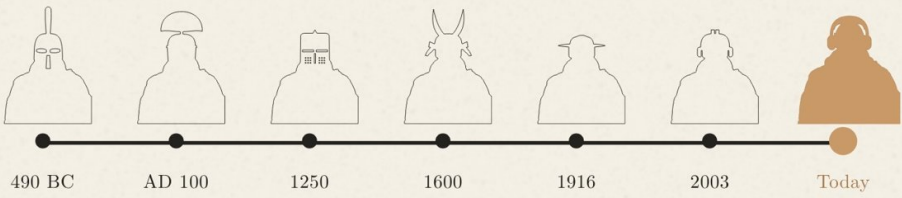
A Modern Hero[1]

Rethinking the Role of Heroism through Films and Video Games

JULIAN DELPHIKI



[1] From the Greek *hērōs*, 'warrior, demigod'. Here: a figure in need of rethinking, after twenty-five centuries of epics, war films and video games.

Thinking School

A MODERN HERO

ALSO BY JULIAN DELPHIKI

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Thinking School — books for readers who would rather understand than be told.

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INTRODUCTION

Setting the Base Camp

A MODERN HERO EXPLORES how heroism has been redefined in the 21st century, and how war and violence have shaped our perceptions of the modern hero. The changing role of the hero in movies and video games means that the modern hero is more complex and nuanced than in the past, and that this is reflected in the way war is portrayed in these media.

Exploring how films and video games have reimagined the concept of heroism, we can also see the impact of new technologies and the changes in the way we experience war and violence.

The book draws on the history of the film industry, citing examples as diverse as *The Lord of the Rings*, *1917*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Schindler's List*, *Platoon* or *Full Metal Jacket*, to name a few. The same deep dive goes into the video game industry exploring best-selling game series like *Metal Gear Solid*, *Call of Duty* and others.

In the following chapters, we will explore together the implications of being a hero in the post-modern world and how the narratives and pacing in movies and the game design in video games influence our sense of heroism; our definition of what it is to be a hero.

Along the way, we will take a long detour through Middle-earth, where J.R.R. Tolkien, a veteran of the Somme, imagined a war won by mercy rather than might; we will follow heroes into old age and departure; and we will ask what becomes of the hero's journey when everyone is told to live one. The book ends with a portrait of a quieter kind of hero—one who rarely appears in trailers, but whom most of us have met.

CHAPTER

1

Can We Be Heroes Again?

Is There Any Evil to Fight Against?

In the end, we have to stand up to evil. All of us have the potential to become heroes, to follow our conscience and stand against evil. At least, that is what many of our stories tell us, in particular those that feature characters with a strong sense of morality, characters who are principled, who are unwavering in their devotion to justice. When evil presents itself to them, they are pushed into a decisive moment. Do they falter, or do they stand? Either way, the choice is tangible and urgent. It often presents itself as a clear chance for these characters to define themselves as moral individuals, to show their belief in righteousness, to become a force for good, even if it comes at a personal price.

We walk away from these stories uplifted not only because in the case of true stories, we are grateful for those who sacrifice themselves for the betterment of others, but also because we are comforted by the belief that evil is something that we can overcome, that we can distance ourselves from. This is why we value heroes so much. They give us the assurance that if our own moral integrity is called upon, we now know how to act, how to do what is right. We get a moral compass with guidance for meaningful action from them. They remind us that we always have a choice, that we always carry within us the potential for good and inspire us to take on the responsibility to bring it about.

I love these kinds of stories. They are important to help shape us as moral individuals and progress our society for the better. But then there's also that other feeling. I'm sure you've experienced these moments where you look upon our modern world and the sheer absurdity of it just hits you like a hidden voice in the back of your conscience that flares up as Elliot's does in *Mr. Robot* in a fierce yet quickly fleeting outrage to tell you that all this talk about heroism and morality is nothing but a distraction. They fail to hide the dark reality underneath. Is it that we collectively thought Steve Jobs was a great man, even when we knew he made billions off the backs of children? Or maybe it is that it feels like all our heroes are counterfeit. The world itself is just one big hoax.

