Transcendence and Epiphany in *Passage:* A Religious Educational Analysis

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What is *Passage?*

Jason Rohrer's independently produced video game -- *Passage* (2007) -- vividly illustrates the potential of video games to mediate transcendence and epiphany through digital play.

Passage **immerses the player within a five-minute simulation of the life cycle --** a quest for intimacy, wealth, fame -- and meaning -- that finally ends in the player's death.

Currently, the New York City Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) curates this game along with 14 others. This public domain game may be downloaded online for free.
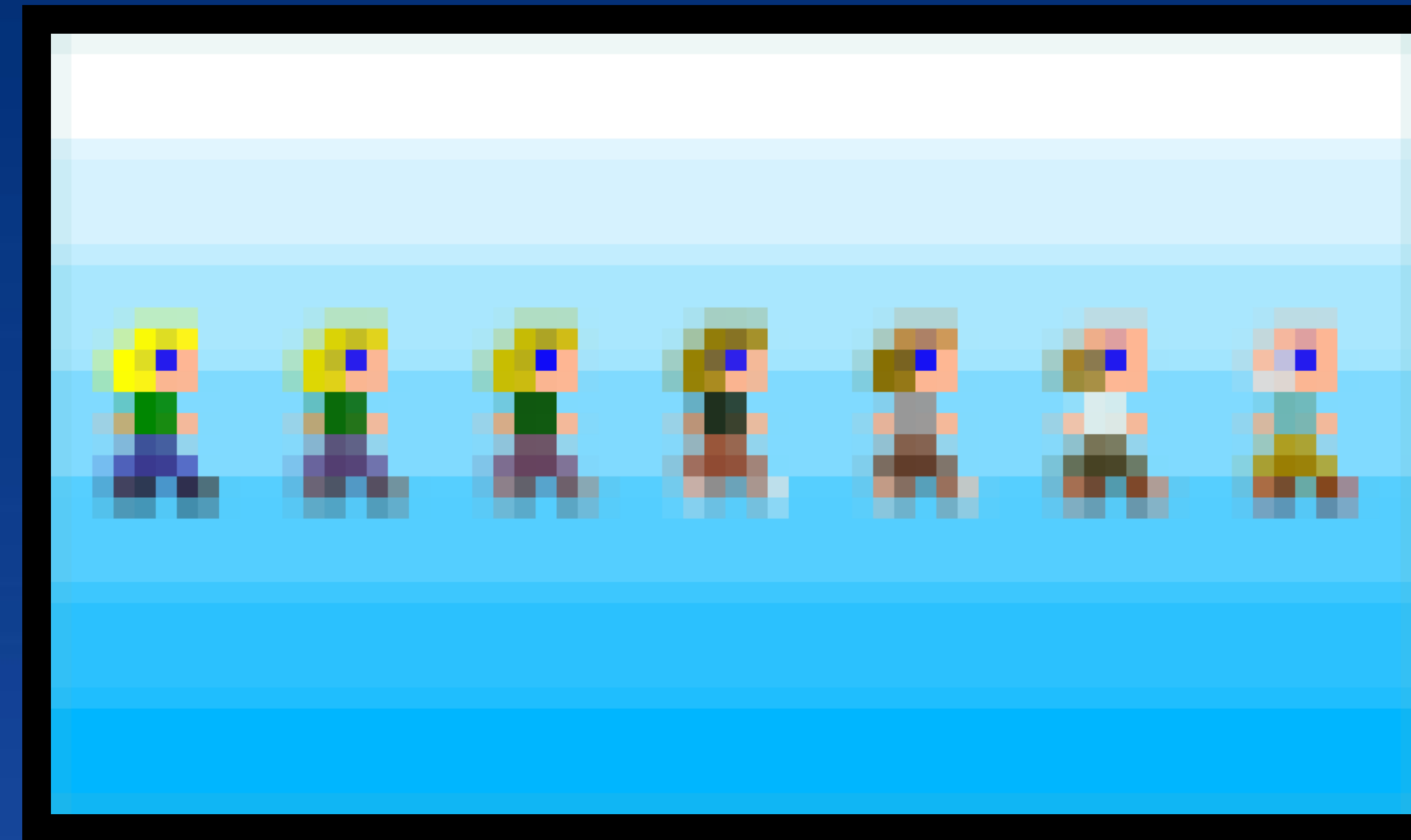
Transcendence / Epiphany

