

Symantha Reagor
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Religious symbolism in HALO

In the book, *Halo and Philosophy*, various authors come together to explain how “the close relationship between games and religion is nothing new.” As game designer, Mark LeBlanc, points out, even in ancient Egypt, people who played the “game *Senet* believed that the game was a sort of divination oracle that foretold afterlife experiences (Cuddy p. 101).” Video games create a magic circle and invite players inside to experience the world through different eyes “just as spaces marked off for religious ritual experiences (Cuddy p. 101).” This paper focuses on one specific game, or rather one game franchise—Xbox’s *Halo*. “The *Halo* universe is a perfect example of a magic circle in its elaborate development of an otherworldly experience, drawing players into a visionary journey ... (Cuddy p. 101).” An analysis of the *Halo* game franchise reveals an expansive and evolving narrative that utilizes religious depth and mythic lore to not only create an immersive and symbolic world, but also elevate this game series to a higher standard of literature and art.

Movie critic, Roger Ebert, is famous in the video game industry for his statement that “Video Games can never be art.” No offense to Mr. Ebert, but similar statements were once made about the work of the now famous and well-respected painter, Vincent van Gogh. When ‘talkies’ emerged out of the silent film era, people doubted this new trend would last. Elvis Presley, The Beatles, and Madonna were pioneers in the music industry, but the older generations felt something akin to horror at these new styles of music, stating loudly and clearly that they would never consider this to be “real” music. New artistic styles are always doubted-- no matter the medium. So too is the legitimacy of video games as art and literature doubted. Thus it is the job of the people in the industry to constantly produce games that rise above the rest of their field. They must create games that challenge misconceptions put into

the public sphere by a vocal few who, more often than not, have never played a video game. In 2012, the Smithsonian made the controversial decision to include two games in its permanent collection. The first, *Flower*, is a musical masterpiece that features no text or dialog, and instead creates a compelling narrative by way of its visuals and soundtrack. The second game, *Halo 2600*, re-imagines the stunning visuals of the epic story of Xbox's *Halo* as a pixel-based side-scroller. The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Elizabeth Broun, "explained the decision...by saying 'the best video games are a great expression of art and culture.' The Smithsonian says it has an 'ongoing commitment to the study and preservation of video games as an artistic medium' (The Art of Video Games)." The Smithsonian sees, in a way that Ebert and much of the news media have yet to see, that video games *are* art. Just as there are good painting and paintings that lack skill, novels worthy of awards and novels that never see a second printing, so too there are video games that touch deeply on human emotions and video games that offer no narrative depth. By taking an active stance to archive and then display the masterpieces of this emerging artistic industry, the Smithsonian helps the public at large understand that "Video games use images, actions, and player participation to tell stories and engage their audiences. In the same way as film, animation, and performance, they can be considered a compelling and influential form of narrative art (The Art of Video Games)."

Diving into a specific analysis of the *Halo* games, right away it is clear "*Halo* borrowed some concepts from science-fiction literature [and mythology] to create their own universe. Then that universe was enhanced by other authors to give players more (Cuddy p. xvi)." The Spartan super-soldiers of the *Halo* franchise are directly inspired by the ancient Greek Spartans. They take on the suicide missions, knowing they might very well die. In *Halo Reach*, a six-member team of Spartans faces off against an overwhelming Covenant invasion, just as three-hundred ancient Greek Spartans held off the enemy at the Battle of

Thermopylae. One-by-one these Spartans die, the planet eventually falls, but not before the final Spartan achieves his goal of getting valuable data off the planet and giving the spaceship time to escape. This data soon turns the tide of the war, but these Spartans do not live to see it happen. Just like with the Ancient three-hundred Spartans, the *Halo* Spartans fight and die, not always to win and see another day, but to hold back the enemy just long enough so that the greater mission has a chance to succeed. They are often outnumbered, but still they do not turn and run. They are equipped with impressive armor that gives them an advantage over the regular UNSC soldier. A Spartan of *Halo* is not a Spartan without his MJOLNIR armored suit, named for the mythic hammer of the God Thor. Indeed, this Armor does seem to be imbued with a mystic or god-like quality, protecting its Spartan from enemy fire that would kill a lesser soldier. Spartans are faster and stronger than normal soldiers. They have been trained to be fearless and see their mission through to the end... no matter the cost. The UNSC reinforces the myth of the unbeatable Spartan by not allowing any Spartan to be listed as “killed in action.” They can only be listed as “wounded in action” or “missing in action,” because Spartans can never be allowed to die. In order to keep hope alive in the long years of hard battle against the Covenant, Humanity needs to believe in this myth of an invincible soldier.