It is fair to assume that we all walk around in this fake world and our awareness of the evils that surround us and more specifically of the evils that we ourselves participate in or that we are in some way or another connected to: buying products, consuming media, enjoying events with much of it, especially nowadays seeming to be intrinsically linked to the exploitation of workers, mistreatment of animals, pollution of the environment, the creation of disproportionate waste, crimes against humanity and the general degradation of the moral fiber of our society and of ourselves. No one is innocent crime bloodshed everywhere. This is not meant as some grand revelation. We all know this. I am not saying anything new. In fact, you are probably tired of hearing it, tired of all the news reports, exposés and documentaries relentlessly torturing your conscience, tired of feeling like you can no longer do anything without committing some kind of moral transgression.

The film *Network* already observed this frustration decades ago and I can imagine the wariness must only have built over time. We know the air is unfit to breathe and our food is unfit to eat. We know things are bad, worse than bad. They are crazy.

And yet this to me only makes it more important to talk about, not just because it is always valid to ask what it means to be an ethical individual in the larger context of a society, but also because it feels like many of our stories seem to struggle with navigating morality in our modern world and are more likely to offer escapes

from the pressing issues of our time rather than insights and meaningful moral guidance.

We sit in the house and slowly, the world we are living in is getting smaller and always say is please at least leave us alone in our living room. We all know why we do this. Not because *Hunger Games* Books makes us happy, but because we want to be sedated because it is painful not to pretend because we are cowards. I find this reaction understandable, sympathetic. Even to some extent, it is natural to shield ourselves from the full moral weight of all of our daily choices and interactions that we do not want to spend all of our time-consuming stories that only remind us of all the evils that surround us, for how could we possibly function otherwise? Especially considering that many of these issues are too big, too widespread, and too complex for us to resolve on our own.

But this is also my great worry that the desensitization goes too far, that the walls go up too high. I dread to think about what has to happen for us to be truly outraged again. And I mean that not in the sense of a visceral yet ultimately ineffectual outpouring of frustration and cynicism and the empty displays of revolt that so often go with it, but in the sense of stories becoming true driving forces for action. Can we still imagine such ideals of heroism? For what would they even look like? How can we claim morality as individuals when evil is not some kind of external entity that we can fight off in grand heroic moments but is woven into the very fabric of our daily being? What if the world as a stage for heroism is, as Elliot put it earlier, a hoax? If our world is full of evil, what does it mean then to be good?

The concept of moral ambiguity and the notion that our actions have far-reaching ethical consequences that we cannot entirely separate ourselves from is obviously not an exclusively modern phenomenon. It has been a fundamental part of discussions of ethics throughout philosophical history. Still, I would argue that there are some specifically modern elements that have made it more complicated. We no longer live in a world of nations and ideologies. For starters, there is the development of globalization, the growing interconnectedness of the world which takes an abstract approach

to show how more aspects of our everyday consumption and being have been disconnected from their local roots, fragmented and re-contextualized into much larger processes. Another take is our progression from agricultural communities to a society that stretches over the entire globe. It shows how, thanks to advancements in energy, communication, and transportation, it has become easier than ever for people, products, and ideas to spread across the world. To give you some examples, we travel more often and further. We can connect with pretty much anyone over the Internet and whereas our diet used to comprise mostly local foods and was subservient to seasonal patterns, we are now eating products from all over the world that are supplied to us in a most steady and unchanging supply. A city of uniformly sized vegetables waits every day for the hundreds of trucks that will take them to the continent's supermarkets.

While there are certainly good things to say about this development and about how it has progressed our society in a lot of areas, it has also proven to be a complicating factor when it comes to our pursuit for morality.

On a more theoretical level, the foundations are supported by the work of Allan Schnaiberg, a sociologist who in 1980 presented his treadmill of production theory to address how global markets, especially since the last century, have been increasingly linked to a significant deterioration of the environment, social justice, and other ethical standards we generally value.

KEY CONCEPT

The Treadmill of Production

Modern economies reinvest their profits in ever more productive, capital- and energy-intensive technology. That technology demands more resources and produces more waste, and the economy needs constant growth just to keep employment steady. Like a treadmill, the system has to keep running faster simply to stay in place.

Allan Schnaiberg, *The Environment: From Surplus to Scarcity* (1980)

A country of farmers became a country of agricultural industrialists, machines replaced men. After the Second World War western economies became defined by what seems to be an insatiable quest for profit, and began to increasingly accumulate capital by carelessly extracting resources, dumping toxic waste back into the environment and either replacing workers with new technologies or moving production to places where labor forces were cheaper and less protected. The profits generated from all this were then used to create even more efficiency to progress as home frequently emphasizes faster and faster, thereby creating a vicious cycle. Continuously spinning, but not actually moving forward. In fact, it seems it is slowly taking us to the capitalist dystopias.

