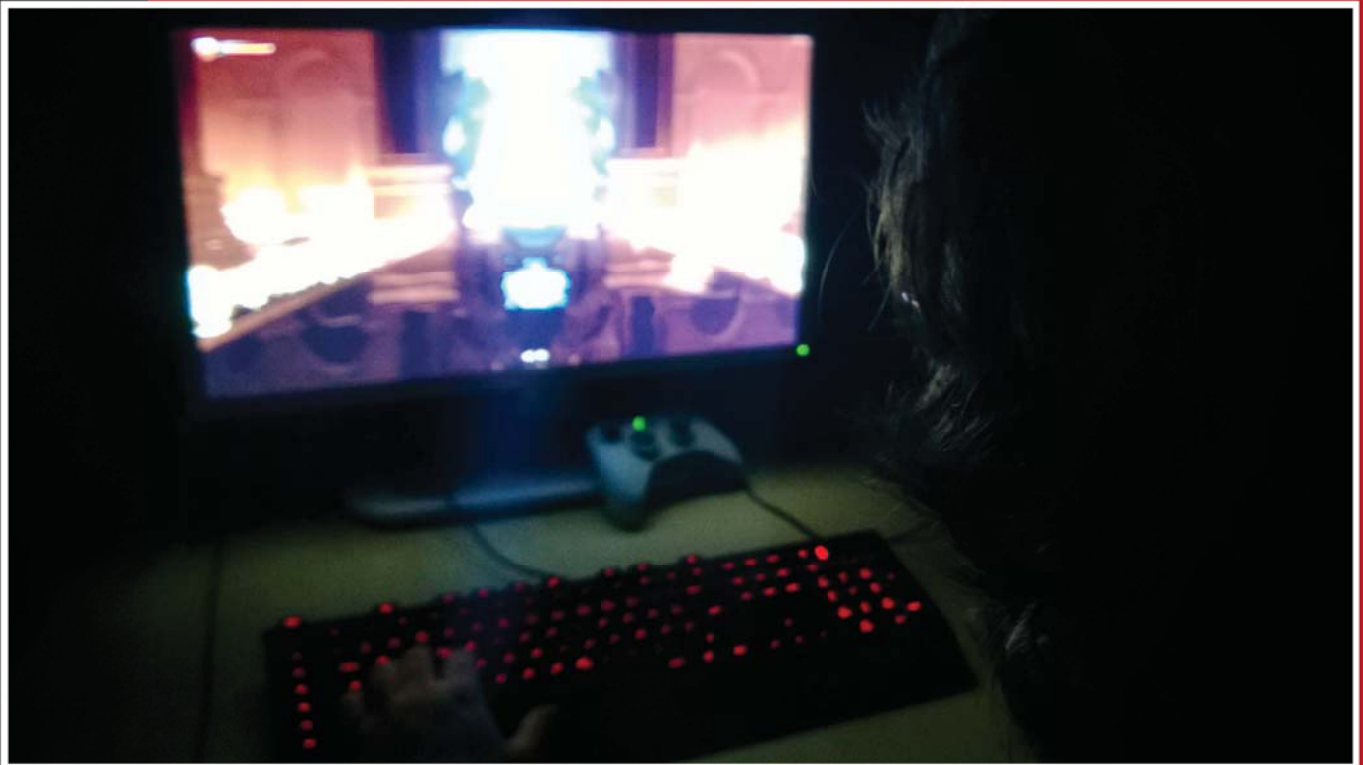




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Religion in Digital Games

Multiperspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches

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Table of Contents

- 01 **Let's Talk Games!** - Introduction to the Special Issue on Religion in Digital Games
Simone Heidbrink and Tobias Knoll
- 05 **Theorizing Religion in Digital Games** - Perspectives and Approaches
Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll and Jan Wysocki
- 51 **Studying Religion in Digital Gaming** - A Critical Review of an Emerging Field
Gregory Price Grieve and Heidi A. Campbell
- 68 **Developing a Framework for Understanding the Relationship Between Religion and Videogames**
Richard E. Ferdig
- 86 **Locating the Locus of Study on "Religion" in Video Games**
J.D.F. Tuckett and David G. Robertson
- 108 **Game Cultures as Sub-Creations** - Case Studies on Religion & Digital Plays
Elke Hemminger
- 134 **Maker's Breath** - Religion, Magic, and the 'godless' World of BioWare's *Dragon Age II* (2011)
Kristin M.S. Bezio
- 162 **'The Lamb of Comstock'** - Dystopia and Religion in Video Games
Frank G. Bosman
- 183 **Religion as Resource in Digital Games**
Ryan Clark Thames
- 197 **'When people pray, a god is born... This god is you!'** - An Introduction to Religion and God in Digital Games
Markus Wiemker and Jan Wysocki



- 224 **The Lord is My Shepard - Confronting Religion in the *Mass Effect* Trilogy**
Joshua A. Irizarry and Ita T. Irizarry
- 249 **Religion(s) in Videogames - Historical and Anthropological Observations**
Alessandro Testa
- 279 **Socialization of Teenagers Playing *The Sims* - The Paradoxical Use of Video Games to Re-enchant Life**
Pascaline Lorentz
- 301 **Fátima Postmortem**
Luis Lucas Pereira and Licinio Roque
- 317 **The Mythic Scope of *Journey* - A Comparative Assessment Concerning the Spirit at Play and Cybernetic Shamanism**
Robert William Guyker
- 352 **Review: eGods - Faith Versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming**
Moritz Maurer



Let's Talk Video Games!

Introduction to the Special Issue on Religion in Digital Games

Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll

When researching a rather new, unusual or controversial topic in nowadays academia it seems to be a new kind of “tradition” to apologize in great length for doing something the scholar thinks the readership thinks he is not supposed to study (or something equally confusing along those lines), based on the assumption that it is scientifically unworthy, insignificant or plain nonsense. That was our experience with the topic at hand, but we are not the only ones and we can prove it. “I do not wish to criticise those who would think that the study of video games in Religious Studies isn’t a credible activity. I understand their scepticism. We’re breaching new territory, charting a region on the social scientific map that we may very easily fall off,” as Jonathan Tuckett (whom you will re-encounter if you keep reading this issue) so aptly puts it, remembering a rather disenchanting encounter with some grey eminences of the conservative academia on the occasion of a conference.¹ In order to follow the apparently mandatory academic ritual of apologizing and legitimizing, we would herewith like to express our deepest regrets for publishing this special issue of *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* topics on “Religion and Digital Games. Multiperspective and Interdisciplinary Approaches”.

However, the reason we nonetheless think the subject is of great scientific relevancy is not only (if a little bit) because we, the publishers of this special issue, have a great affinity towards digital games and have always wanted to talk about it in academia², but mainly due to the fact that religion (in the broadest as well as the narrowest sense of the term)³ is to be found in computer games and thus at a matter of course constitutes research. Religion and religious elements make appearances in the storylines narratives, the aesthetics, the construction of gameworlds, gameplay mechanics and the players' receptions like in any other popular media. And in the same way as bestsellers, blockbuster movies, comics and TV series have already become subject to research in

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- 1 See: Tuckett (2013): „Here be Dragons. The Quest for Academic Credibility“. Available: <http://criticalreligion.org/2013/10/21/here-be-dragons-the-quest-for-academic-credibility/> (last access 13/02/2014).
 - 2 Some authors of this issue seemed to feel the same way. See the paper by Tucket & Robertson in this issue.
 - 3 In this context, we do not want to enter the discussion of defining a seemingly undefinable term. We would like to localize the term in a broad discursive and actor-centered field. See e.g. Bergunder 2011.

the field of Cultural Studies, so should games and the socio-cultural and religious discourses surrounding them!

Thus, in order to underline the importance of video games as new field of Religious Studies we have decided to dedicate the special issue of this journal to the different interdisciplinary approaches to this research area. In order to attempt a mapping of the new research field of religion and digital games, we have called for and received articles from a multitude of disciplines, ranging from theoretical works to rather normative considerations. Herewith we are pleased to present an indeed “multiperspective and interdisciplinary” issue, hopefully contributing to further research!

In the first part of the journal we have assembled articles on theory and / or method, beginning with our own contribution *„Theorizing Religion in Digital Games. Perspectives and Approaches”* by **Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll** and **Jan Wysocki**. The paper tries to give insight into different academic discourses and possible approaches focusing on the interdependencies of religion and video games, both from a game-immanent and actor-centered perspective. The article is the result of a university course taught in cooperation with our supervisor Prof. Gregor Ahn. Indeed it was this course and the cooperation with Gregor Ahn which initially gave the impulse for a further opening up of the field by compiling this issue. The next article *„Studying Religion in Digital Gaming: A Critical Reflexion of an Emerging Field”* by **Gregory Price Grieve** and **Heidi A. Campbell** also gives a summarizing view on the field drawing on the forthcoming volume *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Campbell & Grieve 2014). The authors highlight dominant subjects and methodological approaches in the area of religion and digital games including games with direct and indirect references to religious contents and discuss how gaming can be seen as a form of “implicit religion”. Implicit and explicit factors of religion or religious aspects also play a role in **Richard E Ferdig's** paper *“Developing a Framework for Understanding the Relationship between Religion and Videogames”*. Presenting a framework of the four key areas “game-content”, “game-context”, “game-challenge” and “player capital” where religious topics occur, the author discusses what people learn about religion while playing and how religion can change gameplay. In the article *“Locating the Locus of Study on Religion in Videogames”* **J.D.F. Tuckett** and **David G. Robertson** identify in a mainly phenomenological approach three related areas of analysis, namely the “religious” response gamers have towards their games, how religions are referred to in computer games and fictional religions in game worlds. By transferring Tolkien's literary concept of “sub-creations” to the field of new media studies and computer games, **Elke Hemminger** in her paper *“Game Cultures as Sub-Creations: Case Studies on Religion and Digital Play”* states, that game cultures mirror cultural practice in general and thus essentially contribute to the social construction of reality.

The second part of this special issue assembles case studies mainly focusing on the analysis of religion in game narratives. In her paper *“Maker & Reath: Religion, Magic, and the 'Godless'”*

6 orl of Bio6 are's ˆ ragon #ge II 789: : ;\$, **Kristin M.S. Bezio** traces the game's storyline of religious conflict and identifies an inherent ethics consisting of the value of interpersonal relationship rather than religious morals. **Frank G Bosman** focuses on the dystopian settings of four different commercially successful video games. In his article *ˆ 2The La, b of Co, sto!-2(ˆ 'sto ia and Reli ion in Vi eo Ga, es* the author argues in favor of the important but often implicit role of religion in game narratives, sometimes supporting the dystopian setting of the game, sometimes opposing it. **Ryan Clark Thames** identifies *“Religion as Resource in ˆ igital Games”* by exploring the role of religious storylines and gameplay in different video games in relation to the player character whereas **Markus Wiemker** and **Jan Wysocki** in their article *ˆ ˆ hen peo le pra' 5 a god is born < ˆ his god is you! #n introduction to Religion and " od in ˆ igital Games”* take a closer look at so-called “God Games”, regarding the specifics of the “genre” as well as the “game-text” together with its production contexts and acquisition processes.

The following articles combine a material-immanent approach of the game contents with an actor-centered analysis of discourses in the context of the games. In their article *“The Ior is 4' Shepar °) onfronting Religion in the Mass Effect ˆ rilogy”*, **Joshua A. Irizarry** and **Ita T. Irizarry** are analysing the series' overarching narrative as well as players' reactions towards the controversial ending. They argue that in the *Mass Effect* universe religion is shown to be culturally and politically disruptive and players were irritated by the final “confrontation” requiring them to make an overtly religious choice. In **Alessandro Testa's** study on *“Religion(s; in Oi eogames: Historical and Anthropological Observations”*, the issue of religious representations, its usage and reproduction in fantasy and historical videogames is addressed. The focus of the study lies on the social relevance of “gaming” and its impact on the shaping of popular and global imaginaries, especially for young generations.

A strictly actor-centered approach is represented by **Pascaline Lorentz'** paper on *“Socialization of ˆ eenagers Playing The Sims. ˆ he ˆ aradoxical . se of 0ideo " ames to Re-+nchant Life”*. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the author claims that, in accordance with Max Weber's philosophy, digital games can serve as means for the “re-enchantment of the world”.

Aside from articles from the field of Cultural Studies, we were able to include two articles from different scientific perspectives on the subject. One example for a designer's perspective on religion in digital games is represented by the article on the game design and evaluation process of the religious themed video game *“Fatima ˆ ostmortem”* by **Luís Lucas Pereira** and **Licínio Roque**, picking up the sightings of the Catholic saint Mary by a young shepherd in 1917 and reprocessing them in a computer game. With *“The Mythic & cope of Journey° #) omparative Assessment) oncerning the & irit at Play and) ybernetic Shamanis, \$*, **Robert William Guyker** presents a normative approach from the field of “Mythological Studies”, tracing back motifs from

the game *Journey* to the works of 20th century “mythologist” Joseph Campbell. Guyker interprets the storyline as “mythic text”, assembled from a multitude of cultures and traditions and argues in favor of the computer game as means of mythological engagement.

Finally, the issue includes a critical review of William Bainbridge's book “*eGods. , aith Oersus Fantasy in Computer Gaming*” (Bainbridge 2013), written by **Moritz Maurer**.

The editors of this special issue hope the articles assembled here will contribute to encouraging further academic debate on the topic of religion in digital games and help opening up the field for even more motivated and enthusiastic scholars and research projects. Perhaps some day it might even be possible to write about religion and video games without at first feeling the need to apologize for it? Until then, we hope you enjoy the issue and are – again – very very sorry!

If you would like to submit a paper for a future issue of *Online 3 Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, feel free to send an abstract or full article to online.religion@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de. We will gladly consider the publication of further articles related to religion and video games as well as any other topic fitting the scope of the journal. (For further information please see <http://online.uni-hd.de>.)

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Theorizing Religion in Digital Games

Perspectives and Approaches

Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, Jan Wysocki

Abstract

The article makes a case for Cultural and Religious Studies to expand the focus of research on digital games which so far have been a mostly neglected field of study. By means of discussing theoretical, methodical and practical approaches by various scholars from different academic disciplines the authors show how religion in games can be analysed, contextualized and interpreted. From a Cultural Studies perspective, they describe the genesis of religious discourses in context of digital games (re)trace the lines of their construction, reception and (re)contextualization as well as the role of the actors within these frameworks. Following a short overview on the history of (computer) game research, practical perspectives and approaches to computer games analysis are taken into focus. The authors refer to the “text” (in the broadest meaning) of the medium, but also include terms like “aesthetic”, “gameplay”, “gameworlds” and “gaming culture” into their considerations. Furthermore the characteristics and interconnections of a game-immanent as well as an actor-centered approach are being highlighted. The discussion on theories is exemplified by many case studies. Digital games as artifacts of contemporary popular culture are as a matter of fact subject to religious discourses on many different levels and by a multitude of (human) actors. They reside and influence the social realities of people who play. Religion is an important factor in this context and so are digital games. To understand the relation between both is the task of this paper.

Keywords

digital games, theory, methods, Cultural Studies, Religious Studies, material-immanent, actor-centered, discourse analysis, media analysis, history of reception, construction processes

1 Introduction

“And every year on this day of days, we recommit ourselves to our city and to our prophet. Father Comstock. We recommit through sacrifice and the giving of thanks and by submerging in the sweet waters of baptism.” (Preacher Witting, *Bioshock Infinite*)

With a loud clatter, the door of the rocket-capsule slides open and the handcuffs which held me in place during my voyage, are released. I get up and cautiously leave my temporary prison to step into an underground cavern. I enter a vast space only illuminated by a multitude of candles, swimming in the water which covers most of the floors. Directly in front of me I see a stained-glass window depicting a white-bearded man in blue garb pointing his finger towards an obscure object in the sky. It is a city in the clouds or so it seems. At his feet, a flock of people is assembled, watching him in plain admiration. “And the prophet shall lead the people to a new world”, it says above the scenery. I hear the hollow sound of many voices chanting gospel-like hymns, echoing off the marble-like walls. After a while I realize that it is a slow version of ‘Will the circle be unbroken’ – in fact a popular evangelical devotional song.¹ All around me are alcoves adorned with statues labeled by cryptic, religious-sounding aphorisms. Where am I? What am I supposed to do here? At the other end of the room I spot a man, all dressed in white. I call out to him, asking him where I am. “Heaven,” he answers, “or as close as we’ll see till Judgment Day”. What does that mean? Have I fallen into the hands of an obscure religious sect? Lacking an alternative I wander on through the shallow waters.

Soon I realize the sheer size of this labyrinth of caverns, one merging into the next. The place is not of a natural origin however but clearly man-made with its cathedral-like structures of high columns, pointed arches, rows and rows of pews, tapestries and stained-glass windows with “pious” motives mostly featuring the already mentioned white-bearded man. Many statues are provided with “sacrificial” offerings like money or flowers, but also toys and other plunder. No daylight is reaching this place and candles are the only source of light. As I proceed, the echo of the singing is becoming louder. I approach a staircase leading me further downstairs. At the foot of the stairs another white-clad figure awaits me but does not deny me entry. As I reach the floor below, I find myself in a narrow entryway, arched by two angel-like figures. On the left and right I can see even more people in white dresses standing motionless in the knee-deep water, seemingly rapt in prayer. The multitude of candles give the high-arched rooms a festive and ecclesiastical atmosphere.

Above the singing I now can hear the agitated voice of a man preaching. Coming closer, I find a group of about twenty white-clad people facing the front side of the huge cavern with bowed heads and folded hands, listening devoutly to the man’s voice rambling on about “the prophet” and “new Eden”. I walk on towards the gathering and gently push my way past the congregation. To my surprise, I am immediately welcomed by the owner of this voice, which turns out to be a gaunt old man in a priestly black cassock (by the name of Preacher Witting as I will later learn). Approaching him, I suddenly realize that the man must be blind, his sightless eyes nonetheless fixating me. He is standing knee-deep in water in an alcove decorated by trellis work. He seems to be guarding a passageway of some sort, flanked by two giant angel statues and beneath a huge skylight in the front wall marking the only place down here where daylight is to be seen. At the end of the small water-filled corridor, a nondescript light source behind a perforated window at the far end of the passage seems to endow the preacher with a kind of halo. Above the passage I can spot an

1 For general information concerning the song see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_the_Circle_Be_Unbroken%3F. For a paper speculating on a subliminal “hidden meaning” of the song in the context of the game, see: <http://adambogert.com/2013/03/29/bioshock-infinite-will-the-circle-be-unbroken/> (last access 05/02/2014).

inscription saying “This path of forgiveness is the only way to this city”. Probably this offers me an escape route away from this place? When the preacher becomes aware of my presence, he asks me if I was from “Sodom below”. I learn that entry to the city through this passageway can only be achieved by being “cleansed” and “reborn in the sweet waters of baptism” as the preacher puts it. Since I do not see an alternative, I agree and grasp his outstretched hand. “I baptize you in the name of our prophet, in the name of our founders, and the name of our lord” he says, as the preacher’s surprisingly strong arms submerge my head under water. “I don’t know, brothers and sisters”, he muses, “but this one doesn’t look clean to me.” Once I manage to surface and catch breath only to be plunged downwards again. I am about to drown and everything around me turns black.