The *Halo* developers waste no time in deepening the mythos of the game by making connections to literature, religion, and ancient myth. “In the first level of the first game of the series, *Halo: Combat Evolved*, you are introduced to one of the Halo structures from which the game gets its name... Such a ring-like formation was most famously fictionalized by Larry Niven in his Hugo-winning book *Ringworld*... (Cuddy p. xiv).” The philosopher, Luke Cuddy, points out in the introduction to the book, *Halo and Philosophy: Intellect Evolved*, that “While the *Halo* storyline is certainly not pilfered from *Ringworld*, there are borrowed elements like a lost ancient super-race who created the rings (The Forerunners) or a

religiously devout aliens (The Covenant) (Cuddy p. xv).” The name, *Halo*, is itself the first and most obvious religious or mythic reference. In Christian iconography, a halo is the divine ring that floats about the heads of angels and other divine beings (Saints and Christ--the savior himself--are often portrayed with a halo).

When *Halo: Combat Evolved* first introduces the Covenant, the player learns that the Covenant is comprised of several alien races that worship the ancient Forerunners as gods and “who together want to 'ignite' the 'Sacred Rings.' In so doing, they will follow the Forerunners (a race of beings who existed thousands of years before *Halo*) into divinity (Cuddy p. 105).” However, the prophets who lead the Covenant refuse to see the truth of Halo. They are not divine structures created to save, but rather they are weapons of unimaginable destruction. Once “ignited” the Halo emits a charge that signals the other Halos to also “ignite” and thus cleanse the galaxy of all sentient life. The Covenant prophets are false prophets. Not only do they misinterpret the legacy of the Forerunners, they willfully deny the actual destructive purpose of the Halo. They deem humanity inferior and sinful creatures, and launch a decades-long war to commit genocide against this newly (to the Covenant, at least) discovered species.

“The ‘covenant’ made is to ignite the rings (Halos) which the Covenant believes will set off a “Great Journey” to being divine. However, the rings were in fact created to annihilate life, a notion that the Covenant denies in the arrogant hopes for divinity. This kind of hubris obviously echoes the story of the Tower Babylon in Genesis, in which humans build a structure that they believe will enable them to reach the heavens and become god-like in so doing (Cuddy p. 107).”

As the game and franchise progresses, players learn the Halo is not a singular structure, but part of a larger Halo Array, built by the ancient Forerunners, a highly advanced alien civilization that died off long before the rise of humanity as we know it. “The

Forerunners' eons-old civilization was based on the idea of the "Mantle" alluding to biblical prophetic notions of the prophetic mantle which commits one to a life dedicated to the social justice in the name of God (Cuddy p. 105)." The "Mantle of Responsibility" was a Forerunner philosophy that stated the "guardianship for all living things lies with those whose evolution is most complete (Mantle)." Their mythology held that it was passed on to them from an even more ancient and advanced race known as the Precursors. However, the Forerunners held themselves in such high esteem that they believed they alone were advanced enough to carry the Mantle. As such, when another race evolved to the point that they might challenge Forerunners' supremacy, the Forerunners de-evolved the other race. They did this terrible thing all while saying they had to do it to protect the peace of the galaxy. It was this arrogance that left them alone in the fight against the parasitic Flood. With no allies to join the fight, and unable to find a way to combat this ever growing threat, the Halo Array was designed and fired. With all sentient life (the food source and host to the Flood) in the galaxy destroyed, the Flood was unable to spread, and soon died off.

In Halo 2, when the Master Chief and the Arbiter come face-to-tentacled-face with the Gravemind, this Sentient/colony-like Flood being declares, "I am the monument to all your sins (Bungie; *Halo 2*)." The Flood flourished in the ancient times due to humanity's unwillingness to join forces and share information about the Flood with the unknowing Forerunners. The Forerunners lashed out in response to the human attacks on Flood-infested Forerunner worlds, and punished the humans by de-evolving them from a space-faring race to rudimentary hunter-gatherers. Moreover, it is a direct result of the Covenant's actions that the Flood was released and once again threatens the galaxy.