We see in so many stories today, dystopias that are defined by high technologies on the one hand, but also by ruined environments and the deterioration of human rights on the other. Normally, our governments should, to some extent protect us from this. They should function as safeguarding institutions that set norms and laws that we all have to abide by and they should interfere when those norms and laws are broken by corporations like we, for example, see in the movie *Quantum of Solace* in which 007 faces an enemy who is essentially just a capitalist.

Unfortunately, as Schnaiberg also observed, many governments facilitated or even actively promoted the treadmill of production because of the dominant neoliberal ideology in the latter half of the 20th century, which believed that economic growth was the best path for social progress and that any negative side effects will eventually be ironed out by more modernization.

Many stories tend to represent this passiveness of governments as them being actively corrupted and while this can certainly sometimes be the case, Schnaiberg presents a more nuanced picture in which, by the time the more serious concerns about the limits to growth came to light, the treadmill had already become so entrenched, so fast, and so widespread that it largely exceeded the power of any one government to do anything about it without risking either international conflicts or significant disruptions to their economy and society. The result of all this, as the German

sociologist Ulrich Beck articulated, is a state of organized irresponsibility: a state in which our system has become so large and complex that no one is willing or able to take responsibility for the evils it produces.

KEY CONCEPT

Organized Irresponsibility

In complex industrial societies, hazards are produced by so many actors, institutions and rules at once that no single one can be held to account. Everyone contributes; no one is responsible.

Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (1986) and *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1988)

As a line often attributed to Albert Einstein puts it: "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing."

From our perspective, as consumers and as individuals striving for morality what this left us is a much larger area in our lives within which our ethical beliefs could potentially be compromised as a direct or indirect result of our own actions. And perhaps more importantly, it resulted in an increasing lack of oversight into where and how our ethical beliefs are compromised, if they are at all.

You could say however, that this problem is to some extent mitigated by the dawn of the information age, and increased access to what goes on in the world and therefore our potential awareness about unethical practices that we disagree with and want to distance ourselves from. Many of the arguments for free markets and neoliberalism certainly seem to rely on this and posit that if, let us say we learn of a company doing something we deem unethical, we could just not buy their product and use our wallets to promote morality and bring about a better world. In fact, there is a growing movement that is built upon this idea that we can change things for the better by changing our individual lifestyles.

Beck observed this too, and referred to it as subpolitics: The increasing focus on one's personal lifestyle as a tool for political action, especially in recent years. Companies are playing into this by specifically branding their products as sustainable, fair trade, animal

friendly or some other label that suggests an ethical standard that serves to ease our conscience and perhaps even makes us feel more ethical by consuming these products. The reality of all this, however, is much more complicated. Not only because as we all know, an age of information is also very much one of misinformation, but also because it rests on certain assumptions that are easily overlooked. Assumptions about who is given the burden of morality and inversely about who is absolved from evil.

If God gives us free will, are we not responsible for what we do, and for what we fail to do? For a number of years I too felt strongly drawn to certain political action. I have been very conscious about my diet and I have been trying to cut down on needless consumption, airplane travel and wasteful output in an effort to better align my actions with my beliefs and to reclaim some sense of morality, to make a heroic stand.

As seen in so many stories, it is a kingdom of conscience or nothing. This makes perfect sense given that this is the foundation of many philosophies of personal ethics which are generally centered around our own actions, our own freedom to choose, our own capacity to distinguish between good and evil. As the prison chaplain says in A *Clockwork Orange*: "Goodness comes from within. Goodness is chosen. When a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man."

While this is true that we carry a responsibility as individuals to reflect on how we impact the world and should try to correct ourselves when we cause harm; I have also come to believe that this otherwise well-intended and valid aspiration towards goodness is in some sense corrupted. It is being abused not by ourselves but by the structures that have emerged around us. It is kind of strange how we have pretty much come to accept, albeit reluctantly, that large corporations and global markets act based on potential profit first, and moral considerations second. That governments no longer have the power or intention to safeguard many of the rights and values we hold dear and that it is up to us to correct both of them when things inevitably go wrong. For what is essentially suggested here is