altering it to fit our needs, seems more efficient and practical than developing a completely new narrative. Paul and the Everyman "player" of *Skyrim* do, however, exhibit qualities of environmental action while existing within the frontier myth. Paul leads the Fremen on an epic quest to restore greenery to Arrakis, and the player in *Skyrim* explores and works with the environment in an effort to defeat Alduin.

In order to successfully utilize the frontier myth, it would require rhetorically resituating the frontier to a moral imperative of environmental action. Difficult, to be

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<sup>135</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, The New Critical Idiom (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004): 3.

<sup>136</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–7, doi:10.1126/science.155.3767.1203.

sure, especially with those strident voices denying the need for action, but a worthy goal. The frontier was the West for Turner, the world for Teddy Roosevelt, space for JFK and Jim Kirk; why, then, can we not formulate our own metaphorical frontier? Could we, as a culture, write a new narrative in which we made the healing of the earth our frontier, as we once demanded to settle the West? The narrative must be carefully formulated, ignoring those who continually ignore scientific evidence and helping us to recognize our own place in a global pentadic ratio as minor agents in a grand scene.

The recognition of our proper place within nature requires a sobering look at the cultural narratives that currently inform how we consider the environment; identification of those narratives is the job of the rhetorical ecocritic. Our species has ignored proper scene-agent and agent-act ratios, to use Burkean terms, and we are paying dearly for it. We will continue to do so if we cannot change our conceptions of scene and the myths that inform them. How we understand and talk about these problems will have an incredible effect upon our future, and determine if or (hopefully) when these problems are addressed and solved. Identifying outmoded scenes and myths makes room for development of new, ecologically informed stories, and this, too, is the ecocritic's solemn duty.



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