Fortunately the above recounted labyrinthic journey through unknown territory and the “forced baptism” leading to a near-drowning experience was not ‘real’ in the ‘physical’ sense of the word. It was an account of a different ‘reality’ namely a sequence of a computer game called *BioShock!- Infinite*, an award-winning² opus developed by *Irrational Games* and published by *2K Games* in March 2013. The text is a “thick description” of a storyline in the beginning of the game which by reason of the religious references in the narratives and game aesthetics we considered as especially relevant for further reflection. In order to enable the readers to follow the plot even without being in possession of the game, we can provide you with a *YouTube* video clip³ of the audio-visual account of the scene.

BioShock!- Infinite is a first-person shooter (sometimes also coined as “thinking-person’s”-shooter⁴) and the third installment of the *BioShock* series featuring similar gameplay concepts and themes as its predecessors even though it is not directly part of the storyline. Timed in a turn-of-the-century setting of the early 1920s, the game’s protagonist Booker DeWitt is being sent to the floating city of Columbia to find Elizabeth, a girl who had been held hostage there for most of her life. In order to enter the city, the protagonist has to undergo the above described baptism scene. During the rescue operation which follows, DeWitt gets involved with two conflicting factions namely the elitist “Founders” and the underground rebels called “Vox Populi” who both struggle for dominion over the town. On his rescue mission through the city of Columbia and different alternate realities the player adopts the role of Booker DeWitt, eventually accompanied by the non-person character (NPC) Elizabeth.⁵ According to *Irrational Games*’ creative director Ken Levine, the general plot and concept of the game is based on the ideas of American Exceptionalism⁶. By also incorporating

2 For a detailed list on *BioShock Infinite*’s awards and nominations see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_accolades_received_by_BioShock_Infinite and <http://irrationalgames.com/insider/bioshock-infinite-wins-75-e3-editorial-honors/> (last access 05/02/2014).

3 For the first 15 minutes of *BioShock Infinite*, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZietNuVY3V0> (last access 05/02/2014).

4 See e.g. <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/384576/interviews/interview-ken-levine-on-religion-and-racism-in-bioshock-infinite/> (last access 05/02/2014).

5 For further information on the plot see http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/BioShock_Infinite (last access 05/02/2014).

6 The term ‘American Exceptionalism’ signifies the idea of the USA as being “qualitatively different” from other

more recent events such as the German left-wing militant Baader-Meinhof group activities from the 1970s, *Occupy' 6 all &street* (2011) and the neo-conservative *Tea Party movement* (since 2009), the game represents a mixture of narratives broaching issues of socio-cultural, political and religious extremism, utopia and dystopia, alternate-reality fiction⁷ and science, thus bringing up a multitude of controversial topics, many of which are naturally of great interest to scholars of religion.⁸ Due to the fact that the discourses concerning the religious topics and elements which are subject to the game have been brought into the public, researchers have the chance to not only analyse the game-immanent narratives, but also the processes of their (re-)construction and reception in an actor-centered perspective.

Those are mainly the reasons we took *BioShock!- Infinite* as prime example for demonstrating and acting out our theoretical approaches. Thus in the following, after a brief overview over the history of Game Studies and a record of the main debates in this field, we will highlight some possible research scenarios to religion in digital games using the example of the baptism scene from *BioShock!- Infinite* described above. In fact, the episode in question will not be the only example we discuss, but it will still accompany us throughout the whole article, where different facets of the scene will be exemplarily focused, analysed and interlinked.

“Make yourself ready pilgrim. The bindings are there as a safeguard“ (*BioShock Infinite*)⁹.

Welcome to the ‘game’. Let’s play!

states. The idea can be traced back to the early 20th century. (For further details see: Lipset 1996.) Even though the theory does not necessarily imply cultural or moral superiority, many (neo)conservative politicians and scholars have used it in that sense (see e.g.: <http://spectator.org/articles/38032/defense-american-exceptionalism#>, last access 05/02/2014). The concept is closely linked with the idea of an American Civil Religion (Bellah 1967 / Emling 2013).

- 7 For details on the inspirations and resources of *BioShock Infinite* see some interviews with Ken Levine, e.g. http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/the-tea-party-occupy-wall-street-and-bioshock-infinite-how-a-video-game-is-reflecting-life/2011/10/21/gIQAIU8fGM_story.html, <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/416306/interviews/ken-levine-and-the-search-for-meaning-in-bioshock-infinite/> and <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/384576/interviews/interview-ken-levine-on-religion-and-racism-in-bioshock-infinite/> (last access 05/02/2014).
- 8 For further details see chapter 3 and 4 of this article.
- 9 So says the automatic voice of the rocket-capsule elevator in *BioShock Infinite*, just before the main protagonist Booker DeWitt begins his journey to Columbia (immediately before arriving in the subterranean caves where our introductory account sets in) See: *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games / 2K Games 2013).

2 The Research on Games: Prospects and Promises

When we think of academia, research, and Cultural Studies it is not very likely that the first thing to spring to our minds is ‘games!’ Such things seem to be rather a serious business surveying the “real” foundations of culture. Philippe Bornet proposes a theory for the question why games have been ignored as something worth of studying. He sees the marginalization of the overall interest in the “serious” study of “playful activities” within and through our own European history. Even early Christian theological doctrines, he says, abolished roman *ludi*⁹ as being immoral and eventually linking many different sorts of games and play with “pagan” culture (Bornet 2012: 16-17). In the time of the Protestant Reformation also Roman Catholic ritual practices were condemned as being not useful along with gambling and other games of chance. The notion of usefulness and uselessness was also later discussed in utilitaristic discourses in the 18th century as productivity and industriousness became main foci of this time and “idle games” were devalorized (Bornet 2012: 20). With this historical interpretation in mind one can see that a new kind of thinking about games has emerged in the last hundred years and especially in the new millennium.

Studies in which one tries to think about games in general thus were first undertaken at the beginning of the 20th century. Harold J. R. Murray’s extensive work on the history of chess and other boardgames (see Murray 1913 [1951]) and the paper of ethnographer Stewart Culin on games of Native North American people (see Culin 1907 [1992]) are well-known examples of this then rising interest in an ignored area of human culture. In 1938 Dutch historian Johan Huizinga elaborated on the origin of culture in play and set in motion different discussions about the definition of play and games. One of his various observation was that when we play we are separated from our “normal” daily lives, a state that is often called being in a “magic circle” (Kücklich 2012: 297). Huizinga considered the phenomena of play and games in a broader philosophical perspective himself stating that he does not have the proper resources to delve into every single historical fact deeply (Huizinga 1949). This of course makes his work quite vulnerable for critique from a contemporary Cultural Studies viewpoint. In 1958 French philosopher Roger Caillois elaborated further on Huizinga’s ideas debating over the difficulty in defining “games” and “play”. Among other things he suggested four dimensions of play and games that help in this definition: “alea” (chance), “agon” (competition), “mimicry” (role-playing), and “ilinx” (the alteration of perception) (Caillois 1961). Even until now we find different aspects of Huizinga and Calloise influential studies used or adapted for contemporary work on games (e.g. King & Krzywinska 2006).

10 I.e. ritual plays that were performed in the context of Roman religion.

Since this academic groundwork pointed out the importance of games in culture, new possibilities emerged for the study of games. In the 1960s and 70s different institutions formed around the occupation with (war) games and simulations, like the *International Simulation and Gaming Association* (ISAGA)¹¹ that held annual meetings to offer a platform for academic and non-academic actors. There was not only room for research but also for thought about games in the improvement of education or for design-related issues. The journal *Simulation & Gaming*¹² was also first released in 1970 being the oldest journal to meddle with the vast field of games (see Mäyrä 2008, 7). The more academic-centric *Cultural Anthropology of Play Reprint Society* was founded in 1974 renaming itself *The Association for the Study of Play* (TASP)¹³ in 1987. From there a number of journals spun, e.g. *Play and Culture Studies*¹⁴ that is being published to this day.

2.1 The Advent of Game Studies

We now reach a new era in the occupation with games – study-wise and of course in our own culture – with the popularization of the computer.¹⁵ The discipline that studies computer-, video- or other such games that reside in the realm of the digital is a relatively young enterprise as are digital games themselves. One could argue that credit is due to Mary Ann Buckles whose 1985 dissertation about the game *Adventure*¹⁶ was one of the first if not the first academic work to get into a serious analysis of digital games. Even then the focus was on narrativity and literature as games have been explored at first from traditional academic viewpoints. Espen Aarseth partly revived Buckles' (unfortunately ignored and underrated) work in 1997 further elaborating on the notion of hypertext and narrativity in games but insisted that game-like cybertexts should be studied not only as classical texts but simply as games with the help of new methods and approaches concentrating on ludic aspects. As one of the other first "ludologists" Gonzalo Frasca also stated that Game Studies should be occupied with the uniqueness of play and activity in digital games rather than their implied narratives (Frasca 1999).

11 See: <http://www.isaga.com/> (last access 05/02/2014).

12 See: <http://sag.sagepub.com/> (last access 05/02/2014).

13 See: <http://www.tasplay.org/> (last access 05/02/2014).

14 See: <http://www.tasplay.org/studies/> (last access 05/02/2014).

15 In terms of the development of the computer games genres (mainly but not exclusively concerning MMORPGs) the most influential source of inspiration has been the so-called "tabletop role playing games", which involve multiple participants interacting in fictional worlds and has gained momentum especially after the publication of the first edition of *Dungeon and Dragons* in 1974. Its influence on digital games varies from the conversion of the rule systems, general topics and fictional world settings and "crosses all known computer game genres from first person shooters to real time strategy games and massively multiplayer online games" (Tychsen 2006: 75). For further details on the history and interdependencies of TTRPGs and computer games, see Tychsen 2006.

16 *Adventure* (or in its full name *Glossal Cave Adventure*) was released in 1976 and is supposed to be the first text-based adventure game and predecessor of important titles like *Zork* or *Labyrinth* creating the genre of Interactive Fiction. It was first played on the PDP-10, a locker-sized mainframe computer.

2001 was the year in which Aarseth proclaimed the “Year One” for the study of digital games in his first article in the newly founded journal *Game & Studies* being now in its twelfth volume. As another academic group that serves as an international node for contemporary Digital Games Studies the *Digital Games Research Association* (DiGRA)¹⁷ tries to encourage work on this topic having hosted six international conferences since its foundation in 2003. There exist also similar but smaller associations that coordinate researchers on a more local level, e.g. the Danish *Spil & Idforskning*^G, the Norwegian *JoinGame*^H, or the *Games Research Association of Sweden*⁸⁹. Universities begin to establish courses in Game Studies but only few possess facilities dedicated especially for this new discipline, like e.g. the *Game Research Laboratory* in the University of Tampere²¹, the *Centre for Computer Games Research* in the IT University of Copenhagen²² or the recently founded *Gaming Lab* of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro²³. While surveying different academic programs of U.S. universities it seems that there are plenty of programs for the design or production of games but not so much for the theoretical thinking about games linked with the humanities and social sciences.

2.2 The “Ludology-versus-Narratology Debate”

“Outside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama and games. If I throw a ball at you I don’t expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories” (Eskelinen 2001: Introduction, para. 1).

In July 2001, when the first issue of *Game & Studies, the International Journal of Computer Games Research*^{8E}, was published, it wasn’t hard to determine the dominating debate occupying the newly formed discipline: Are games primarily a storytelling media? Jesper Juul, one of the contributors to the first issue precisely phrases this question and it’s underlying implications:

“As questions go, this is not a bad one: Do games tell stories? Answering this should tell us both how to study games and who should study them. The affirmative answer suggests that games are easily studied from within existing paradigms. The negative implies that we must start afresh” (Juul 2001: Introduction, para. 1).

17 See: <http://www.digra.org/> (last access 05/02/2014).

18 See: <http://spilforskning.dk/> (last access 05/02/2014).

19 See: <http://joingame.idi.ntnu.no/> (last access 05/02/2014).

20 See: <http://ptbg.org.pl/strona.php?id=11> (last access 05/02/2014).

21 See: <http://gamelab.uta.fi/> (last access 05/02/2014).

22 See: <http://game.itu.dk/index.php/About> (last access 05/02/2014).

23 See: <https://newsandfeatures.uncg.edu/uncg-gaming-lab/> (last access 05/02/2014).

24 See: <http://gamestudies.org/> (last access 05/02/2014).

The question is a defining one, a question of identity. Simply put, it asks: Do we need Game Studies as a distinct and independent academic discipline? Of course Juul, himself a “ludologist”, finds an equally defining answer. After examining alleged similarities of games and narrative media and discovering considerable differences in the way stories translate to games (and vice versa), as compared to the way they translate between movies and novels (Juul 2001: The problem of translation), he also describes an “inherent conflict between the *now* of the interaction [in games] and the *ast* or ‘*rior*’ of the narrative”. According to him, “you can’t have narration and interactivity at the same time; there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story.” (Juul 2001: Conclusion, para. 1) Finally, he emphasizes the difference between the reader/story and the player/game relationship by stating that “the player inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game *and* undertakes a role inside the game” (Juul 2001: Conclusion, para. 1) he comes to the following conclusion:

Using other media as starting points, we may learn many things about the construction of fictive worlds, characters (...) but relying too heavily on existing theories will make us forget what makes games games: Such as rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the player’s actions into the game world, the way the game defines the possible actions of the player. It is the unique parts that we need to study now (Juul 2001: Conclusion, para. 4).

Of course, Jesper Juul was not the only proponent of a study of games, which separates itself from narrative focused paradigms. But not every “ludologist” took the “diplomatic” approach to “narrotologist” views and methods Juul did by acknowledging similarities between many games and movies, novels and theater productions but at the same time emphasizing their fundamental differences.

Markku Eskelinen, also a contributor to the first issue of *Game Studies* finds very clear words in describing the ‘colonization’ of computer game research “from the fields of literacy, theatre, drama and film studies”:

“Games are seen as interactive narratives, procedural stories or remediated cinema. On top of everything else, such definitions, despite being successful in terms of influence or funding, are conceptually weak and ill-grounded, as they are usually derived from a very limited knowledge of mere mainstream drama or outdated literary theory, or both” (Eskelinen 2001: Introduction, para. 1).

He then continues by examining the (in his view) most crucial differences between computer games and dramatic and narrative media. Referring to Espen Aarseth’s work *Cybertext: ~erspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Aarseth 1997), he points to the “configurative” nature of games, compared to the “interpretative” nature of literature, film and theater:

“In literature, theatre and film everything matters or is conventionally supposed to matter equally – if you’ve seen 90% of the presentation that’s not enough, you have to see or read it all (or everything you can). This is characteristic of dominantly interpretative practices in general. In contrast, in computer games you either can’t or don’t have to encounter every possible combinatory event and existent the game contains, as these differ in their ergodic importance” (Eskelinen 2001: Gaming as configurative practice, para. 5).

After describing additional differences between games and narrative media, like causal, spacial and functional relations, Eskelinen closes with the sharp statement, that “stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy.” (Eskelinen 2001: Conclusion, para. 1)

Fortunately, the frontiers between “ludologists” and “narratologists” have somewhat softened up to a point, where key players on both sides, including Henry Jenkins (2004), Espen Aarseth (2009) and Janet Murray (2013/2005) in the last years have agreed, that “the Ludology/Narratology discussion has moved on” (Eskelinen 2001: para. 1) and that “narratology proper is not opposed to ludology in any way”²⁵. As Murray frames it:

“(…) games are not a subset of stories; objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories. (...) It is time to recognize the difference between the useful formalist methodology and the distractingly prescriptive ideology of game essentialism. No one group can define what is appropriate for the study of games. Game Studies, like any organized pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multi-dimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving” (Murray 2005/2013: para. 10).

Parallel to this discussion and true to Murray’s statement, the purely “ludological” as well as the purely “narratological” approaches have not remained (and never really where) the only way of researching digital games.

2.3 Merging Game Studies with Humanities

Starting with the new millennium a broad spectrum of studies concerning digital games have emerged and journals or collections of essays found their way into academic discourses. The ever growing amount of literature is not that easy to grasp in its wholeness but can maybe be sorted into certain categories. As a starting point we see introductory works and handbooks on Game Studies (e.g. Mäyrä 2008; Raessens & Goldstein 2011; Wolf & Perron 2003, 2013) that give an overview

25 See: <http://vimeo.com/7097715> (last accessed 12/02/2014), comment section.

over what Game Studies can encompass, or what goals Game Studies can try to achieve. From there on we encounter different approaches to the research of games. Depending on the academic perspectives different questions arise and of course very diverse answers can be given. One can ask about the “text” of the game, the modes of storytelling, or the characters, as a scholar of Literary Studies would do (e.g. Ryan 2001; Majewski 2003; Kocher 2007; Backe 2008). Then again we see sociological and ethnographic actor-centered works that focus on the people playing games, their playing, and the interaction between players and game (e.g. Yee 2006; Corneliussen 2008; Quandt, Wimmer, Wolling 2008; Boellstorff 2008; Sisler 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Taylor 2006).²⁶ Some scholars explore game mechanics and inner structures of games and how those can be described in an adequate manner (e.g. Aarseth 2003; Juul 2005; Björk & Holopainen 2003; Sicart 2008). We see also works that elaborate on moral implications or even philosophical statements that can be found within games (e.g. Cogburn & Silcox 2009; Sicart 2011). The topic of morality, often combined with the question of children’s education is not only discussed within academic but very much so in popular media because of the widely accepted notion that video games can have negative effects on children’s learning, upbringing and their socio-moral compass.