Transcendence literally means "to climb beyond" (Lt. *transcendere*). Religious educators associate transcendence with awe, reverence, imagination, ultimacy, possibility, meaning, and wonder (Whitehead [1929] 1967; Dewey [1932] 1972; Phenix [1971] 1975; Astley 1994; Huebner 1999; Purpel 1999). Simply put, **the quest for transcendence is a quest for something *more.***

Slattery suggests that **learners can experience transcendence through epiphany --** akin to "the moment in a short story or novel when the reader becomes fully cognizant of the past, present, and future events all in one instant" (2006, p. 84).

Playing *Passage*

1. The game begins with no instructions given. The play screen consists of 100 pixels by 12 pixels.

2. As game play begins in youth, the future horizon is blurred. As game play concludes in old age, the past becomes blurry instead.

3. As each five-minute game unfolds, the player searches a maze-like playing field for various rewards.

4. Points accrue with each step, doubling when with a life partner. However, the life partner prevents access to certain rewards.

5. Along the way, the player's on-screen character ages -- steadily, stubbornly, almost imperceptibly -- until death overtakes him.

Reviews of *Passage*

Passage received **widespread and critical attention** from diverse media outlets such as *Business Week*, *Esquire*, *Slate*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, and a host of blogs and gaming websites.

Fagone (2007) hailed Jason Rohrer as a "videogame programmer saving our 21st century souls."

Thompson (2008) praised *Passage* as a "fantastically expressive, artistic vehicle for exploring the human condition."

Montfort (2009) observed that the insights of *Passage* gradually dawn upon the player throughout gameplay, mediating a meditative experience upon the meaning of life.
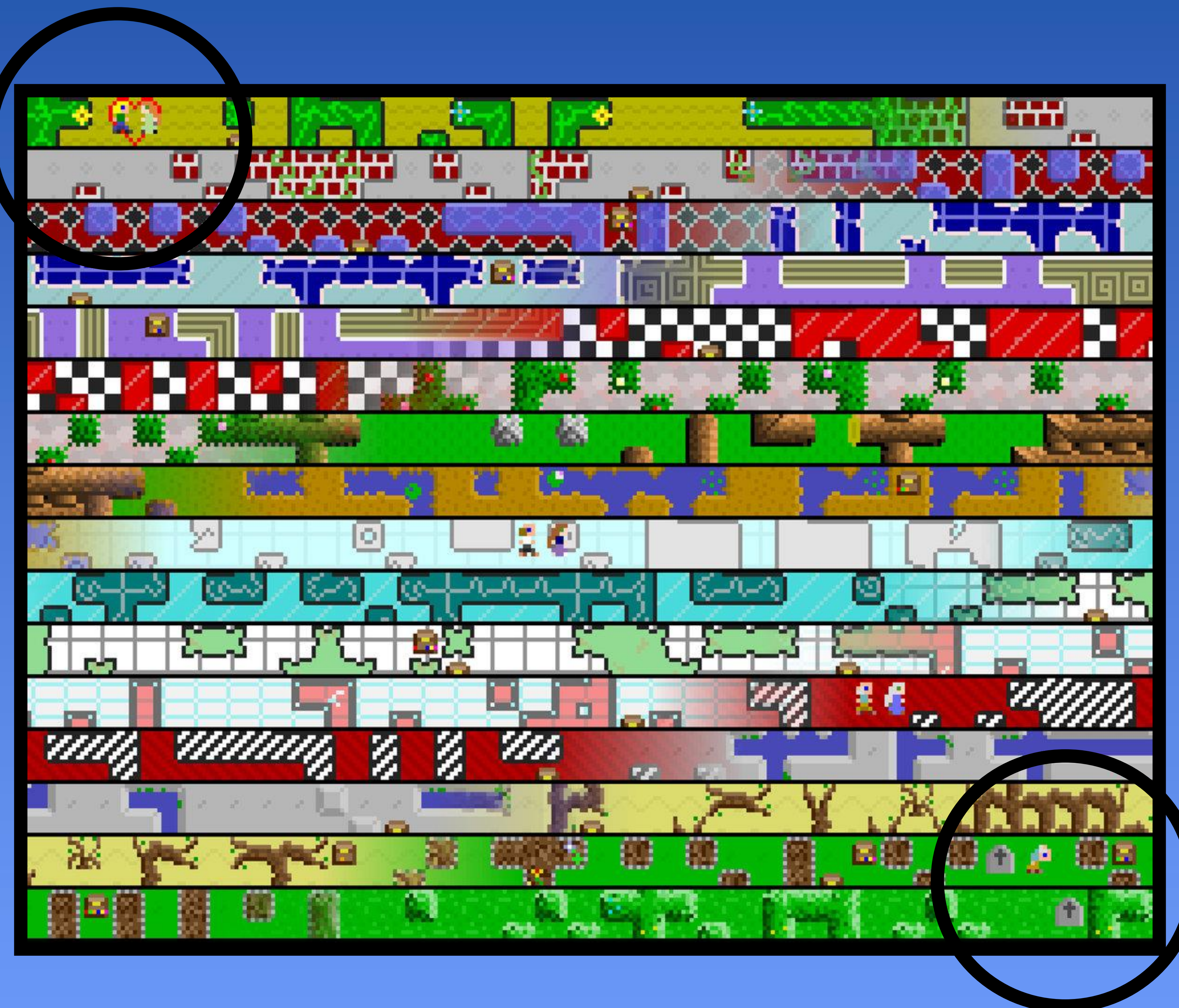
Transcendence and Epiphany in *Passage*