Just like the flood of the Old Testament, the Flood in *Halo* swept through, destroying and killing all it touched. However, also like in the Bible, there was a plan to save life. The Forerunners created the Halo Array to be their sword, striking out against the Flood--but they

also created shields, or more precisely, shieldworlds, and the Lesser Ark and Greater Ark. It is in these places the Forerunners would store the seeds of life so that after the rings fired, life in the galaxy could be restarted. More than that, one Forerunner, called the Librarian, worked in secret to leave clues and instructions in the very DNA (or genesong) of humans. These instructions, or *geas*, would pass down in each generation of human. As humanity grew in intellect and advanced in technology, they unwittingly acted upon the ancient *geas*, leading them to technological breakthroughs such as the physical augmentation of the SPARTAN-II's. It was the Librarian's hope that humanity would one day "reclaim" the Mantle and assume guardianship of all life and succeed where the Forerunners failed.

In her paper, "*Does Cortana Dream of Electric Sheep,*" Monica Evens, Assistant Professor in computer game design at the University of Texas at Dallas states that "It is no accident that the Chief is woken from cryosleep to the sound of a hushed choir and the awe of the two technicians in attendance (Cuddy p. 41)." For if the Forerunners are false gods, or at least an analogy to Old Testament sinful humans, and the Covenant prophets are false prophets and the physical representations of sin and the devil's attempts to lure people into temptation, then the Master Chief stands in stark contrast as the true savior. He is Christ, Buddha, and King Arthur rolled into one heavily-armored being. The Master Chief, also known as John-117, is the savior of humanity in the *Halo* Franchise. Time and again he steps forward to draw humanity out of the shadows cast by the evils of the Covenant, and the Flood. In *Halo 4*, the first game in the new "Reclaimer Saga," it is the Chief who stands fast against humanity's new enemy, the Forerunner commander, the Didact. The Forerunner artificial intelligence known as 343 Guilty Spark, tells the Master Chief in *Halo 3* "You are the child of my makers. Inheritor of all they left behind. You are Forerunner." Guilty Spark's statement evokes biblical imagery of the first humans, made in God's image, and the inheritors of the Earth. Humans are the children of God in the Bible. In *Halo*, Humans are the

children of the Forerunners, and it is them, *not* the Covenant who are destined to take the place left empty by the Forerunners. They shall achieve this only by following the path the Master Chief walks.

In the essay “Apocalypse *Halo*” included in the book, *Halo and Philosophy*, the authors point out that the Master Chief is “a type of Davidic messiah...because he is the head of the Spartans, responsible for putting down the insurrections in the colonies and fighting against the Covenant. And like King David, he is responsible for uniting the colonies and maintaining order... Master Chief is the hoped-for deliverer of Humans (Cuddy p.110).” His name, John-117, is a clear reference to the bible, as John 1:17 reads “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).” “ This passage could be read as alluding to Master Chief as the bringer of “grace and truth” and the freer in the law of the “Covenant” (Cuddy p. 110).” John 1:1-7 of the bible reads “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him (John 1:7).” Indeed *Halo*’s ‘John’ does bear witness to the light. It is he who learns the truth about Halo’s “divine light” and in *Halo 4*, he alone survives the light of the Forerunner device, the Composer, which digitizes the mind—or soul— of all in its path, leaving nothing but ashes in its wake. When the Captain of the UNSC battlecruiser, *Infinity*, refuses to stay to fight the Didact. John-117 remains behind. It is his steadfast dedication to the protection of humanity that convinces others of the very real threat the Didact poses.

Comparisons between the Chief and a Bodhisattva can also be made. “In Buddhism, a Bodhisattva is characterized by his or her motivation to lead others to enlightenment. A Bodhisattva seeks the enlightenment of all sentient beings, but has postponed his or her own enlightenment in order to help others reach it (Cuddy p. 90).” The Master Chief constantly puts himself in danger, so that others may stay safe. He continues to search for the truth even