In the variety of works paper appear that address one specific game and dissect it to lay open different layers of meaning carried within the object of study. We see e.g. different studies on *World of Warcraft* (Krzywinska 2006; Klastrop 2008) or other games as *Max Payne 2* (Kringiel 2009). But specializing in specific games is something that entails certain problems. In a fast evolving and ever-changing landscape of this medium a game that is studied for several years could very well be outdated at the time the work is published. To concentrate on one game means, that the researcher will maybe loose connection to the latest developments in the game industry. Therefore bigger studies in the form of whole books on one game are rarely undertaken and specific games and certain topics therein are more often discussed in the form of articles in journals or in collection of essays.

Most interesting for scholars of religion is whether studies were conducted which focus on religious topics in digital games or at least the connection between religious discourses and games in general. As one of the few works *Religions in Play*, edited by Philippe Bornet and Maya Burger (2012) tackles the question of how religious narratives and religious actors have been and are linked with games. But until now this certainly huge field of research remains mostly untapped²⁷ and digital games have only recently been declared an interesting object for scholars of religion.

26 See also Nick Yee’s extensive *Daedalus Project* in the context of which he surveyed about 40,000 players of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) at <http://nickyee.com/index-daedalus.html> (last access 05/02/2014).

27 Another example is the forthcoming volume *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, edited by Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieve (Campbell & Grieve 2014 forthc.).

3 Why Study Religion in Games?

Now, after a brief journey through the history and genesis of the discipline of Game Studies, its main issues and its relation to Humanities and Cultural Studies, its time to direct our focus on the topic of religion in computer games as a new field of research. “Why (at all) study religion in digital games?” is a justified question in this context. The easiest and shortest answer to this query is as simple as that: “Because religion is to be found there!”

In the same way as religion is referred to in cartoons, blockbuster movies, bestseller books and other mediated content of postmodernity, it is addressed in computer games.²⁸ And in the same way as all other reference to religion or religious elements in popular culture are subject to Religious Studies in an actor-centered and/or Cultural Studies approach, so are digital games. This answer, however, might be a bit too straightforward and succinct on one hand, and much too scientifically self-sufficient on the other. In times, when academic research is (according to expectations of the public) supposed to prove its relevance for culture and society, a researcher might have to dig deeper to legitimize researching the appearance of religion that is (presumably) much devoted to matters of transcendence within the (presumably) rather “mundane” and marginal realm of digital games. – However, in our opinion it is not difficult to give reason for the analysis of digital games as a new field of research for Religious Studies!

Nobody will seriously doubt that digital games have become a mass phenomenon of nowadays popular culture. Even though in popular discourse those activities still have the reputation of being played by a marginal group of socially inadequate adolescent boys²⁹, hard evidence tells otherwise: According to Nick Yee’s large-scale sociological analysis³⁰ of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) the players can be characterized as follows:

“(…) the average age of MMORPG players is around 26. In fact, only 25% of MMORPG players are teenagers. About 50% of MMORPG players work full-time. About 36% of players are married, and 22% have children. So the MMORPG demographic is fairly diverse, including high-school students, college students, early professionals, middle-aged home-makers, as well as retirees. In other words,

28 There is a multitude of publications broaching these issues, let us just refer to Stewart M. Hoover who in his works highlights the general interdependencies of religion, media and culture in theory and practice, e.g. Hoover 2006.

29 To quote only some random examples, let us mention a newspaper article published in the aftermath of the so-called “Columbine Highschool massacre” in 1999, blaming violent videogames for the shooting (see: “Doom, Quake, and Mass Murder” <http://www.salon.com/1999/04/23/gamers/> published 23/04/1999 by *The Salon*, last access 05/02/2014). Identical press releases can be found on the “Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting” in 2012 (see: “Media blames violent video games for Lanza’s Sandy Hook killing spree: is there a link between video games and aggression?” <http://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2012/12/19/media-blames-violent-video-games-lanza-s-sandy-hook-killing-sprees-there-link> published 19/12/2012 by *the Drum*, last access 05/02/2014).

30 For an overview see: Yee (1994-2004): The Daedalus Project, <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/>.

MMORPGs do not only appeal to a youth subculture. (...) Another caricature of video gamers is that they are solitary hermits, but the data on MMORPG players show that 80% of MMORPG players play with someone they know in RL (a romantic partner, family member, or friend) on a regular basis. Thus, MMORPGs are in fact highly social environments where new relationships are forged and existing relationships are reinforced.”³¹

Also the average time of play per week does not surmount the national average for TV watching.³² Above all, it is – according to Shaw (Shaw 2010) who takes the perspective of Cultural Studies (an a basic understanding of culture as [discursive] process[es]) – not possible to define video game culture as a separate sphere, as it is part of the cultural mainstream. Instead, she urges us to look at “video games in culture rather than games as culture” (Shaw 2010). Which is basically the perspective we would like to adopt for the analytical and methodical approaches in the following sub-chapters.

Computer games are part and result of the socio-cultural discourses its designers and its players are embedded in. In the same way they can be treated and analysed as “cultural artifacts” as “they provide a representational trace of both individual and collective activity and how it changes over time, enabling the researcher to unpack the bidirectional influence of self and society” (Steinkuehler 2006). Thus, digital games are being designed by, played by, and reflected on by a multitude of socio-cultural actors. As such they are more than a product of the culture they are embedded in but can serve as significant indicators which (explicitly and / or implicitly) point to discourses which are part of this setting. In cases, computer games might even serve as a kind of “burning glass” which reinforces or singularizes subliminal or subconscious issues. Religion, as being a part of these discourses, is one factor within this framework and can serve as a focal point in research.

Therefore, in the context of computer games, religion and religious elements (like narratives, iconography, symbols, place and character names etc.) can be researched and analysed on different levels and from a multitude of perspectives and foci, depending on the research question(s) and the scientific interests. One possible approach could be a game-immanent analysis of religious topics, the reception, transformation and / or (re-)construction of religious elements as symbols, rituals, architectural styles, quotes and other materials, as we have shown in the introduction. We can identify the different elements which have been derived from historical or recent religious history (in the “baptism” scene from *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games / 2K Games 2013) which we describe in the introduction it could be US-American forms of Christianity) and ask questions on

31 See: Yee (1994-2004): The Daedalus Gateway. The Psychology of MMORPGs: Player Demographics, http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway_demographics.html (last access 05/02/2013).

32 See: Yee (11/01/2005): MMOPRG Hours vs. TV Hours. In: The Daedalus Project: The Psychology of MMORPGs, <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000891.php> (last access 05/02/2013).

transfer or transformation processes, the aesthetics, the role of those religious elements for the construction of the plot, etc. A research along those lines might allow for evidence on the level of the game designers and producers but leaves the players which “consume” the game unconsidered. Whereas an actor-centered approach on the reception processes by the gaming community, e.g. in computer forums, fan fiction and other media within the context of digital games might result in interesting findings on the level of the players (but does not necessarily allow for conclusions on the designer / producer level). In the case of the “forced baptism” scene we do know that there has been some strong reactions, especially due to the fact that the “baptism” is an obligatory part of the game and cannot be skipped, if a player wants to continue.³³ Those critical statements always point back to the critics themselves and allows for conclusions on their religious disposition(s).

This is also true for the construction of religious stereotypes as Vít Šisler has shown in terms of the representation of “Arabs” in different American and European video games (Šisler 2008a). In his analysis of *Command D) onquer Generals* (EA Pacific / EA Games 2003), a strategy-game where the player is able to chose from three sides of a fictional conflict, he has shown that in contrast to the well-organized and high-tech American troops, the “Global Liberation army” which presents “the Arabs” is depicted as hostile and brutish terrorists using car and truck bombs, suicide bombing and biotoxins as weapons of choice, thus uncovering and reflecting underlying fears and stereotypes of “the Muslim other” within contemporary Western societies along the lines of Edwad Said’s concept of “Orientalism” (Šisler 2008a: 86). Reichmuth and Wernings term of “neglected media” (Reichmuth & Werning 2006, quoted in Sisler 2008b) which Šisler applies to the field of computer games might as well be a useful perspective for other research on religious ascriptions and stereotyping in digital games. He argues that “neglected media exhibit strong popular appeal and economic relevance, which contrasts with their lack of culture prestige and scientific coverage. (...) Stereotypical representations tend to be reproduced in neglected media in more explicit forms, partly because these media are considered to be less relevant in cultural discourse and thus less subject to media critique” (Reichmuth and Werning 2006, quoted in Sisler 2008b: 205).

The examples given above clearly show the socio-cultural relevance of researching religion in digital games. Games – as objects and products of popular culture – are means and indicators of religious discourse in many different perspectives we will specify in the next chapters. Now it takes us, the (gamer-)scholar, to entangle the interwoven lines of discourses and shed light to a subject of scientific research.

33 For further details on the matter see chapter 4.1.

4 In Search of Religion(s) in Games: What to Study?

In the previous chapters we have argued that religious elements in digital games serve as an indicator for the negotiation of religious topics in different socio-cultural settings, the construction of fictional religious worlds, religious conflicts or even as instruments for the visualization of subliminal socio-cultural discourses. In the next part of the article, we will try to trace some of those lines of arguments somewhat further by exemplifying theoretical and practical approaches to research and analytical perspective.

4.1 Religion and Game Narratives: ‘Questing’ for a Religious Storyline

It is a common fact, that many (if not most) digital games tell – in one way or another – a story or are at least based on a storyline.³⁴ As Marie-Laure Ryan (Ryan 2006) states:

“(…) in the vast majority of computer games, especially recent ones, players manipulate avatars with human or human like properties situated in a world with features inspired by real geography and architecture, such as hallways, rivers, mountains, castles, and dungeons. Insofar as the actions of the player cause this world to evolve, computer games present all the basic ingredients of narrative: characters, events, setting, and trajectories leading from a beginning state to an end state. One may conclude that the unique achievement of computer games, compared to standard board games and sports, is to have integrated play within a narrative and fictional framework” (Ryan 2006: 182).

Ryan – like many other researchers – takes a middle-ground position, trying to reconcile the formerly opposing position of the ludology vs. narratology controversy we have briefly outlined in chapter 2.2. “A discussion of the narrative potentials of games need not imply a privileging of storytelling over all the other possible things games can do”, as Henry Jenkins (Jenkins 2004) suggests. In order to better distinguish the special function and characteristics of narratives in games, he introduces the term of “game architecture”: “Game designers don’t simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces” (Jenkins 2004: 121). Many scholars argue, that it is precisely this “spatiality” (which is achieved by the visual design, but also by a network of intertwined narratives) which strongly contributes to the players’ sense of “worldness”³⁵, allowing a deep

34 For a brief insight into the history of computer game research including the scholarly debate on the narrativity of games, see Chapter 2.1 and 2.2 of this paper. A historical overview of narratives on cyberspace, including computer games, can also be found in Murray 1997.

35 The term “worldness” as used by Krzywinska mainly refers to the (virtual) environment as being provided with a unifying consistency concerning “geography” / “spaciality” as well as its “history”. See: Krzywinska 2006: 386.

“immersion”³⁶ into the virtual game environment. Henry Jenkins argues for “understanding games as serving some specific functions within a new transmedia storytelling environment” (Jenkins 2004: 120), where narratives are being transmitted by multiple media platforms reverting to topics and elements from “earlier” media like literature or film or broach the content of other popular or traditional discourses (Jenkins 2006: 95). Along these lines we can identify (among others) the following narratives and narrative structures within a computer game environment (mainly paraphrasing Ryan 2006: 201):

- The narrative script or plot provided by the game design.
- The narrative that players “write” through their actions, choosing a particular sequence of events within the range of possibilities offered by game script.
- The narrative that attracts players to buy and play the game (e.g. cut scenes and background information that introduce the game in several media; text on the box, commercials, ...).
- The narrative (e.g. a cut scene) that introduces a quest or game sequence of follows the its completion.
- The microstories told by nonplaying characters.
- The narratives that players create themselves by writing or talking about the game and their experiences e.g. in the form of fan fiction, forum discussions, machinima or even the embodiment of game characters at conventions or in Cosplay, etc.

Thus, a complex network of intertextual references and discourses is woven which in many cases also includes religion or religious issues in an explicit or implicit way. Depending on the research perspective and methodical approach both, a game-immanent analysis of the construction mechanisms and reception processes on the side of the game designers, as well as an actor-centered approach on the players’ side can provide interesting insights into the discursive localization, the construction as well as the mechanisms of reception, ascription and personal disposition towards religion on different levels. In order to further explain the different levels and approaches towards narratives in games we will in the following exemplarily review some research project in the field.

One example for an analysis of narratives in computer games is the research of Tanya Krzywinska (Krzywinska 2005, 2006, 2008) on the significant role of myth for the world-creation in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004). The author has identified

36 “*Immersion* is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality (...) that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus,” (Murray 1997:98).

narratives and narrative patterns resembling mythological tales of cosmogeny and world creation in a multitude of religious traditions and has analysed their functions for the gameplay. She argues that

“the mythic plays a primary role in making a consistent fantasy world in terms of game play, morality, culture, time, and environment. It provides a rationale for players’ actions, as well as the logic that underpins the stylistic profile of the game, its objects, tasks, and characters. In terms of the “cultural” environments of the game, the presence of a coherent and extensive myth scheme is core to the way differences and conflicts between races are organized. And, as a form of intertextual resonance, its mythology furnishes the game with a “thickness” of meaning that promotes, for players, a sense of mythological being as well as encouraging an in-depth textual engagement” (Krzywinska 2006: 383).

By applying approaches by contemporary media scholars, like Bolter and Grusin’s concept of “remediation”³⁷ (Bolter & Grusin 2000) as well as the theories of “thick text”³⁸ and “geek aesthetic”³⁹ by Roz Kaveney (Kaveney 2005), the author identifies different layers of narrativity. Krzywinska follows the different strands of narratives she identifies as “myth” and traces them back to their (assumed) origin in Celtic, Greek, Native North American mythologies. In doing so she uncovers the processes of reception, construction and “remediation” within the contexts of popular literature as well as popular culture. Some storylines can be directly traced back to literary fiction (mainly sci-fi and fantasy) as Krzywinska points out, quoting the example of the (re-)construction of the Night Elves in accordance with J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (Krzywinska 2008: 128 ff.).

In *6 orl of 6 arcraft*, mythic structures serve as a means to create consistency and coherency, applying “not only to spatial coordinates, style, and physics but also to the past events that constitute the current state of affairs within the world and to which the player-character is subject” (Krzywinska 2006, 386). Krzywinska argues that the structures as well as the forms and contents of those mythological narratives (e.g. the world-order, the landscaping, the socio-cultural structure and the gameplay represented among others by the prophetic style of many quest texts) are a necessary element for invoking the notion of *World of Warcraft* as persistent world by the players. (Krzywinska 2008: 127).

37 The concept of “remediation” means the refashioning of earlier media like visual arts, film, tv, literature etc. by new digital media. In this process, the new media gain their cultural significance not by merely substituting older media, but by including and incorporating them (Bolter & Grusin 2000). Contemporary computer games can – in analogy to Bolter and Grusin’s theoretical approach – with a focus of intertextual elements be explained as a “remediation” of preexisting media genres such as religious story, fantasy tale, film (Krzywinska 2006: 384).

38 Roz Kaveney’s conception of “thick text” refers to the (intertextual) contexts, references, allusions and connotation within and across media genres (Kaveney 2005: 5 and Krzywinska 2006: 383).

39 The term “geek aesthetic” relates to the phenomenon of fandom culture featuring a depth engagement into certain media products or media genres. According to Kaveney (Kaveney 2005: 6) “a feature of the geek aesthetic is that popular culture is consumed in an active way”.

“As a form of narrative used to explain or allegorize a state of affairs, myth is, I would argue, intrinsic to the creation of a particular worldview in all these cases, whether that worldview is to be taken as ‘real’ or as a form of make-believe” (Krzywinska 2006, 385).

Following Krzywinskas line of argument, an analysis of the religious elements and contents as well as its receptions, remediations and (re-)constructions within the framework of the game leads to interesting insights into the religious dispositions of the designers as well as the recipients who actively contribute to the narratives and storylines by the means of the internet and other (mainly digital) media.

In the context of digital game narratives it may even happen, that the individual storylines which the players create, collide with the prescribed in-game settings, as the study of Heidbrink, Miczek and Radde-Antweiler (Heidbrink, Miczek, Radde-Antweiler 2011) confirms, by means of the example of mourning rituals for a recently deceased player within the virtual gaming environment of *6 orld of Warcraft*. The event was organized by the so-called “guild” of the deceased and was preannounced in several online group forums. The ceremony was held in an in-game territory which is constantly contested by the two rivaling factions of the game. As a result, the mourners were disturbed and (their virtual representations were) killed by members of the opposing party. These events have in the aftermath lead to many off-game discussions on the intrusion of real-life events into the virtual space of a fictional game environment and on the agency of the gamers to haphazardly redefine the prescribed in-game narratives for real-life purposes, claiming their right to temporarily invalidate the narrative of the conflicting parties in a war scenario⁴⁰ in order to conduct a ritual.⁴¹ Even though the focus of the research was mainly on ritual and conflict, the clash of the different positions toward the function and validity of in-game narratives in contrast to the gamers’ individual ascriptions towards religion and ritual becomes obvious and underlines the interdependencies of in-game and off-game “realities”.⁴²

A different approach to researching narratives in computer games has been taken by Gregor Ahn (Ahn 2011) in his study on the construction of death and postmortality. By comparing the computer games *Veneti!a* (Deck 13 Interactive / dtp entertainment 2008) and *The 0oid* (Ice-Pick

40 For further information on the dominant narrative of war or conflict using the example of World of Warcraft see MacCallum-Stewart 2008.

41 Some of the discussions are quoted in Heidbrink, Mizek, Radde-Antweiler 2011: 176ff.

42 A different approach towards rituals and player agency in computer games (namely first-person shooters) is taken by Rachel Wagner (2012 a & b). She claims that in contrast to films, literature etc. computer games deploy an intense feeling of agency and performance in its players by fulfilling their in-game quests of imposing order in a hostile and chaotic environment (Wagner 2012 b). She raises the question if in this sense digital games can be termed as “ritually cathartic” (Wagner 2012 a: 162). For further discussion on first-person shooters and rituals employing Wagners viewpoints also see Perrault (2013): “The Religious Ritual of) *all of Duty*”: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/greg-perreault/the-religious-ritual-of-c_b_4235383.html (last access 05/02/2014).