Video games like *Passage* mediate the experience of transcendence by creating moments of epiphany.

1. No instructions are given. The simplified game screen conveys a sense of symbolic abstraction. In these ways, *Passage* mediates a quest of wonder and imagination.

2. The future and past horizons are blurred throughout game play, conveying a sense of future mystery and past forgetfulness. In these ways, *Passage* mediates a quest of wonder and imagination.

3. The game calls for exploration according to a strict time limit. In this way, *Passage* mediates a quest of wonder and possibility.

4. Points accrue without explicit explanation. Thus, the player must discern the meaning/lessness of game actions and point accrual. In this way, *Passage* mediates a quest of wonder and meaning.

5. The on-screen character ages almost imperceptibly. At best, the player perceives this gradually -- too late to choose any other path. During the first playthrough, the player normally feels surprise, sadness, and stillness as death overtakes the on-screen character and his life partner. Normally, this sparks a moment of contemplation about life's brevity and life's choices in the player's real life -- the experience of many students in my January-term class, *Understanding Video Games*. In this way, *Passage* mediates a quest of wonder, meaning, awe, and reverence.

Further research into video games such as *Passage* might explore the religious dimensions of aesthetics, liminality, myth, neuroscience, symbol, or virtual reality.

Resource List: Astley, A. (1994). *The philosophy of Christian religious education*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press. -- Dewey, J. ([1934] 1972). *A common faith*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. -- Fagone, J (2008, November 20). The video-game programmer saving our 21st-century souls. *Esquire*. Retrieved from http://www.esquire.com/features/best-and-brightest-2008/future-of-video-game-design-1208-2. -- Huebner, D. (1999). *The lure of the transcendent: collected essays by Dwayne E. Huebner*, ed. Vicki Hillis. Collected and introduced by William F. Pinar. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. -- Montfort, N. (2009). Portal of ivory, Passage of horn. In *Well played 1.0: video games, value, and meaning*, ed. Drew Davidson, 221-234. ETC Press. -- Phenix, P. ([1971] 1975). Transcendence and the curriculum. In *Curriculum theorizing: the reconceptualists*, ed. William F. Pinar, 323-337. Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Corporation. -- Purpel, D. E. (1999). *Moral outrage in education*. New York, NY: Peter Lang. -- Slattery, P. (2006). *Curriculum development in the postmodern era* (2nd ed). New York, NY: Routledge. -- Thompson, C. (2008, April 21). Poetic Passage provoked heavy thoughts on life, death. *Wired*. Retrieved from http://www.wired.com/gaming/gamingreviews/commentary/games/2008/04/gamesfrontiers_421?currentPage=all. -- Whitehead, A. N. ([1929] 1967). *The aims of education and other essays*. New York, NY: The Free Press. -- *Passage* may be downloaded from http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage/. This URL also contains links to 69 critical reviews of *Passage*, as well as the designer's own reflections upon his game.