when ordered to stand down. He has postponed his own freedom from fighting so that others may know peace. Beyond the in-game lore, “Master Chief is a Bodhisattva in that he is that part of the player that the player wishes to become (Cuddy p. 92).” Chief does not get flustered by the countless enemy waves that attack him (though the player often might). He stays calm and sees the mission through to the very end. He does not complain when he is tasked with another dangerous mission that he must embark on with no other support than his artificial construct and ally, Cortana. Cuddy states in *Halo and Philosophy* that it is in this way, the Chief teaches the player sincerity, patience, and helps them to develop inner strength. The Chief does not stop his efforts to protect humanity—ever. After the end of the Human-Covenant War, “he returns to cryosleep in the floating remnants of the [UNSC battlecruiser] *Forward Unto Dawn* with Cortana watching over him, ready to wake him in humanity’s next hour of need-- a moment that seems more appropriate to Arthurian legend than science-fiction (Cuddy p. 45).” In *Halo 4*, the first game in the “Reclaimer Saga,” Cortana does call upon him once more. “Wake up Chief. I need you.” The words are simple and to the point, and like the myths of Arthur and Christ—two figures waiting to be summoned once again to save their people and lead them into a new age of glory—the Chief wakes to once more save humanity.

Arguably two key figures in the *Halo* franchise after the Master Chief are the artificial intelligence construct, Cortana, and her creator Dr. Catherine Halsey. In terms of mythology, Cortana is a representation of the Goddess archetype. “Mother, teacher, goddess, nurse, damsel, comedienne, alarm clock: Cortana has many roles, some of which she occupies simultaneously (Edge Staff).” She was created from the cloned brain cells of Dr. Halsey. It is all too easy to make a comparison to the Greek Goddess Athena, who sprang forth from the head of her Father, Zeus. Cortana is a symbol of Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, guiding John-117 on his missions, interceding when his knowledge is lacking, such as when 343

Guilty Spark nearly tricks him into igniting Halo. “She is there at the beginning, when Master Chief is awoken from his first cryonic sleep and the pair escape the burning spaceship *Pillar Of Autumn*. She is there at the end of Halo 4....The words she whispers into his ear during Halo 3 ring true: “I am your shield; I am your sword. I know you, your past, your future.” (Edge Staff).” However, she is also Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, reminding the Master Chief that he is more than just a soldier, he is also John, and she wants him to remember that he is more than just a Spartan— he is human. Near the end of *Halo 4*, Cortana saves John’s life by sacrificing her own. An article on the website Edge makes it clear:

“Master Chief, in the grip of honest grief, apologises[sic] to Cortana, revealing the truth that it was her that he wanted to save over the world: “It was my job to take care of you.” Cortana replies, in a hoarse whisper: “We were supposed to take care of each other. And we did.” In this moment it becomes clear that Halo is a love story without romance. Using the last of her strength, Cortana projects a hard light version of herself into the scene, allowing genuine contact with Master Chief for the first time in order to say goodbye. And so the thing finally becomes a person (Edge Staff).”

Put a different way, the Goddess descended into the mortal realm to connect one final time with her human love.

This paper only scratches the surface of the *Halo* universe. The depth of religious symbolism, the modern interpretations of ancient mythology, and the reinvention of literary tropes into this video game franchise cannot adequately be covered in a mere ten-page paper. Sadly, “There’s a sort of synthesis here between literature and videogames that is often overlooked, or simply not recognized... there are deeper science fiction concepts that underlie the game and the storyline” that most media outlets are only too happy to ignore in favor of another piece about the “dangers of video games” (Cuddy p. xv).

As any fan of the *Halo* franchise can attest, this game series has “*taken some of its best elements from award-winning science fiction; it’s created a storyline that raises questions about religious devotion, war, morality, and more; it’s a videogame which are, more and more, becoming staples of our society; and it engenders deeper questions that are explored by contemporary science fiction authors via Halo fiction (Cuddy p. xvii).*”

Within the sphere of literature, *Halo* rests firmly in the science-fiction genre, and maybe that is one reason critics are so quick to dismiss this game as qualifying as “art” or “literature.”

Yet, it is important for people to understand that “*As a genre, science-fiction is valuable for exploring the nature and purpose of humanity, especially as it is one of the few genres in which we can step outside of humanity and look back at ourselves from alien eyes... Science-fiction has never been about the future, but about the present: about us as we are now, contrasted with what we hope or fear to become (Cuddy p. 35).*”

Much of what has been said in this paper, especially the arguments for the acceptance of video games as art and literature, can be said about many games; this paper only offers a glimpse at the resounding depth of a single video game franchise--*Halo*. Perhaps in time, people will look with a critical eye and analyze other games and series such as *World of Warcraft*, *Guild Wars*, and *Assassin’s Creed*. Maybe then the argument will change from “do video games count as art and literature?” to “how can we improve the artistic qualities of video games?” or even “how can we ensure a better depth of narrative within video games?”

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