Lodge / ND Games 2009) he shows that the transfer and transformation of religious motifs and topics does not necessarily result in the construction of an in-game religion but can be limited to the installation of certain (originally) religious concepts or topics in an overall “secular” setting (Ahn 2011: 123). In accordance to the fact, that most computer games enable the player to “revive” a character after its (virtual) death, the general in-game conception of death, dying and the ability for the avatar to be “revived” can be termed as “multimortality” and “multivitality” (Ahn 2011: 127). Interestingly, this fact is subject to many ascriptions derived from traditionally religious concepts by the players, like the Christian concept of “resurrection” or the Hindu / Buddhist idea of “reincarnation” (Ahn 2011: 126).

Using the example of the conceptions of “death” and “dying” (in in-game speech often referred to as “(re-)spwan”) the author shows, how in-game scenarios can mirror and reproduce real-life religious discourses. Ahn’s analysis does not only allow the visualization of reception processes and the localization of its topics in religious history and literature⁴³, but also show the mechanisms in the contemporary construction of secular concepts of postmortality in popular culture. Thus, the results of the in-game research can serve as proof for the tendency to disembed the notion of postmortality from the traditional religious settings and reintegrate them into secular and world-immanent contexts (Ahn 2011: 144). That way, the construction and reception of the narratives of “multimortality” / “multivitality” in computer games reflect the cultural discourses on postmortality and by doing so serve as indicators of recent developments in Western religious history. This study shows, that the narrative structures of in-game scenarios heavily depend on real-world actors and can therefore serve as mirror and catalyst of contemporary socio-cultural discourses.

Accordingly, the gameplay of *BioShock!- Infinite* (Irrational Games / 2K Games 2013) often refers to contemporary Christianity, mainly to US American Christian fundamentalism. Taking the example of the baptism sequence in the beginning of this paper, the scenic arrangement, the background music as well as the different narratives point to Christian elements, even though partly in an implicit way. Terms like, “new Eden”, “Sodom”, the “sweet waters of baptism” as well as the concepts of “cleansing” and “being reborn” in this context bear strong cues referring to Western Christian religious history. In analysing these in-game constructions the researcher is able to (at least to a certain degree) draw conclusions on the religious disposition of the designers who assembled these patterns. In the case of *BioShock Infinite*, it is even possible to retrace some actual conflicts

43 Ahn shows e.g. parallels in the construction of postmortality in *The Ooi* and Dante Aligheris *Divina Comedia* (Ahn 2011, 132),

within the developers' company *Irrational "ames* due to religious differences⁴⁴ ending in extensive alterations of at least one game character within the development process⁴⁵.

These incidents (as well as a gamer's request for refund because of the "forced baptism" scene⁴⁶) have not only fueled the debate among the designers and the gaming community⁴⁷ alike, it also confirms – in accordance with the other examples quoted above – the analytical potentials of in-game narratives for the study of religion in the context of computer games and the importance and interdependency of both the in-game material-based and the actor-centered perspectives.

4.2 Religion and Game Aesthetics: The "Beauty" and the "Beast"

"Digital games are commonly described as phenomena that combine aesthetic, social and technological elements, yet our understanding of the aesthetic element of games and play is perhaps the least developed of all" (Niedenthal 2009: 1).

Simon Niedenthal's appeal for an approach focussing more on aesthetics mainly addresses the discipline of Games Studies and discourses on game design, where in his opinion aesthetics plays only a marginal role (Niedenthal 2009: 2). However, the general negligence of non-textual contents is a well-known dilemma also in the disciplines of Cultural Studies. Recently scholars have gradually become aware of the problem especially in terms of new media research and started to consider it to a greater extent. But this engagement almost always is limited to visual content to the disadvantage of other sensual dimensions like e.g. the soundscape, the impact of colors, the menu navigation as well as the interconnectivity of the different aspects (Heidbrink & Miczek 2010: 1). In accordance with Niedenthals criticism of reducing game aesthetics to questions of "game as art" (Niedenthal 2009: 1) and recent studies on aesthetics and Material Culture⁴⁸ we would like to define our notion towards (game) "aesthetics" as follows: (Game) aesthetic means the role of apperception

44 See e.g. <http://operationrainfall.com/bioshock-infinite-dev-nearly-quits-over-religious-differences/> (last access: 05/02/2014).

45 See e.g. <http://www.pcgamer.com/2013/01/22/bioshock-infinite-character-changed-religion/> (last access: 05/02/2014).

46 For a detailed record of the incident see chapter 4.4 of this paper.

47 See e.g. <http://www.ign.com/boards/threads/christians-didnt-like-bioshock-infinites-forced-baptism-scene-demands-a-refund.452963280/> (last access: 05/02/2014).

48 The idea of transferring the theories of Material Culture to the digital contents of video games where materiality does not exist in the literal sense might sound contradictory at first. However, from the perspective of the gamers the online environment is part of their socio-cultural context and thus "real" as well as "material" to them, even though the materiality exists only in a virtual sense. Additionally we must not forget that the interconnections between the sensual dimensions perceived in-game always refer to and rely on the physical body of the gamers and thus provokes and stimulates "real" perceptory reactions (Heidbrink & Micek 2010: 4).

within the process of knowledge production, including all kinds of sensory stimuli as well as the actors' communication and mediation on the topic.⁴⁹

“Actors within different social, political, cultural or religious fields receive, communicate, negotiate and develop the notion of aesthetics in close connection to their possibilities of perception, certain interpretation patterns and – probably most important – to their sensual and bodily dimensions. (...) With its interest in the mechanisms of production, ways of perception, and discursive negotiations of visual culture the subject exceeds the boundaries of classical studies of arts and aesthetics and allows a critical reflection on the relationships with – for example – narrative modes or cultural topics or bodily and other sensual perceptions” (Heidbrink & Miczek 2010: 2-3).

Along the same line of thought, Niedenthal (Niedenthal 2009: 2) identified and terms three key concepts on aesthetics in digital games he recommends to further analysis, namely

1. Game aesthetics refers to the sensory phenomena that the player encounters in the game (visual, aural, haptic, embodied).
2. Game aesthetics refers to those aspects of digital games that are shared with other art forms (and thus provides a means of generalizing about art).
3. Game aesthetics is an expression of the game experienced as pleasure, emotion, sociability, form giving, etc (with reference to “the aesthetic experience”).

For our further considerations we would mainly rely on the first and third concept, which term (game) aesthetic as “the way a game looks, sounds, and presents itself to the player” and games as “artifacts that have the potential to give rise to an aesthetic experience”. Aesthetic experience as “the play of imaginative and cognitive faculties” (Niedenthal 2009: 2-3) is closely associated with the concepts of immersion⁵⁰ or “incorporation” (Calleja 2007). The two terms bear close relations to (the perception of) materiality and “worldness” (Krzywinska 2006: 386)⁵¹ as they interconnect the player with the game. Both concepts can be characterized as follows (Niedenthal 2009: 4):

1. (It) is one in which attention is firmly fixed upon (...) components of a visual pattern
2. Excludes the awareness of other objects or events.

49 For a detailed outline and historical record of the study of “aesthetic” in Cultural Studies with a focus on religion see Heidbrink & Miczek 2010. For interdisciplinary case studies on aesthetical / sensual dimensions of religion in new digital media see the articles of the special issue “Religion on the Internet – Aesthetics and the Dimensions of the senses” of *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4.1. (2010), online available: <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/ojs/index.php/religions/issue/view/1123> (last access 05/02/2014).

50 For further details on the concept of “immersion” see chapter 4.1 of this paper.

51 For further explanation on the term “worldness” see also chapter 4.1. of this paper.

3. Is dominated by intense feelings or emotions.
4. Hangs together, is coherent.
5. Involves „make-believe“.

One dilemma in connection with “aesthetic” in the context of video games is the fact, that there is neither an overarching theoretical framework nor a fixed analytical “toolbox” for its analysis. However, the absence of a consistent theory or method is weakness and strength at the same time: “As it is currently pursued, then, writing from a game aesthetics perspective is a somewhat fluid practice”, as Niedenthal observes, somewhat laconically (Niedenthal 2009: 3). Nonetheless, this deficiency can be a chance for scholars from different disciplines to sharpen and further develop research prospects on aesthetic by having the chance to bringing in their respective subject-specific expertise.⁵²

Especially in terms of world-creation and world design (where aesthetics are closely linked with underlying narratives in order to construct consistent “worlds”) computer games offer a vast field of different styles and approaches, which in most cases can be conceptualized as processes of “remediation” (Bolter & Grusin 2000) and / or “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins 2006) we have already mentioned in chapter 4.1. of this paper. Surprisingly (or maybe necessarily?), familiar elements often derived from (especially Western-Christian) historical and contemporary religious iconography, architecture and landscaping can be found in many digital games such as *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games / 2K Games 2013). In the depiction of the subterranean caverns in the baptism scene, the ecclesiastic architecture with the neo-classical pillars, the winged statues, the stained-glass windows as well as the soundscape, the content and style of the written aphorisms, the voxophone recordings and the cadence of speech of the in-game religious experts all bear strong reminiscence of Christian religious sources and origins and can be subsumed as aesthetical content. Here, questions on the selection, combination, (re-)construction and (re-)contextualisation of religious elements as well as the ascription by the players could be an interesting research scenario which provides insights into contemporary discourse on Christianity.

Some game designs also draw heavily on fictional fantasy such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) as Krzywinska has exemplarily shown by tracing back the construction and characterization of the night elves and their “homeland” along Tolkienian lines (Krzywinska 2008: 130). Fictional world-building (in the literal sense) can be coined as common phenomena in genres such as fantasy and science fiction where the “world” is usually constituted by imaginary landscapes connected by spacial terms which can be built, explored and “mapped”.

52 For examples of approaches from Cultural Studies and Geography, see e.g. Niedenthal 2009: 3.

“J. R. R. Tolkien was the first to create a full realized secondary universe, an entire world with its own geography and histories and legends, wholly unconnected to our own, yet somehow just as real” (George R.R. Martin, quoted by Krzywinska 2008, 132).

This literary form of world-building often becomes subject to computer games and thus also to game aesthetics. In this context, the construction of the religions as well as the religious objects assigned to the different “species” which inhabit the fictional worlds as well as the soundscape in religious spaces, religiously motivated quest texts etc. could lead to interesting conclusions concerning intertextual processes of reception. Of special interest could e.g. be the question, in how far the decidedly Christian worldview of a fantasy author like J.R.R. Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings*, 1954/55) which is inherently present in different aspects of his books (Purtill 1984) also has found entry into the gameworld settings.

Other digital games combine the aesthetics of a certain historical or cultural setting with a specifically attuned gameplay, like the example of *Ōkami* (Clover Studios / Capcom 2006) for Sony Playstation and Nintendo Wii shows. It transfers contents and pattern from Japanese mythology⁵³ into a gameplay that consists (among other) of the mastery of Chinese character calligraphy (conducted by help of the motion controller). Thereby aesthetic and aesthetic experience is acted out on different levels.

A game such as *Okami* demonstrates the way in which these pleasures can coexist in a game: we experience sensory pleasure from the visual, auditory and tactile elements of the play experience, joy from seeing our efforts to bring light to Nippon bear fruit, and aesthetic pleasure from the way in which player agency, expressed through the affordances of brushwork, ties all these together (Niedenthal 2009: 6).

Questions concerning the transfer and transformation processes of contents and iconography from Japanese mythology into the storyline, the audio-visual shaping of the landscape and the game characters and in this case especially the gameplay could be interesting research designs. Do the actors (designers and gamers alike) perceive this aesthetical programme derived from Japanese

53 The title of the game *Ōkami* is a play of words, since two different notations with Chinese characters are possible. One version (狼) means “wolf” whereas a different Character combination (大神) literary means “great god”. However, the meaning of the term “kami” exceeds the concept of “god” by far since in the Shintō context where it is derived from it can include elements in nature, animals and (human) spirits, and energies of some kind which are believed to have a form of “spiritual power”. In the context of the game *Ōkami*, the main character is a white wolf embodying the Shintō mythological sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami so both Character versions would be valid. The Japanese website on the game however uses the version of “great god” (大神). See: <http://www.capcom.co.jp/o-kami/> (last access 05/02/2014).

religious history as religious? If so, how are the contents (re)mediated and contextualised (maybe even in a comparative perspective, e.g. in the US and in Japan)?

A completely different aspect exhibit games which focus on conflicts and war. In many cases, the aesthetical regime (as well as the accompanying narratives, as we have shown in the previous sub-chapter) focusses on “othering” certain groups, as Vít Šisler (Šisler 2008b) has shown for stereotyping Muslims using the example of different video games with a Middle Eastern setting. The author states that the representation of Arab and Muslim cultures in Western media exploits stereotypical generalization and clichés, mostly realized by an iteration of a limited number of textures and schemes. along the lines of Edward Said’s concept of “Orientalism” (Said 1978).

“On the screen, the Muslim Arab continues to surface as the threatening cultural Other (...) He / She lacks a human face and lives in a mythical kingdom of endless desert dotted with oil wells, tents, run-down mosques, palaces, goats, and camels” (Jack Shaheen quoted in (Šisler 2008b).

Since “in-game representations of Arabs and Muslims do not circulate in a ‘ludological vacuum’ and have to be contextualized in a broader (narrative) structure that covers Islam in news and popular media” (Šisler 2008a: 2), the topic of the Middle East as war zone and virtual battleground has become even more significant in the post 9/11 era. Not only have the numbers of games with an objective of fighting terrorism increased significantly, the stereotyping, the “othering” of the (virtual) Muslim counterpart have become even more racist as well (Šisler 2008a: 5).

“The militarization of the video game trope, having reinforced the polarized frame of the good Self and the evil Other, obviates any further explanation of the reason for conflict” (Šisler 2008b: 210).

In this context, the role of religion as source or legitimization of (virtual) conflict as well as the iconographical and auditive patterns and topics on Islam that (re-)emerge in the context could be an interesting approach to research. Especially in terms of bestseller games, the research design of an actor-centered approach could comprise questions on agency, embodiment and self-reflection in Muslim and non-Muslim players.

In more general terms, the topic of “othering” and the depiction of “civilized” and “savage” respectively “familiarity” and “otherness” is also examined by Jessica Langer (Langer 2008) by the example of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) in a postcolonial perspective. She identifies the (visual and conceptual) construction of in-game „races“ according to fictional as well as real-world ethnocultural stereotypes of e.g. black Caribbean and Native North Americans (Langer 2008: 89). This is visible in the modelling of the visual characteristics of the different species, the landscapes, and the construction of their culture and their religion. Langer concludes that

“To an extent unique among current MMORPGs, World of Warcraft takes its cues equally from real-world cultures and from a Tolkienic construction of orcs, trolls, dwarves, elves, and humans. World of Warcraft depictions of these races are therefore doubly familiar: they have both the Tolkienic underpinnings of Western fantasy discourse and stereotyped features of real-world cultures. The result is that they become hybrid stereotypes, with attributes from both sources” (Langer 2008, 92).

Again, questions concerning the depiction of religious contents within the framework of intertextual references and ascription could lead to interesting insights, especially if connected with Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus”⁵⁴ and / or Foucault’s theories on discourse and power⁵⁵.

The importance of the individual perspective (including our own as researchers) especially within the regime of perception and the senses cannot be underestimated. Even though the perception of aesthetic is an individual sensation, the cognitive processing of the apperception is – as we have shown – a discursive process and therefore in part socio-culturally determined (Heidbrink & Miczek 2010: 3). Therefore, aesthetic must always be culturally contextualised! Using the example of the fantasy action role-playing game *Dragon’s Crown* (Vanillaware / Atlus 2013) which is a product of Japanese designers, a rather explicit and exaggerated depiction of gender attributes immediately comes to attention. This fact has led to considerable debates.⁵⁶ However, with regard to the Japanese tradition of *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints) where the depiction of sexual intercourse and men with exaggerated genitalia was a common phenomenon, the display and overstatement of gender characteristics seems (or at least seemed) to have been part of the socio-cultural discourse. The so-called “shunga” (literally “spring drawings”, a Japanese term for erotic art) were an established art form in 17th to 19th century and exhibit direct lines of reception to contemporary manga art (Ito 2008). Including this line of discourse into the debate on the visual design of *Dragon’s Crown* might generate a different perspective and leads to different assumptions.

Our approach towards aesthetic in computer games naturally deals with religious topics and is mostly derived from the theoretical and methodical approaches in the area of Cultural Studies. Our field of interest is focused on the processes of reception and (re-)construction in landscaping, architecture, soundscapes, symbols and other audiovisual contents to which human actors (may) ascribe religious meaning. We are aware that we sometimes must fall short on some aspects of the

54 See: Bourdieu 1984.

55 See e.g. Foucault 1970.

56 There are a multitude of voices agreeing and criticising the design, leading to an official statement by the designers. See e.g. <http://www.destructoid.com/blogs/TitusGroan/sexism-dragon-s-crown-and-the-gaming-community-yes-we-re-going-there—252316.phtml>, <http://www.tyrantandogre.com/the-dragons-crown-controversy-is-stupid-heres-why/>, http://gamasutra.com/blogs/JoshBycer/20130711/196096/Dragons_Crown_and_the_Sexism_Debate.php, <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/123560-Dragons-Crown-Designer-Apologizes-for-Exaggerated-Characters> (last access 05/02/2014).

analysis of non-textual aesthetic contents, e.g. when looking at a game's soundscape or visual design, not being a trained musicologist or art historian.⁵⁷

Returning to our initial case study of the baptism scene in *BioShock!- Infinite* it surely would be very interesting to deeper analysis the soundscape, namely the choice of music in the sequence. Apart from church bells and a reverberant ecclesiastic echoing we identified the devotional song “Will the circle be unbroken”⁵⁸. We can trace the song back to its origins in 1907 and can identify the author of the lyrics and the composer of the tune.⁵⁹ By analysing the lines of receptions throughout the century, we can reconstruct its popularity, the different versions and the general occasions when the song was sung.⁶⁰ We also know, that the copyright of the song has expired and that it is now public domain. About the exact reasons why the tune appears in *BioShock Infinite* we can only speculate. However, we can record our own impressions the song triggers in us, as we as researchers are also actors in the field. Moreover, we can summarize and analyse other actors' ascriptions towards the song, its meaning and its function within the context of the game. Interestingly, there are speculations worthy of further research which point towards the song as secret hint towards the cyclic setting of the plot⁶¹, to name only one of many potential actor-centered research scenarios. Surely a musicologist could dig deeper and we would like to encourage that!

However, we do make exciting and relevant scientific findings by means of analysis and discursive localization of the media elements, the reception processes and the actors' positions beyond the realm of text and communication! And for deeper analysis in subareas of game aesthetics we are not afraid to seek interdisciplinary assistance by experts from the respective fields, if necessary. After all, the analysis of digital games calls for interdisciplinary approaches in order to be able to digging deep into the material at hand and analysing it thoroughly, adequately and from the bottom up.

“When you're forced deep underground, well – you see things from the bottom up” (Daisy Fitzroy, *Bioshock Infinite*).

57 For an approach in musicology, see e.g. Laack 2008.

58 Information on the song and a short description on the context has been given in the introduction of this paper.

59 See: http://hymntime.com/tch/bio/h/a/b/habershon_ar.htm (last access 05/02/2014).

60 General information can be found in the Wikipedia entry on the song on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_the_Circle_Be_Unbroken%3F (last access 05/02/2014).

61 See: <http://adambogert.com/2013/03/29/bioshock-infinite-will-the-circle-be-unbroken/> (last access 05/02/2014).

4.3 Religion and Gameworlds: Where World and Story Meet

Espen Aarseth defines “game-world” as “fictional content, topology/level design, textures etc.” (Aarseth 2003: 2) and thereby focuses on the spatial dimensions of a game, its levels, its interiors and the space that it gives for the objects and characters the player can manipulate or interact with. This lays the groundwork for a category that we would like to open up further. What constitutes the gameworld is not only its topography. The topography often tells the player in some way or another a certain story or some basic narrative and is filled with meaning. Therefore we would like to expand the term “gameworld”.

A gameworld represents the result of a game’s aesthetics, its narrative and its possibilities in the communication between the player and the game.⁶² It is this combined effort of the underlying mechanics and elements that constitute a gameworld that can be experienced by the player. We can think about game environments that open up before us that present e.g. modern-day cities through which we stroll, fantasy forests through which we must traverse or many other landscapes and places. They can be the “home” of our avatar or the objects we manipulate in a game and are the space in which they exist. This aesthetical space can be filled with recognizable structures or architecture, representations of nature, like mountains and trees, and with other objects that tell us something about the environment in which the game takes place. Thereby aesthetics are complemented with narratives and thus form the groundwork of the gameworld. The unique “worldness”⁶³, according to Lisbeth Klastrup (talking especially about online game worlds), emerges from the

“(…) complex interplay between a) the aesthetics of the gameworld as both an actualised explorable and mentally imagined universe; b) the experiences and means of expression the world as a game system and tool allows and affords; c) the social interaction in and about the world” (Klastrup 2008:1).

So the gameworld can be seen as a nexus in which all the strands of aesthetics and narratives merge together and are interwoven with the option of the player to interact with those elements. “Gameworld” points at the larger experience of the game consisting of its mechanics, stories, objects, characters, spaces etc. Thus a fictional or “invented universe” (Klastrup 2008: 2) comes to life. We find ourselves now at a point of higher complexity. Instead of looking at certain aesthetically perceivable symbols, narratives or other smaller elements of a game, we are confronted with greater phenomena. Instead of looking at one character, one symbol etc., we analyse whole communities of NPCs, the spaces they inhabit, the rules of this world that we can

62 For a detailed reflection on game narratives and game aesthetics, see chapter 4.1 and 4.2.

63 For a different perspective on “worldness” also see Krzywinska’s approach mentioned in chapter 4.1.

explore etc. The notion of imagining and pretending also plays a big role for gameworlds. A player will perceive the fictional universe of a game as a world when he plays along with it. The solemn strings of things said and things shown to the player culminate in the “becoming” of the world. The question arises how a player perceives this world. Is he making a cut between “his” world and the world behind the screen? Is he shifting seamlessly between these two? (Klastrup 2008: 5)

Such gameworlds can be filled with lore, stories about it, either told in the game or through additional out-game material like books, comics, films etc.⁶⁴ Whole societies of characters can be elements of it: royal courts, fantasy tribes, space congresses, church congregations, godly pantheons, etc, of course highly depending on the setting and the story. Sometimes religion functions as one of the elements that take place in a gameworld being interwoven with other bits and pieces of telling objects. Bigger open-world RPGs can be good examples for this. The Elder Scrolls’ series, e.g. *The Elder & rolls V(Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), offers the player not only an abundance of topography, landscape and architecture but also puts towns and cities in its environment full of NPCs to speak to that give the player information about this fictional universe. The player can read books in the game that further expand on it and experience the world’s story through quests etc. One is presented with a classical medieval fantasy world with monsters, magic and religion that is expressed through the worship of a pantheon of gods.

Being “drawn into a world”, experiencing “immersion”⁶⁵ in it, is one of the goals that games try to achieve (Klastrup 2008: 4). And a coherent gameworld, or at least one that gives the player the sensation of coherence, can contribute to this experience. Also player action is a significant element in the simulation-like character of certain gameworlds. Doing something in a world, participating in its ruleset, to get involved in its world through exploration and/or through the repertoire of action of the player’s avatar lets the player become part of the gameworld.

Religion can be a part of this universe and does play sometimes a significant role in it. *Skyrim* shows a complex mythology and religious specialists in temples and shrines that give the player information on their meanings. In the *Gothic* series (Piranha Bytes 2001-2006) and its successor *Risen* (Piranha Bytes 2009) one had the choice to join religious orders. Those orders were constructed with special aesthetical elements (temples, altars, monasteries, monks in robes, NPCs performing rituals) and narratives (mentioning of gods, mythologies, articles of faith) and were deeply linked with the surrounding story and had their firm place in this fictional universe.

The more complex religion is woven into the narrative and aesthetics of a gameworld and the more a player can communicate and interact with this element the more likely it is that a response will be generated by the player. One of many possible questions a researcher can work with is e.g.

64 Further details on the processes of “remediation” and “transmedia storytelling”, see chapter 4.1 and 4.2.

65 For different aspects concerning the concept of “immersion”, please refer to chapter 4.1 and 4.2.

how players react to religion in gameworlds. Do they take it for granted as a part of the world and engage in the religious discourse in it? Do they feel threatened in their own religious feelings? Or do they ignore it altogether? What does it mean when a player takes on a role of a religiously charged character in the game (e.g. a monk, a battle-cleric, a participant of a ritual)? What meaning have those elements for the one who is interacting with them?

Taking the example of *BioShock Infinite*, we see a gameworld richly saturated by religious elements which add to the players' immersion into the gameplay to a considerable amount. By enhancing the atmosphere and creating an aesthetical and narrative consistency and coherency. In this context, the baptism scene serves as a leitmotif for the plot, since in the very end of the game the main character (or his alter ego?) indeed is drowned in the process of the baptism. Therefore, the baptism scene is central for the whole game setting, since it constitutes the gameworld as cyclic construction with "wormholes" to a multitude of alternate realities.⁶⁶

4.4 Religion and Gameplay: Immersion into a Field of Study

When it comes to asking the question what digital games *are* all about, what distinguishes them from other media, a multitude of answers can be found. But the most defining and controversial ones revolve around "choice", "interaction" and "agency"⁶⁷.

"Games are about player agency to a very large extent", artist David Hellman tells the gaming website *Polygon* in criticizing the lack thereof in recent installments of *Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda*. According to him, limiting the possibility for choice and adopting a more linear approach means abandoning the need for exploration and disrupting the "sense of wonder and discovery" of earlier *Zelda* games. Ignoring player agency to him means acting against the very "nature of video games and against what they do best"⁶⁸ (Lien 2012).

Hellman is not the only one trying to define gaming experience based on player agency and choice. Game Studies scholar Thomas Apperley, in tackling the question of "game genres", identifies "interactivity" as the binding element of games as a medium (Apperley 2006: 7). Based on Aarseth's criticism of the term as "purely ideological [...] lacking any analytical substance" (Aarseth 1997: 51), Apperley adopts the term "ergodic", describing the very active role of a human actor in the reading and creation of a "cybertext" or – in our case – the playing of a game.

66 For further information concerning the cyclical world construction also see the reference to the song "Will the Circle be Unbroken" in chapter 1 and chapter 4.2 in this paper.

67 See e.g. Thue, Bulitko, Spetch and Romanuik (2010), who state that "Agency, being the ability to change the course of one's experience (...) is a central aspect of video games."

68 Of course, while acknowledging the significance of player agency and choice in distinguishing games from other media, linking the amount of provided player agency with overall enjoyment of a game should be viewed with caution. See e.g. Johnson 2013.

In both cases, “agency”, “choice” and “interaction” (or “ergodic action”) are playing a vital role in defining either the quality or the very nature of video games as a medium. So, when talking about the means to find and study religion in digital games it is essential to look at possible approaches towards gameplay – as a main tool of achieving and describing “agency”, “choice” and “interaction” in games (Thue, Bulitko, Spetch, Romanuik 2010: 210) – and religion.

Instances of religious symbolism in gameplay and even specific game mechanics are easy to find throughout a variety of games and game genres. Just recently, in a development diary concerning the latest expansion *Sons of Abraham*, *Crusader Kings II* developer *Paradox Interactive* talked about the implementation of game mechanics specifically designed to make the gameplay of Jewish and Muslim factions⁶⁹, characters and rulers more compelling to play compared to their Christian counterparts. *Civilization IV* by *Firaxis* lets the player choose between seven pre-set religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Taoism) for his or her own civilization, each with the same effects, but differing in technological requirements to found them. The expansion pack *Gods & Kings* for *Civilization 0* implemented the possibility for the player to create his or her very own religion, based on a set of various “beliefs”, representing the ideas and goals of the religions and granting different bonuses throughout the game.

Of course, religious themes are not only prevalent in games of the ‘strategy’ genre. Action focused games like the “Multiplayer Online Battle Arena” (MOBA) *SMITE: / attleground of the Gods* feature a large variety of character abilities and items inspired by various mythologies. From the official game website:

“SMITE is the online battleground of the gods. Players choose from a diverse cast of deities and use their unique powers to triumph over the opposition in 5v5 team matches.”⁷⁰

Playable gods range from *Agni, Hindu " god of Fire* to *Zeus, " reek " od of the &-'*, each with their own sets of abilities and roles on the battlefield.

The list doesn’t end here. “Ethical decision making systems” (most common in role playing games) like the “moral scale” in *Bioware’s Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Thames 2014), the “karma scale” in *Bethesda’s Fallout M* (Schulzke 2009) and the “Paragon-Renegade” system of the *Mass Effect* series (also by *Bioware*) can – depending on game narrative and player reception – have strong implicit or explicit religious connotations while at the same time changing and influencing the game experience based on the player’s choices.

69 Such as the possibility to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem or to restore the high priesthood for Jewish rulers and the possibility for Muslim rulers to choose between two different schools of theology: the Mu’tazila or the Ash’ari school. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=hCVDNJIVavo (last access 07/02/2014).

70 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smitegame/home/sidebar/game-info/about-smite> (last access 07/02/2014).

What makes the relationship between gameplay and religious association so interesting and meaningful to study is that gameplay can have a direct influence on the “ludic experience” of the game, i.e. player agency and perceived challenge/balancing. As *Gamasutra* author Soren Johnson phrases it:

“Ultimately, game design is a series of tradeoffs, and designers should recognize that choice itself is just one more factor that must be balanced with everything else. Even though player control is core to the power of games, it does not necessarily trump all the other factors, such as brevity, elegance, and variety” (Johnson 2013, Too repetitive, para. 7).

On the one hand, these “tradeoffs” can have a significant impact on the way religion is integrated into and presented through gameplay and game mechanics. The prerequisites for founding a religion in *Civilization IV* may be based on designer reception of said religion (e.g. the technology *Meditation* is needed to found *Buddhism*), but as well on actual balancing and gameplay considerations (e.g. where in the “tech tree” the technology is placed). On the other hand, reception of religious narratives can strongly influence design decisions throughout the development process. In *SMITE*, the gods *Her!ules*, *) hampion of Rome*^{N7} and *Odin, the Allfather*^{N8} are not only represented as brawny warriors, but they are also meant to be played as “melee bruisers” and feature corresponding abilities like *Her!ules*’ “Excavate”, which allows him to rip a huge boulder from the ground and hurl it at an enemy⁷³. While both of these examples aren’t especially interesting in terms of player choice and agency, they already point to a variety of possible approaches towards religion and gameplay.

1. Just like game narratives, game aesthetics and gameworlds, specific elements of gameplay are parts of reception processes of religious beliefs, symbols and narratives, both by game designers and players.
2. Through said reception processes religion in relation to gameplay can play a significant role in influencing and shaping the actual mechanics and gameplay experience of a game.
3. Due to the complex decision making process and the “tradeoffs” involved in the course of creating an enjoyable, challenging (and commercially successful) gameplay experience, the construction of game mechanics and game rules can also have a significant role in

71 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1848> (last access 07/02/2014).

72 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1669> (last access 07/02/2014).

73 *Poseidon, Greek God of the Oceans* even possesses the ability to summon a creature from the depths of the ocean to attack his enemies. An ability, arguably designed for the sole purpose of implementing the iconic phrase “Release The Kraken!” - coined by 1981 fantasy film *The Clash of the Titans* - into the game. See <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1881> (last access 07/02/2014).

influencing and shaping the presentation and therefore reception of the religious beliefs, symbols and narratives inside the game.

Of course, this balancing act of design and gameplay decisions by the game developers is in most cases invisible to the player, who only sees (and receives) the end product. This leads us back to the beginning of this section and back to player agency and choice, or more precisely the lack of choice in the described gameplay sequence at the beginning of *BioShock Infinite*. The so called “forced baptism”⁷⁴ presents us with an excellent example of how gameplay and narrative decisions can come into conflict with player agency and personal views. By prompting the player to push a button to receive baptism and therefore proceed within the game, he or she is provided with the illusion of choice and real agency. The scene is neither avoidable (if one wants to continue the game), nor is it a cut scene where the player becomes a passive spectator of the events without having to consent. Actually the player has to willingly accept the participation in the ritual by clicking a button. He or she either has to accept the baptism or quit the game completely. This fact has led to irritation especially among religious gamers one of whom has even successfully fought for a refund of the sales price⁷⁵ because of “extreme blasphemy” of the baptism sequence. The gaming website *Kotaku* quotes the reaction of the above mentioned gamer:

“As baptism of the Holy spirit is at the center of Christianity – of which I am a devout believer – I am basically being forced to make a choice between committing extreme blasphemy by my actions in choosing to accept this ‘choice’ or forced to quit playing the game before it even really starts.”

He goes on in complaining about how there is no way to somehow bypass or skip the sequence, implying that such an option would have allowed him to play the rest of the game. Therefore one might argue, that the problem – at least for the author of said letter – doesn’t lie in the game’s overall narrative (of which the baptism is an integral part), but in the feeling of denied agency, of being forced into *acting* against one’s own beliefs. The question remains as to whether the sequence would have received a more positive reaction had it been stripped of all gameplay elements, however minimal and had been transformed into a cutscene.

Whatever implications one might draw from this example, it at least points to the importance of taking a closer look at player agency, player choice and thus gameplay when dealing with the issue of religion and games.

74 See: <http://kotaku.com/some-dont-like-bioshocks-forced-baptism-enough-to-as-473178476> (last access 07/02/2014).

75 See: <http://www.polygon.com/2013/4/16/4231064/valve-refunds-baptism-bioshock-infinite> (last access 07/02/2014).

4.5 Religion and ‘Gaming Culture’: “World” and “Play” Intertwined

When first considering writing this section on religion and “gaming culture” our thoughts immediately went to a wallpaper decorating a PC desktop in our office for quite some time now. It depicts a row of iconic video game characters including – among others – *Assassins Creed III*’s main character Connor, *Mass Effect*’s Commander Shepard and the “Psycho” from *Bor erlands I&II*. Written above and below those images is a single sentence: “I am a gamer not because I don’t have a life ... but because I choose to have many”⁷⁶. Often, when looking at it, one can’t help but feel a small hint of pride in the things accomplished in all of those games. Seeing ourselves as “gamers”, we went searching the internet for other like minded people in hopes of finding some opinions on being a gaming enthusiast, of being part of “gaming culture”.

We quickly found a rather lengthy discussion on the forums of the popular gaming website *Neoseeker*. User *Zazomy* takes the title of the popular wallpaper⁷⁷ as an opportunity to ask the other users of the forum the question: “How many of you people are proud to be gamers? How many of you spit in the face of naysayers who would chastise you for your enthusiasm of gaming? What is your attitude towards gaming?”⁷⁸

Only 3 minutes later, user *Paper Fox* provides the first reaction: “Female gamer and proud. Everyone I work with knows I’m a gamer, so much so that I’ve had people I’ve never met before come up to me with gaming related questions.”

But not every response seems to be quite so enthusiastic. User *Paradox* states: “I’m not really ‘proud’ to be a gamer. I will mention that I play video games if someone asks me, but for the most part I keep it and other interests like that to myself.” And *4 rGrim*, adds:

“It’s only natural I guess, people who play games tend to be different, so now we’ve got a whole new sub-sub-subclass of human beings. Now we have ‘gamers’. I just don’t like it. In some cases, it feels normal. Like ‘metalhead’ for someone who likes metal.

A gamer is pretty much what I am, but I hate being part of a classification, except for human. It feels like gamers are trying to say they are part of something, and everyone else is not, and it feels like everyone else is going to start to resen[t] and not understand it. There already are some, like the people who can say that gamers have no life for example.

76 See: http://www.wallpaperhere.com/I_am_a_Gamer_104691 (last access 07/02/2014).

77 A slight derivation of the phrase can also be found on a so called “meme”, depicting a figure cut together from various video game characters (although it is hard to determine which of both is the older one). See <http://weknowmemes.com/2012/06/im-a-gamer-because-i-dont-have-a-life/> (last access 07/02/2014).

78 See: <http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/18/t1754371-am-gamer-not-because-don-have-life-but-because-choose-to-have-many/> (last access 07/02/2014).

As video games start taking a large place in many people's live, it is no doubt going to be another thing for people to argue and debate about."⁷⁹

The discussion goes on for several more pages, but the underlying tone seems to be, that there is no agreement to what it means to be a gamer, to be part of "gaming culture" (or not) or what the term even means. Regardless, especially gaming related public media seems to have adopted the term on a broad basis. Popular sites like *Gameinformer* have created their own sub sections dedicated to "gamer culture" related news⁸⁰, an online article on "amasutra", written by Christopher Totten (2010), emphasizes "the importance of gaming culture" in forming bridges between "gamers" and "non-gamers" and online encyclopedias like *6 iki edia*⁸¹ and *Tvtropes*⁸² are crediting 'video game culture' with various phenomena like it's own slang and terminology, it's influence on music or social implications like "MMORPG identity tourism" or the influence of the real-time strategy game *Starcraft* in South Korea.

So what exactly is this "gaming, gamer or video game culture" everyone is talking about? And what do we have to look at in regards to religion and digital games? The first question has already been addressed by Adrienne Shaw in her article "What is Video Game Culture?: Cultural Studies and Game Studies" (Shaw 2010) where she did some extensive research on press as well as academic discourses on "video game culture". Summarizing her findings and looking at the problem from a Cultural Studies perspective, she advises scholars against a definition and therefore "othering" of video game culture, which would only serve in setting it apart from "regular" culture. Instead, academics should not only draw on the terminology, but also the concepts as well as the internal conflicts of Cultural Studies when dealing with the culture of gaming:

"We must be reflexive and critical of both our object of study and our methodologies. Defining gaming culture as something distinct and separate from a constructed mainstream culture encourages us to only study those who identify as gamers, rather than more dispersed gaming. That is, we should look at video games in culture rather than games as culture" (Shaw 2010: 416).

Drawing on Stuart Hall's work on "black culture" (Hall 1993: 111ff.), she suggests to "look at video game culture as inclusively and diversely as possible." ((Shaw 2010: 416) According to her, the study of games should not only focus on a singular and allegedly homogeneous gaming community, but should try to address the diversity and heterogeneity of players and playing practices as "video

79 See: <http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/18/t1754371-am-gamer-not-because-don-have-life-but-because-choose-to-have-many/>

80 See: <http://www.gameinformer.com/p/culture.aspx>

81 See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game_culture

82 See: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/VideoGameCulture>

games permeate education, mobile technologies, museum displays, social functions, family interactions, and workplaces” and “(...) are played by many if not all ages, genders, sexualities, races, religions, and nationalities.” ((Shaw 2010: 416)

So what does this mean for the study of religion and digital games? Based on Shaw’s observations and suggestions, this question may be addressed from two different – sometimes overlapping – angles: religion and ‘culture in games’ and religion and ‘games in culture’.

Religion and ‘Culture in Games’

This approach refers to the way religious symbols, narratives and practices are drawn upon, received, transformed and represented ‘inside’ video games to create an immersive, coherent and therefore enjoyable – or at least ‘believable’ - experience for the players. Thoughts on this topic, including examples and sections on game narratives, game aesthetics, game worlds and gameplay have already been addressed in chapter 4.1 through 4.4 of this article.

Sticking to Shaw’s critical approach on the definition of culture, one possible way of looking at religion and ‘culture in games’ may be to ask the question how religious beliefs and symbols are used inside games to ‘identify’ specific cultural groups and factions. As Raymond Williams phrases it: “[i]n contemporary parlance, culture consists of four sorts of elements: norms, values, beliefs, and expressive symbols” (Shaw 2010: 405). Looking for such elements in video game narratives, aesthetics, worlds and gameplay mechanics in both “imagined” (e.g. fantasy worlds like *World of Warcraft*) and “real world based”⁸³ scenarios (e.g. the *Call of Duty* and *Age of Empires* series or *Command and Conquer: Generals*) may give us important information on the game designer’s understanding of cultural and religious identity as well as provide us with the opportunity of disclosing processes of social construction and “othering”.⁸⁴

Of course Williams definition of culture is only one of many possible definitions which – like Shaw phrases it: “[..] has been a persistent debate in Cultural Studies as it should be in the analysis of video game culture.” (Shaw 2010: 405) What this means is, that there are as many approaches to religion and ‘culture in games’ as there are possible definitions for the term “culture” (or “religion”, while we’re at it). Which should not prevent game focused academia from discussing the accompanying questions and issues.

83 For the purpose of this article, the differentiation between “imagined” and “real world based” game scenarios has solely been made to avoid the exclusion of the former when dealing with the construction of cultural identities in games. In fact, the term “real world” should be handled with extreme caution with regards to digital games and virtual worlds as a whole.

84 One such work is Vit Šisler 2008a, where he specifically discusses the “othering” of these groups by mainstream European and American games and the process of “digital emancipation” of Middle Eastern developers. For more information see also chapter 4.1 and 4.2 in this paper.

Religion and “Games in Culture”

The same goes of course for dealing with religion and ‘games in culture’. But while the previous section dealt primarily with ‘game-immanent’ representations of religion, this one refers to religious beliefs and practices that go beyond the boundaries of games, oftentimes either leaving them behind and entering the “real world” or using them to create something completely new, something not envisioned by the games’ designers.

There are numerous examples of how video games are influencing and shaping contemporary pop culture, many of which have in the past been discussed – both by academics and by popular media, as described by Shaw – under the terms “gaming culture”, “video game culture” or “gamer culture”. While keeping clear from such attributions, the actual phenomena usually associated with these categories still remain. The (sometimes major, sometimes minor) influence of games on popular culture can be found in musical performances, television shows and channels, movie adaptations, “e-sport” events and “cosplay” conventions and iconic video game characters like *Mario*, *Pacman* or *Sonic the Hedgehog* are known by “gamers” and “non-gamers” alike. In the same vein, public discourse on religion and video games has become more and more prevalent throughout the “gaming community”. Examples being the debate on *BioShock Infinite*’s “baptism scene”⁸⁵, already mentioned in chapter 4.1 and 4.4 of this article, general discussions on web forums like *The Escapist*^{GF} and even the “proposition” of founding a “Church of the Latter Day Player” presented by Andy Robertson at the Greenbelt Festival 2012⁸⁷ including its controversial discussion, e.g on *Boutube*^{GG} and *Kotaku*^{GH}.

But reducing the interactions between games and culture to a “one-way street” of pop cultural influences would mean disregarding the creative influence of players on their games and the way they are bringing their own norms, values, practices and belief systems into the games, often than not transforming and reshaping them in the process. Games like *Minecraft*, which provides the player with almost limitless creative possibilities in shaping the game to their own liking without confining them by setting specific goals and rules, may function as a great example for how players sometimes draw on their own cultural, social and religious influences to shape the world around them, sometimes alone and sometimes in groups. But at the same time *Minecraft* remains the exception to the (quite literal) rule and more often than not, players have to adapt to a game’s very strict rules and design boundaries when trying to express themselves.

85 Please refer to chapter 4.4 in this article for more information on the matter.

86 See: <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/9.405993-Religion-in-Video-Games> (last access 07/02/2014).

87 See: <http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/media/video/19784-andy-robertson/> (last access 07/02/2014).

88 See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX8J5ORkcUo&feature=youtu.be> (last access 07/02/2014).

89 See: <http://kotaku.com/video-games-are-the-next-big-religion-991525452> (last access 07/02/2014).

On September 11th, 2012 insurgents attacked the US consulate in Lybia and killed several people in the process. Among those killed was Sean Smith, known as “Vile Rat” in the space MMORPG *+0+ Online*. Under this name, Smith had worked himself to a position of great renown, influence and power inside the game. Last acting as ‘chief diplomat’ for *Goonswarm*, *ederation*, one of *+0+*’s largest player alliances of the time, he had played a major part in shaping the game’s political landscape. In reaction to his passing, many fellow alliance members, friends and *+0+* players decided to remember Vile Rat inside the game and did so in various creative ways: Numerous player controlled outposts throughout the *+0+* universe were renamed to “Vile Rat Memorial Park”, “Vile Rat Memorial Station” or “RIP Vile Rat”. Additionally, another in-game tribute was created by writing the name “Vile Rat” into space through the use of so called “bubbles”⁹⁰ inside of which individual players used the in-game item ‘cynosural field’ to ‘light candles’, thereby paying their respects.⁹¹ In this case, players used the game’s own mechanics to express their sympathy, mourning and respect inside the game in a creative manner. At the same time, they were transporting practices from the ‘outside’ (e.g. the lighting of candles) world into the game, adapting them to its boundaries and therefore transforming them.

There are more cases of these kinds of transportation, adaption and transformation processes, shown for instance by Heidbrink, Miczek and Radde-Antweiler in their work on mourning rituals in virtual worlds and games like – especially relevant in our case – the *World of Warcraft* (Heidbrink, Miczek, Radde-Antweiler 2011: 172ff) as described in chapter 4.1 of this article. Using the example of *BioShock Infinite*, we already mentioned the debates which arose from the conflicting religious concepts of the in-game setting in contrast to the socio-cultural realities of the players (e.g. the discourse on the “forced baptism”). Additionally, we find many sources for players’ deep involvement into the gameworld by their discussing, recording and reconceptualizing of in-game content in their daily “physical” life.⁹² These instances clearly show how religion can be an integral element of discourse in “culture in games” as well as “games in culture”.

While these are mere examples for a much wider possible area of studies, it can be stated that dealing with religion and ‘games in culture’ means dealing with complex processes of interaction, exchange, adaption and transformation of cultural and religious practices and beliefs. It is left to researchers of religion and digital games to identify these processes and place them into the broader context of contemporary reception, negotiation and expression of individual religious identity.

90 “Warp Disruption Fields” (or “Bubbles”, named after the large blue sphere, they form after being deployed) are stationary devices, used by players in *EVE Online* to prevent other ships from “warping” away, thereby stopping them from fleeing and forcing them to engage possible attackers. See https://wiki.eveonline.com/en/wiki/Warp_Disruption_Fields (last access 07/02/2014).

91 See: <http://kotaku.com/5943483/here-is-eves-in+world-tribute-to-its-slain-diplomat> (last access 07/02/2014).

92 See e.g. the extensive contributions of gamers to e.g. the *BioShock Wiki* on http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/BioShock_Wiki or *BioShock* cosplay on <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/bioshock-cosplay> (last access 07/02/2014).

5 Conclusio: Towards a “Religious Games Studies Manifest”

Throughout the course of this paper, we have presented various perspectives and examples on how religion is being adopted, represented, modified, received and communicated by players and designers alike. Examining the role of religious elements in “game narratives”, “game aesthetics”, “game worlds”, “gameplay” and “gaming culture”, we have argued that these elements in video games can serve as an indicator for the negotiation of religious topics in different socio-cultural settings, the construction of fictional religious worlds, religious conflicts or even as instruments for the visualization of subliminal socio-cultural discourses, thereby enforcing the importance of further academic study in the field of games and religion.

In this last chapter we would like to share some final thoughts on general perspectives as well as considerations on approaches when dealing with the issue of religion and digital games. Regardless which perspective one takes when looking at religion and digital games, be it narrative, aesthetics, game worlds, gameplay or “gaming culture” (or a mixture of these approaches), the question of ‘what’ exactly one should study remains an important one. Throughout this article we tried to encourage a ‘two sided’ view and approach to this issue: a “game-immanent” approach on the one side and an “actor-centered” approach on the other side.

Both perspectives possess the ability to give important insights into the way religion and games (and the players) interact, each raising and inspiring their own respective research questions. “Game-immanent” approaches can be used to ask for and analyse the way “mythic structures” are used in games like *6 orld of 6 arcraft* to create a feeling of consistency and coherency within the game world, while in other games the representation of certain characters and religious practices in narratives and gameplay mechanics may serve as a form of cultural “othering”. On the other hand “actor-centered” approaches can sharpen the view on the way players and designers of video games receive, adopt and negotiate religious content or are introducing their own religious beliefs and practices into the “game sphere”.

However, as the examples given in this article indicate, a strict separation of “game-immanent” and “actor-centered” approaches rarely help in highlighting the bigger picture of interactions between religion and games. Asking for the constitution of coherency and consistency or the process of “othering” by means of religiously charged narratives, aesthetics or gameplay mechanics is of little use if we don’t involve the game designer, who decided to implement these elements into the game and the player, who is confronted with them, thereby starting his or her own process of reception and occasionally public discourse. Likewise, following the various discourses in the context of religion and digital games is of little use, if we don’t have a solid comprehension of the games in question. Generally speaking, “game-immanent” and “actor-centered” approaches

remain a question of perspective, influencing mainly the focus of study rather than its practical methods. Whether a researcher of religion and games might decide for one or the other, his or her methods should always consider the whole picture by integrating qualitative analysis of game “text” and structure, gamer and designer reception and related discourses as well as – in any case – actual play.

Let us finally and as a general summary of this article list some key points we consider as essential for the research of digital games within a Cultural Studies perspective:

1. **Know your material!** In order to adequately research (religious contents in) digital games you need to be familiar with the game you are analysing. That means, you need to play it, since it is your “field” of study and research. In the same way as ethnographers do field work (mostly) in a geographical sense, you have to “immerse” into your virtual game environment. Thoroughly. Looking over other players’ shoulders does not count and will never suffice! You. Have. To. Play!
2. While doing your research, always mind your own position, opinions, socio-cultural and religious localization and context(s). **You are – as a gamer-scholar – also an actor in the field** you are researching. No more and no less. Reflect it! And forget about neutral viewpoints, those are scientific myths that do not exist!
3. Always be aware that the game you are researching is a cultural artifact, a composition of and by the socio-cultural discourses it is embedded in. **Reflect on the specific cultural context** it derives from, especially if it is not your own (but even then)! It may open your eyes and change your perspective. Above all, **digital games always are a product of contemporary popular culture**. They are a part and output of this culture, a synthesis in a way. Think of culture as a complex formation of interwoven and fluid fields of discourses which are constantly being shifted and negotiated. Whoever talks about “gaming culture” as “subculture” is welcome to validate his/her point. We doubt it is possible. Besides, empirical data (e.g. Yee 2006) proves otherwise.
4. If doing your research, **focus but contextualize!** In the course of your study, you need to phrase a research question and focus on certain topics or elements. This is a necessary and pragmatic decision. However, always keep in mind, that games consist of a multitude of interdependent contents and elements and perspectives, such as the material-immanent and the actor-centered dimensions are always interlinked and necessarily so! You won’t be able to consider and incorporate all possible dimensions of research, but you have to reflect upon the possible limitations of your study!
5. **As a gamer-scholar, you might be a nerd.** Get used to it and look on the bright side! You might be able to combine work and play. Have fun!

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Studying Religion in Digital Gaming

A Critical Review of an Emerging Field

Gregory Price Grieve

Heidi A Campbell

Abstract

This article provides an overview of the study of religion and gaming by outlining the dominant approaches, development and themes in this new interdisciplinary field of inquiry. It highlights dominant thematic and methodological approaches currently within the field of religion and digital games studies including the study of religiously-themed games, the role religion plays in mainstream games, and how gaming can be seen as a form of “implicit religion”. This critical review is contextualized in relation to the studies presented in a forthcoming book, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, which maps key theoretical approaches and interpretive trends related to how different expressions of religion and religiosity are manifested in various gaming genres and narratives. We show that digital games are an important site of exploration into the intersection of religion and contemporary culture helping us understand what religion is, does, and means in a changing contemporary society.

Keywords

digital games, play, implicit religion, narrative, game studies, video games

You feel like you’ve seen it before. The perpendicular Gothic spires of a thirteenth-century medieval cathedral tower over the strangely empty English countryside. Inside, the richly decorated choir stalls are empty; the sun filters through the stained-glass windows, streaking the dust-filled air and illuminating the gilded nave and the hallowed halls, which are covered with a veneer of centuries of prayer. Suddenly, there is a blood-curdling screech, and the cathedral is filled with the scurry of hundreds of spider-like creatures that fill the shadows. A blast shatters the silence, and multiple flashes of gunfire light the darkness. An archway begins to crumble; tracer bullets fill the air, leaving behind red puffs of blood. For a moment there is near-silence, with only strange

growling whispers to be heard. Then, the click of reloading, and the shooting begins again. Of course, this is not happening in the actual world, but in a digital game. The violent shootout is under way between the alien race called the Chimaera and the last vestiges of humankind in Sony's first-person shooter game *Resistance: Fall of Man* (2006). Set in an alternative history where Europe has been invaded by aliens, a virtual copy of the Manchester Cathedral in England is utterly destroyed at the hands of warring soldiers and, of course, the gamer.¹

This example illustrates how modern video games, such as *Resistance: Fall of Man*, are heavily coded with religious undertones, and how they interact with the larger society. Consider for instance, almost immediately after the release of the game in the United Kingdom, the Church of England claimed that the digital depiction desecrated the actual physical cathedral and violated copyright.² As the digital recreation of Manchester Cathedral and the controversy its virtual destruction caused illustrate, religion has a significant presence in the digital context. Indeed, since the 1990s everyday religious practices have become increasingly intertwined with new forms of media. In the twenty-first century, scholars have noted how people use digital media to recreate religious practices: they visit online shrines, take virtual pilgrimages, and incorporate social media and the internet into their spiritual routines. Despite this, the study of religion and gaming has not received much attention in the study of religion and the internet and it remains one of the most understudied elements of such digital environments.

This article seeks to provide an overview of the study of religion and gaming by outlining the dominant approaches, developments and themes in this new interdisciplinary field of inquiry. This review is then contextualized in relation to a forthcoming book, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Campbell & Grieve 2014), which offers a foundation for theoretical reflection on key themes in the field including how religious gaming is constructed ideologically, and how different expressions of religion and religiosity are manifested in different gaming genres and narratives. Through this work we demonstrate that digital games are an important site of exploration into the intersection of religion and contemporary culture that helps us understand what religion is, does, and means in a changing contemporary society. We contend that just like films helped to illuminate and expose the religiosity of the twentieth century, digital games now depict the religious within the twenty-first century.

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- 1 BBC News 2007 Cathedral Row over Video War Game, viewed 14 March 2013 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/manchester/6736809.stm>.
 - 2 BBC News 2007 Fantasy Meets Reality in Church Row, viewed 14 March 2013 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6738309.stm>.
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1. A Prolegomena to the Study Religion and Digital Games

Walter Ong argues in *The Presence of the Word (Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History)*, that different media may make different religiosities possible (see Ong 1967). Ong suggests that religion began in an era of orality, was transmitted into visual form through manuscript writing as well as print, and has now entered the world in a new way via electronic media. Digital games represent an important sphere of cultural and religious study, as they reflect and shape contemporary religiosity in unique intentional and unintentional ways. Digital games have become a fertile and essential ground for research into what it means to be human in the fullest sense.

Though scholars have begun paying attention to the intersection of religion and digital game in the past decade, for the most part the intersections between digital games and religion has often been neglected. We assert this is typically because of four reasons: games are widely considered simply a form of young people's entertainment; video games are often seen as artificial or unvalued forms of expression; technology is thought to be secular; and virtual gaming worlds are seen as unreal. Because games are assumed to be merely frivolous childish fun, mixing religion and gaming is problematic for many people. Religion and games have a long intertwined history. As Rachel Wagner (see 2012c) shows, games and religion share many of the same structural elements, this echoes the work of Johan Huizinga, a Dutch historian and one of the founders of Game Studies (see Huizinga 1955).

While some still perceive the average digital game player as a young male playing alone, just wasting time, a large gap exists between the public perception of who plays video games and what the research demonstrates (see Sternheimer 2003). Statistics show that video games are not a ghetto of adolescent boys: the average gamer is thirty-five years old and has been playing for thirteen years.³ Forty percent of all game players are women; boys age seventeen or younger account for only 18 percent of players.⁴ Moreover, gamers do not play alone, but typically play with others - either face-to-face or online (see Gee 2001). The perceived connections between the availability of video games and an epidemic of youth violence do not have a solid foundation, and research has not conclusively proved that video games desensitize players (see Grossman 2000; Heis 2000; Jenkins 2002).

A second reason that religion is frequently overlooked within digital games is that some assume games to be shallow, unable to carry or communicate important ideas. This means that they are seen as an inferior medium of expression, whose messages are playful and not to be taken seriously. Such assumptions have been expressed by religious groups as well as by some

3 Entertainment Software Association, viewed 14 March 2013 <<http://www.theesa.com>>.

4 Ibid.

technologists and game designers. For example, in 2012, Apple stated in its "App Store Guidelines," "We view Apps different than books or songs, which we do not curate. If you want to criticize a religion, write a book."⁵ The guidelines explain that applications containing critiques, controversial framings of religious groups, and offensive references to or misquotations of religious texts will be rejected. Religious content "should be educational or informative rather than inflammatory." While Apple's stance appears to be an attempt to limit what could be perceived as offensive content to dissimilar groups, it also innately communicates that games are not able to provide critical reflection or arguments about topics such as religion, which the company feels should be covered in text-based, or electronic books. Furthermore, even though the designer sought to provide a space where play could reveal wider implications of multiple outcomes, in 2012 Apple rejected the game *Endgame: &yria* (Auroch Digital Ltd. 2012) (which is based on the real civil war in the Middle Eastern nation) because of its perceived targeting of "a specific race, culture, a real government or corporation, or any other real entity."⁶ While this can be seen as simply an attempt at ethical policing of app content, it also points to assumptions about the controversial nature of religion in popular media content, and that certain media platforms, such as games, should be neutral spaces avoiding not only stereotyping, but also complex narratives related to religious history and tradition. This limiting of how religion is dealt with in app and digital culture is something not seen in game development in general, since many popular games draw on religious narratives, characters, and symbols as central themes directing gameplay. The move toward serious gaming has meant that games often deal with very complex historical and cultural framings as religious and political narratives often underlie gameplay.

Reflecting an implied secularization theory, a third reason religion tends to be ignored in relation to gaming is that digital media are seen as the epitome of modernity and therefore imagined as anathema to religious practice. Such secularist assumptions draw from the work of early sociologists such as Karl Marx and Max Weber, who have been re-popularized by authors such as Dawkins and Hitchens, who claim that society is becoming increasingly secularized; this work also contends that scientific progress, especially technological progress, will bring about religion's eventual decline (see Dawkins 2006; Hitchens 2007; Smith 2007). Some have argued that because digital media and networks bring different traditions in close contact with one another, allowing alternative voices to have a global platform, this will ultimately dissolve traditional faith structures. Indeed, some frame the internet in particular as a catalyst for the potential secularization of society. Nonetheless, as the scholar of religion and digital media Christopher Helland claims, "Religion on

5 App Store Guidelines, viewed 14 March 2013, reposted at <<http://www.cultofmac.com/58590/heres-the-full-text-of-apples-new-app-store-guidelines/#p6smqGUzOLVfKsgv.99>>.

6 Venture Beat ,2013 'Apple: 'Want to Criticize Religion? Write a Book'--Don't Make a Game', viewed 14 March 2013,<<http://venturebeat.com/2013/01/15/apple-want-to-criticize-religion-write-a-book-dont-make-a-game/#YrZCyRBPJbrTCQ1m.99h>>.

the internet is a unique phenomenon. Due to its massive online presence, it challenges traditional academic theories that link the secularization process with developments in modernity and technology." (Helland 2005). In fact, there is no one evolution of technology. Since the mid-1990s, many religions and religious actors have used digital information technology in radically different ways to spread and practice their faith (see Campbell 2005). Consequently, as the chapters in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* demonstrate, claims that the growth of technology and of secularization go hand in hand are unfounded.

Finally, the claim is often made that because digital games are a "virtual" medium, that means they are unreal or do not reflect reality. Indeed, the question of whether digital games can be viewed as an authentic form of expression has been raised in the courts. In April 2002, the U.S. district judge Stephen N. Limbaugh Sr. ruled that digital games are incapable of conveying ideas based on reality, and that digital images are not "real" and therefore enjoy no constitutional protection. As evidence, St. Louis County presented the judge with videotaped excerpts from four games, all in the first-person shooter genre. In June 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the ruling, and declared that digital games are covered under the First Amendment: "Like the protected books, plays and movies that preceded them, video games communicate ideas--and even social messages--through many familiar literary devices (such as characters, dialogue, plot, and music) and through features distinctive to the medium (such as the player's interaction with the virtual world)." (see Brown 2008).

Soon after *Resistance: Fall of Man's* release, the Church of England claimed that the digital depiction desecrated the actual physical cathedral and violated copyright.⁷ To prevent further virtual desecrations, the cathedral announced its "Sacred Digital Guidelines," which included provisions that game designers "respect our sacred spaces as places of prayer, worship, peace learning and heritage," and "do not assume that sacred space interiors are copyright free."⁸ While publicly apologizing, Sony responded to the controversy by arguing that "throughout the whole process we have sought permission where necessary" and, furthermore, that the game "is entertainment, like Doctor Who or any other science fiction. It is not based on reality at all."⁹ It is clear that a number of issues and assumptions have framed religion and gaming as a contentious meeting, at odds with one another. Yet the study of this intersection is not only fruitful and worthwhile, but we assert it also contributes new depth to current explorations in Game Studies.

7 "Fantasy Meets Reality in Church Row, viewed 14 March 2013
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/manchester/6736809.stm>.

8 [Times Online 2007 Manchester Cathedral Says Sony Apology Not Enough and Issues New Digital Rules](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article2098466.ece), viewed 3 March 2009. <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article2098466.ece>>.

9 BBC Online 2008 Sony Apologises over Violent Game, viewed 17 October 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6276460.stm>>.

2. A Genealogy of the Study of Religion in Digital Games

Because of the relatively brief history of digital gaming and its neglect by scholars of religion and media, the academic study of religion in gaming has a correspondingly short genealogy. Scholarly work began to surface in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century and gained momentum through discussions hosted at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting later in the decade. In 2007, in a panel called "Born Digital and Born Again Digital: Religion in Virtual Gaming Worlds," scholars presented work on religiously themed games, the problematic appearance of violent narratives in religious gaming, and the rise of the Christian gaming industry. In 2008 the panel "Just Gaming? Virtual Worlds and Religious Studies" considered the use and presence of religious rituals and narratives in mainstream video gaming.^o These presentations drew attention to the need for a more focused study of religion in gaming and virtual worlds. While in the last decade scholars within Religious Studies and Media Studies have begun to pay attention to the importance of religion in gaming, still few books dedicated solely to the critical study of religion and gaming exist. The edited volume *Halos and #atars: Playing Video Games with God* was the first collection to offer a range of religious critiques and responses from scholars, religious practitioners, and game producers regarding the nature and content of video games. This was followed by a published collection from a conference on religion and play entitled, *Religions in Play (Games, Ritual & Worlds)* that provides an historical overview of the relationship between different forms of physical, board, card and digital games to religion. The most recent is William Sims Bainbridge's book *eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming* looks at conceptualizations of the sacred in massively multiplayer online roleplaying games. It is within this emerging conversation that *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* seeks to contribute by offering a systematic and focused thematic investigation of the growth of the study of religion and its relationship to Game Studies. This article draws its arguments and observations from work presented in this text.

Scholars in the study of religion and gaming within the last decade have primarily focused on a few specialized topics. One of the first areas of inquiry focused on religious education research as it related to video games, including pedagogical reflections on using gaming within religious education (see Scholtz 2004), and how video games may be used to contribute to religious identity formation and the development of critical reflection (see Hayse 2009). Such work has frequently focused on the symbolism and narratives of explicitly religious-themed games. Related to this work, some scholars have considered how specific religious groups, especially within the Christian tradition, have approached or responded to games and gaming culture. Here we see studies unpacking the cultural and theological stories underlying popular games such as *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, and those seeking to provide frameworks for a critical evaluation of games based on the boundaries of specific faith communities (see Schut 2012). Clifford Scholtz emphasizes that the

study of games created by religious groups and for religious education highlights a number of themes that are shared with the broader field of game studies; these include the exploring of identity negotiation, ritual, and flow theory in media environments (see Scholtz 2005).

Researchers have also examined specifically how popular mainstream video games, such as *Halo* (343 Industries 2001-2012) or *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007-2012), use religion as a narrative tool or plot device (see Corliss 2011). In this case, the focus has been on the role played by religion and how religious meaning circulates and is interpreted in readings of video games. The incorporation of religious symbols and characters may have unintended consequences for gameplay. For instance, Mark Hayse has argued that "religion within video games tends to suffer from a narrative and procedural incongruity," since mixing religion and gaming can be inherently problematic (see Hayse 2012: 182). He notes, as similarly observed by Bogost, that the adoption of the procedural rhetoric, especially as it relates to violent narratives in mainstream games, informs religious narratives in ways that challenge the traditional framing of morals and codes of behavior (see Bogost 2007). Issues such as these have been studied in detail in the rising scholarship around Islamogaming, which has questioned how gaming narratives and environments may enforce religious and ethnic stereotypes or be used to present alternative identity representations (see Šisler 2006; Campbell 2010). Vít Šisler, a pioneer in this area, has demonstrated the intentionality of Arab game designers to subvert and refashion traditional Western framings of Arab and Muslim characters as villains. This demonstrates how religious representation can be used to create "serious games," thereby turning gameplay into an important arena for religious and political discourse (see Šisler 2009; 2008). Such inquiries into the consequences of certain game narratives and structures on player beliefs and behaviors are of interest not only to this subfield, but also to Game Studies in general.

More recently, scholars have taken an interest in the relationship between virtual play, the sacred, and the performance of religion in gaming (see Plate 2010). Considering, for instance, how games present and offer rituals that mimic attributes of religiosity, which add purpose and meaning to gameplay in this context, emphasis is frequently placed on the gaming environment and the experiential nature of gaming (see Pargman & Jakobsson 2008). Drawing on Huizinga's concept of the magic circle as the way to explore the relationship between play and symbolic and religious ritual and magic, some work in this category has additionally considered the nature of the sacred and magic in gaming. Notable here is the work of Rachel Wagner, who has explored in detail the ways video games evoke the "otherworldly" and encourage an escape from the daily or mundane in the same way that religious ritual invites practitioners into a space of play and re-imagination (see Wagner 2010; 2012c). Wagner has also produced the only monograph to date that gives significant attention to the relationship between religion and gaming, dealing with gaming in a broad context of religious imagination and virtuality (see Wagner 2012b). Her work explores what she calls "first-

person shooter religion" as a theoretical frame to discuss how the boundaries of computer and gaming culture configure the gaming experience in a manner similar to the ways religious culture and tradition frame behavior in a religious space (see Wagner 2012). As Wagner illustrates in "God in the Game: Cosmopolitanism and Religious Conflict in Videogames," this expression of implicit religion is even more apparent in the proliferation of handheld digital devices, which offer an almost religious vision by imposing order on a chaotic environment driven by information overload. Implicit religion recognizes that seemingly secular practices may serve a religious role in people's everyday lives (see Bailey 1990), which means that traditional religious language and notions can be transposed onto actions and artifacts previously seen as nonreligious. This area of research adds to innovative theoretical thinking on issues arising from gaming studies, and considers how the nature of serious games and the gamification of culture may impact and have application to wider social relationships and contexts.

3. Emerging Themes within the Study of Religion and Digital Games

In an attempt to provide a clear overview of the field and its emerging themes *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* brings together a range of compelling and important contributors on religion and gaming to offer an overview and synthesis of key questions and approaches being taken in this growing area of research: the study of religiously themed games; considering the role religion plays in mainstream games; and finally--though at first glance it may seem a completely secular enterprise--reflection on how gaming can be seen as a form of implicit religion in terms of experience and expression. Although scholars have paid attention to the dominant narratives in religiously themed games, further work is needed on the implications of such constructs for gamers and each community's presentation of religious identity. Mainstream games such as *Halo* and *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1986-2013) frequently evoke or rely on religious narratives, symbols, and rituals to frame and facilitate gameplay. The ways in which video games and virtual world environments, such as *Second Life* (Linden Research, Inc 2003) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-2011), might offer players religious experiences has received some attention. However, this raises additional issues about the extent to which religious themes underlie digital storytelling, and the implications this has for the gaming experience. Religious-like experiences or gaming encounters can indeed be described in religious terms. Furthermore, the question of how gaming practice and culture might be discerned and understood as a form of implicit religion emerges especially when secular activities take on a sacred role or meaning for individuals. Thus *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* draws together a range of studies from innovative scholars, which coincide with these three common areas of inquiry—religious games, religion in games and

gaming as religion--in order to map and evaluate how studying religion in digital gaming contributes to a fuller understanding of gaming culture.

Through a close reading of literature in the field and works found in *Playing *ith Religion* we have identified a number emerging themes within religion and digital games research worth more scholarly attention. We argue that the study of religious symbols, representations, and narratives reveals how gaming may have larger cultural and religious implications, which are frequently unforeseen by both game designers and players. This is seen in the presentation of a "haunted magic circle" in gameplay, which associates religious narratives with the horror genre (see Walter 2014) so religion is framed in ways that are both innovative and problematic. From the study of Arab stereotyping within popular digital games to tension and protests within India in employing sacred narratives in violent video games scholars have note different religious and cultural groups may find the employment of religion in games may be seen as highly problematic (see Zeiler 2014). This is especially true when nontraditional religious interpretations unintentionally make gameplay a source of cultural "othering", or Orientalization (see Šisler 2014). This requires scholars to carefully consider the broad range religious and cultural impact of religiously-themed games.

Another observation noted is the need for further investigation of why religion is present at all within popular digital games. This suggests the need to closely examine the implications of the integration of religion into this genre, and what impact this may have on understandings of play and playfulness within game theory. Some research asserts that across history, religion and play have gone hand- in-hand as a way to instruct, inform, affirm, and inculcate players into specific narrative and worldviews (see Anthony 2014). Consequently, the gaming enterprise can be seen as simultaneously playful and provide an indoctrination into certain beliefs and behaviors; gaming must therefore be studied as a culture-building sphere. Gameplay evokes unique patterns of flow, empowerment, and disempowerment that are associated with religious feelings (see Steffen 2014). Because gaming may lead players to draw on broad religious narratives to explain their emotions and experiences, understanding religious language and tradition becomes essential in interpreting the process of gaming. This innate link between religion and play also raises interesting questions about how religion is framed or possibly extricated from a particular gaming context in order to avoid controversy, such as work on gaming companies attempting to erase religion from contexts in which they perceive potential cultural conflict (see Likarish 2014).

It is also noted that there is a move towards describing gaming in terms of implicit religious practice, so studies of gaming behavior seek to identify and explain the meaning behind ritualistic behavior. It may be because religion and play exhibit shared qualities and encourage similar conditions, such as a need to define the cultural boundaries of a given space in order to break the perceived rules (see Wagner 2014). It is also noted that religious gamers often draw similar connections between games and religion in order to justify their participation and engagement in

such a space and culture (see Luft 2014). Thus we suggest more nuanced reflections on why gamers and game designers often read religion into the gaming context is another important area of investigation

Finally, there is a need for more refined theoretical and methodological work to be done in the study of religion in digital gaming. New scholars have begun to make contributions in this area by drawing on established work in Game Studies and considering how they can be applied and adapted. We also note new theoretical and methodological approaches emerging from religiously-focused study of games that may have broader application. From studying ludological structures in light of spiritual efficacy as a way through exploring gaming as a form of implicit religion (see Steffen 2014), to the development of a multimodal approach to game analysis and to investigate meaning-making pathways in gameplay (see Carrillo Masso & Abrams 2014), we suggest that the study of religion and gaming can offer new tools and methods that can be applied to other areas of game studies. Overall, by highlighting what the integration of religion into digital games and gaming environments may mean and the larger cultural, social, and religious impact of such actions, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* seeks to enliven discussion of the relationship between video games and religion.

4. The Future for Religion and Digital Game Studies

This article and our forthcoming book *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* seek to draw attention to an emerging field of scholarship that combines the best elements of Game Studies and Religious Studies. We argue that studying digital gaming is not merely an end in itself, but a means of displaying and unlocking the meaning of religion in contemporary society as a whole. Digital games are not simply mirrors that reflect culture. Rather, they frequently eschew or alter, like a funhouse mirror, assumptions about religion. This means they have the potential to inform or interpret religious practice as it is reflected back at us, with a selectivity determined by the source. Digital games do not simply mediate religion, but they also "mediatize" it. Stig Hjarvard in "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change" describes the concept: "the media have developed into an independent institution in society and as a consequence, other institutions become increasingly dependent on the media and have to accommodate the logic of the media in order to be able to communicate with other institutions and society as a whole." (see Hjarvard 2008).

It is important that Game Studies do not ignore the role played by religion in shaping gameplay. We seek call for scholars of serious games to also take seriously the place and

performance of religion in public discussions related to digital games. Although in writing about the Manchester Cathedral, Ian Bogost in "Persuasive Games: The Reverence of *Resistance*" defends Sony's use of the cathedral, he criticizes the corporation's response as a self-defeating statement, which while addressing gun violence, does not speak to how the cathedral plays into the game itself. Bogost maintains that the need "to defend the artistic merits" of the game "is now left to the critic. For my part, I think the cathedral creates one of the only significant experiences in the whole game, one steeped in reverence for the cathedral and the church, rather than desecration."¹⁰ To make sense of this terrain, game critics and scholars need to consider the different layers of how religion shapes not just the gaming experience but also the institutional and public response to it. This nuanced and multifaceted investigation of religion in gaming offers game studies, a unified language to understand how religion informs gaming (see Anthony 2014). It also offers tools for deciphering the framing and impact of religious characters, themes, and moods.

Conversely, Religious Studies cannot ignore how games can and do shape faith practices. Despite the popular conception that religion and games do not mix, or at least do not mix well, this book shows how digital games have both intentionally and unintentionally become spaces to grapple with complex cultural histories, existential meanings, and religious narratives. Often, such interaction is intensified through "cultural feedback," which refers to how content from one culture is appropriated and reinterpreted by game developers in a second culture (see Likarish 2014), only to be reintroduced into the original culture in a recognizable, but discordant form. It should also consider the extent to which digital games may have a bias toward "mechanized religion," a kind of mechanical theology that sees gods as technologies to be manipulated for power (see Schut 2012). In either case, as the controversy surrounding *Resistance: , all of Man* shows, gaming has become an important sphere for cultural discourse that cannot be ignored. As Manchester resident Patsy McKie from Mothers Against Violence maintained, the game is "something that needs to be taken seriously first by the Church but also by parents."¹¹

For the Church of England this was a matter of ultimate concern. For Sony, the cathedral was just part of a game. The church wanted to ignore the game. Sony wanted to ignore religion. This lack of nuance may be partially due to the relative adolescence of the medium; indeed, film took quite a few decades to mature as a tool for art and expression. Nonetheless, we argue that a nuanced investigation of religion within Digital Game Studies adds to the public conversation something that is missing from much of the discussion concerning digital religious games: analysis of the games themselves, especially how religion plays out in them. We see the importance of exploring why

10 Gamasutra, 2007 Persuasive Games: The Reverence Of Resistance, viewed 14 March 2013
<http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/1689/persuasive_games_the_reverence_of_.php>.

11 BBC News 2007 Cathedral Row over Video War Game, viewed 14 March 2013,
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/manchester/6736809.stm>.

video games use religious structures such as churches and cathedrals as central narratives and the implication of reading religion through the processes of play. By emphasizing the diverse ways in which religion potentially shapes the gaming experience, we hope to make space for a broader conversation between the scholars of media and of religion and to encourage a rich interdisciplinary exchange.

Demonstrating how religion offers important cultural meaning-making resources and symbolic scripts that still play an important role in contemporary popular culture, and can provide an important apologetic for the place and attention to religion in digital games. Scholars have argued that what makes the connection between religion and games defensible is that both provide order-making activities and escapes from the everyday; religion and gaming provide similar tools and map out overlapping worldviews (see Wagner 2014). The study of digital religious games offers unique insights regarding the relationship between contemporary culture and the role of religion in society. As Zeiler (2014) demonstrates religious organizations and communities often utilize tools offered by popular media culture to enact and affirm their distinctive religious identities for global audiences. In a similar fashion, Masso and Abrams (2014) stress that religious groups may seek to present themselves in video game ecologies in order to establish or negotiate their role in the wider culture.

This article has sought to provide an overview of the growth of religion and digital game studies, highlight current themes and set out an emerging agenda for scholars engaged in this area. Scholars in Religious Studies have begun to explore how video games can be seen as religious texts, can be framed in relation to religious experiences, or can serve as an extension of religious practice itself. Media scholars have noted that many games employ religious characters, narratives, and symbols, which shape gameplay in distinctive ways and create representations of various religious and cultural groups that are worthy of in-depth study. We suggest careful attention to the study of religious narratives, rituals, and behaviors within gaming, as illustrated in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, can offer a fuller understanding of the social and cultural impact of the gaming experience on contemporary society. Focused reflection on how digital and video games inform or reform different individuals' and groups' understandings of the practice of religion also opens up new possibilities for academic and public discourse about religiosity.

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Developing a Framework for Understanding the Relationship Between Religion and Videogames

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Abstract

Religion is either explicitly or implicitly found in videogames. In some cases, the player acts as a god or must defeat a demigod or set of demons. In other cases, religious aspects are less transparent, serving as an environmental factor or background to a particular game rule or mechanic. The purpose of this paper is to first acknowledge the potential impact of those intentional and unintentional pedagogical strategies and outcomes inherent in games. It then sets out to further explore how and what people learn about religion while playing; it also addresses how religion changes game play. Finally, although there is value in deeper case studies of specific games, this article takes a holistic approach to understanding games and religion. It does so by presenting a framework of four key areas where religious themes prevail: game content, game context, game challenge, and player capital.

Keywords

game context, game challenge, player capital, game content, religious games, symbolism

And if anyone enters competitive games, he is not crowned unless he competes lawfully (fairly, according to the rules laid down).

-2 Vko qvj { 2:5/9 (Amplified Bidle, 2013)

1. Introduction

Religion is an important part of videogames. Often times the connection is explicit. An EverQuest (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999) player might choose to be a cleric, where they have the ability to heal and to resurrect. Part of their game play includes worshipping a deity—typically the creator of their race. At other times, the relationship is more opaque. Someone playing The Sims (Electronic Arts, 2000) might decide to create a church to have their creations pray or to host a wedding. Or a player might have to go on a mission in or near a church (e.g. The Godfather: The Game, Electronic Arts, 2006).

Regardless of its explicit or implicit visibility, religion is a critical component of many aspects of game design and consumption. Given the inherent and natural connection between videogames and religion, it is prudent to ask about the impact of such a relationship. How does religion impact game play? How are designers utilizing religious symbols to improve game believability? How are religious, moral, and ethical principals built into challenges and overall game objectives? Unfortunately, we know very little about these questions and the broader impact of religion in videogames. This points to a much larger issue of needing more research in the videogames field—a concern highlighted by many researchers (e.g. Ferdig, 2009).

As researchers continue to add findings to a core understanding of videogame play and use, a deeper understanding of the interplay of digital games and religion will be useful for at least two reasons. First, much of the debate about the use of videogames relates to impact and yet the impact on religious beliefs has gone relatively unstudied. Second, churches of varying denominations have gone digital and are exploring the development and delivery of religious games; such an analyses could support future integration.

The need for this framework finds its roots in the early work on videogames. Researchers attempting to understand the field recognized that the 'field' actually consisted of representatives from multiple discipline--all interested in various aspects of the same entity (Ferdig, 2009). An educator might be interested in whether videogames help people learn. A psychologist might be interested in the media impact of playing games. A computer scientist could have interests in the human interaction and the game design. The development of a framework prevents privileging one perspective over another while encouraging these various disciplines to join in the development of a research foundation rather than solely playing in their own arena. DiPietro, Ferdig, Boyer, and Black (2007) proposed one such framework that included game studies as pedagogy (e.g. teacher and student use), psychology (e.g. expertise, cognition, and social skills), media effects (e.g. violence or gender studies), genre studies (e.g. narrative), or game design (e.g. HCI or modding).

The topic of religion and videogames would benefit from the development of a similar foundational framework.

It is worth noting that such a framework is never meant to be static. Its value is in its fluidity--evolving as it becomes disequibrated. The focus of developing a framework also does not exclude the need for specific studies. For instance, case studies of religious aspects of specific games would lend insight into religion and genre, religion and game play, etc. Many of the papers in this special issue complete this important task. The goal of this paper, however, is to create a much broader framework to be able to understand the work that has been done and will need to be done to deepen our understanding of religion in video games. This framework draws on evidence from videogames, from pop culture's response to videogames, and from research on religion in videogames. The framework helps researchers, designers, educators, and theologians to consider the impact of videogames while contextualizing their specific goals, interests, and perspectives on religion. It helps current and new researcher understand gaps in the field. Perhaps most importantly, there are consistently disagreements in videogames studies. One of the most obvious is the debate on violence after or because of playing violent games. A framework helps readers contextualize the debate regardless of the outcome or beliefs about the topic of controversy.

2. Definitions

Prior to exploring a framework for understanding videogames and religion, there are two important questions that must be asked and answered. First, what is religion? The dictionary offers:

- *the belief in a god or in a group of gods*
- *an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods*
- *an interest in a belief, or an activity that is very important to a person or group* (Merriam-Webster, 2013)

The third definition is perhaps the most commonly used in reference to videogames in popular culture and the media. People refer to players who worship games; game players are often said to have religious devotion to particular platforms. Some reporters call it a cult or say that certain games have cult followings. And, Andy Robertson (2013) even requests membership in his Church of the Gamer. Although this would make an interesting study, the focus of this paper is on videogames that connect to religion as a belief in a god or group of gods or an organized system of beliefs and rules used to worship that god or gods.

Second, what are videogames? In this paper, videogames refer to digital games played on a television or computer screen. Popular game platforms include Nintendo (e.g. DS, 3DS, Wii, Wii U, etc.), Playstation, and Xbox. Games are also played on personal computers, mobile devices, and tablets. These electronic games can be played individually or with other players as a stand-alone option or via an internet connection. The reason for the differentiation is that there is a lot to be learned from a much broader analyses of games and religion. For instance, Anderson, Mellor & Milyo (2010) found that “(c)ontrary to popular wisdom and several recent observational studies, religion is not strongly associated with more other-regarding behavior in controlled experiments” (p. 163). Porter (2008) used role-playing games and found higher motivation with students learning theology. However, neither of these studies (at the time of their writing) was using technology for delivery or interaction. Future studies of videogames should utilize such resources for triangulation of research outcomes, but the focus here is on those games delivered electronically.

3. Framework

With these definitions in mind, the paper turns to a framework for exploring videogames and religion. There are four key components to this framework: game content, game context, game challenge, and personal capital. Within each component, examples from games and research are provided to further explore the important concepts.

Game Content. There are cases when the content of the game is explicitly related to religion. This can occur in one of two ways, depending on the definition of religion. First, a game may have been created to teach principles, skills, or knowledge associated with a named religion. *Axys Adventures: Truth Seeker* is an example of a game that is aimed at teaching a Christian message. According to the developers, the story is “ultimately a parable speaking of the healing and forgiveness that takes place in our lives when we give God access to our hearts, but also the danger and tragedy that occurs when we give the enemy access to our hearts by believing his lies” (Rebel Planet Creations, 2007, n.p.). *Bible Quest: Journey Through Genesis* is a jewel-quest type game where players progress through stories from the book of Genesis. Inspired Media Entertainment suggest players can watch the book “come to life through beautiful hand-drawn art and amazing audio storytelling” (2011a, n.p.). *Left Behind 4: World at War* asks players to confront the Antichrist on physical and spiritual battlefronts while witnessing fights between angels and demons (Inspired Media Entertainment, 2011b).

Games for knowledge, skill, and attitude growth around religion can also happen when a game attempts to teach ethics or morals that may be directly or indirectly tied to one or more

religions. This does not refer to moral choices within a game. For instance, in *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012, Yager Development and Darkside Game Studios) players must make a moral choice about how to disperse a crowd. Some might decide to shoot into a crowd; others decide to shoot into the air (Jaech, 2012). These are important opportunities and appear in the Game Challenge component of the framework.

Instead, this second aspect of Game Content refers to a desired pedagogical outcome of learning a moral or ethical behavior or attitude. Perhaps the greatest examples of this are social impact games. Here games are intended to promote awareness and action of humanitarian and educational efforts (Games for Change, 2013). Games that aim to have a social impact cover topics like climate change, the impact of technology on nature, ecological concerns, autism, and poverty. An excellent example of a social impact game is *Darfur is Dying* (interFUEL, 2006). According to the developers, “*Darfur is Dying* is a narrative-based simulation where the user, from the perspective of a displaced Darfurian, negotiates forces that threaten the survival of his or her refugee camp. It offers a faint glimpse of what it's like for more than 2.5 million who have been internally displaced by the crisis in the Sudan” (n.p.). (Also see International China Concern, 2013.)

There are religious game development companies and conferences (e.g. Christian Game Developers Conference, 2013). There are also lists of games that would fit under the ‘religious genre.’ ‘Religious games’ fall under some of the same constraints as educational games; given relatively low budgets, they typically do not compete with many of the large fund, popular press games. Research on said games is also relatively nonexistent. The move to more mobile application and game development may change this as development costs decrease. More of the work in this area has been theoretical in nature. Wagner (2013), for instance, presents an argument that religion “can be played as a game, but there are times when it should not be, especially if the model is a first-person shooter and the hope is for a clearly defined set of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ (p. 258).

Social impact games are more numerous, due in large part to the foundations and other funding sources that support the cause behind the game (e.g. AIDs, poverty, climate change, etc.). However, research on social impact games is also in its infancy. As stated succinctly by Ruiz, the originator of *Darfur is Dying*, “It is indeed difficult to measure the success of a game whose goal is not to turn a profit but rather seeks to incite societal change” (Parkin, 2006). Research in this area has been supported by triangulation with previous studies. For instance, Williams (2006) found that play in an immersive online game produced an increased global outlook and some online community improvements.

Game Context. Game context refers to the story, environments and situations within game play that explicitly or implicitly reference religion. These references could be part of the physical environment or part of the game rules or norms created by the designers. However, these rules and symbols only refer to the context, not to the actual challenge of the game. These typically fall into one of three categories. First, there are environmental factors such as buildings (e.g. churches or synagogues) or tools (e.g. crosses or religious artifacts) that create the backdrop or setting for a videogame. In some cases, these buildings add to the realism of an environment. Any player, religious or not, is used to seeing a religious building in their home environment. Seeing a church in the Grand Theft Auto series (1997, Capcom, Take-Two Interactive, and Rockstar Games) is not ironic given the goal of adding realism to an environment. In that context, not seeing a church might seem more bizarre.

Other games add a religious symbol, building, or entire theme to fit within the narrative of the game. In Dante's *Inferno* (Electronic Arts, 2010), the main character "journeys through the twisted, menacing nine circles of hell in pursuit of his beloved Beatrice" (n.p.). Here the environment is not added for realism, it is necessary for the telling of the story.

A second aspect of game context refers to situations when religion impacts or directs the rules of the game. Adherence to a rule ties back to moral or ethical behavior; this is often done implicitly. For instance, if you get caught taking or selling drugs in the controversial game *NARC* (Williams Electronics, 1998), you end up going to jail or losing your job. Other games will allow characters to get married or date but only offer a character that is heterosexual (Taylor, 2007).

There are also situations where religion explicitly impacts the rules of the game. In *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games, 2010), players' responses impact a morality system. Riding vs. eating your horse and capturing vs. killing your opponents all impact the game's outcomes. Moore (2011) shares:

A good example is the 'alignment' rubric used by many role-playing games. As players navigate through the secondary world, they must make choices which in turn impact their characters' relative alignment to a set of binaries: good or evil, just or merciful, cunning or honest, and so on. Players' status according to these binaries usually has an impact on their interaction with the game world. For instance, villagers might flee a character aligned with 'feared' while they would circle round a character that is 'loved.' In this way, players are able to participate in the construction of their game characters. (p. 73)

A final aspect of game context refers broadly to miracles of fantasy and the science of the real world. This relates to the concept of explicit and implicit rules, but it refers more to underlying characteristics of players and/or the worlds they live in. A game that more closely mirrors reality might have a person driving a car, playing a sport, or simulating a business venture. A game that is

more fantasy-based might give the player the option to fly, possess a superpower, or conduct magic. This is particularly true in cases where a player can choose a game character who by their very definition have the ability to produce miracles of religion or modern science (e.g. a wizard in a role playing adventure). Each of these choices represents underlying assumptions about the world; those assumptions relate to one's faith and beliefs.

Some of the current research in this area has focused on avatar use and choice. Black et al. (2009) gave users the opportunity to create avatars based on four scenarios. Participants were asked to create a hero avatar, a villain avatar, an avatar that looked like themselves and an avatar that represented what they wanted to look like. Avatars were then analyzed and compared with actual photos of the participants. The researchers found that participants created avatars that most looked like themselves when asked to create heroes or villains (e.g. seeing the good and bad in themselves). Participants were also overwhelmingly willing to change characteristics that were temporal and easy to change in real life (e.g. hair color or length) but less likely to vary enduring characteristics like gender or race.

A second set of research studies that is obviously related refers to the importance of realism in game design. Reyes and Adams (2010) suggest that " the experience and enjoyment of video games are affected in part by social reality and, in turn, social reality is being affected by the experience and enjoyment of video games" (p. 149). In their work, they also describe three types of realism. Representational realism relates to graphics, sounds, and how a game represents time and place. Simulative realism relates to the correlation between the game rules and real life models. Finally, inverse realism relates to the real world interactions in games, such as motion controllers and connections to real businesses.

Much of the research on videogame use and religion might immediately examine the game challenges and outcomes. Although this is valuable work, more research needs to pay attention to the context that sets the space for the game play. In some cases, the realism of the religious artifacts and symbols as well as the rules of the worlds might lead to differentiated play and outcomes (particularly explored as representational, simulative, and inverse realism). Research has already provided evidence that players make moral decisions in games as if they were true interpersonal interactions (Weaver & Lewis, 2012); how would that change given changes in the realism of the context? The choices that are presented to the user about their world and the actions they can take in that world could also preempt attitude and knowledge outcomes. If players choose to pick characters that represent the evil and good in themselves, researchers could find a way to study those choices and how that impacted moral, religious, and fantasy-based outcomes and game play.

Game Challenge. Game challenge refer to the actual goals and presupposed outcomes of the game being played. This relates to game content. For instance, if the goal of the game is to teach

religious knowledge, then there is a good chance that the challenges of the game are going to be associated with that goal. However, challenge has more to do with the techniques and methods of the game--it is the actual game play that potentially leads to encounters with religion.

There are at least three avenues for exploration related to the game challenge. The first challenge type is that of a "god game." A god game is one that gives the user an omnipotent and, in some cases, an omnipresent perspective on the world they are engaging. An example would be *The Sims* where players have the opportunity to control the lives of their creations. Another case is *Spore* (Electronic Arts, 2008). The game provides an opportunity for the user to create an organism and take them through the evolution of cell, creature, tribe, civilization, and space. Being a 'god' gives them the opportunity to put into practice their beliefs and to mimic their theological understanding of their creator, albeit theistic or not.

This 'god game' is different than a 'god mode' of a game. The 'god mode' often refers to a cheat code or limited-time supernatural power that makes the user invincible. Although such modes do provide exploration of omnipotence, it is typically not the focus of the game or is limited in scope. Conversely, these god games give players an opportunity to think, rethink, and act religiously, morally, and supernaturally (Geraci, 2012).

A second broad conception of game challenge relates to games where the sole purpose is being evil or being good. Where the god game lets you make choices, there are often game narratives that set the stage for the player and put them in specific roles. A player automatically assumes the role of a NYPD detective in *Max Payne* game series (Rockstar Games, 2001). The *Everquest* series allows you to create an 'evil' race. In many cases, the choices are not clear. There might be an overarching narrative but the player can choose to make good or bad decisions. These decisions may or may not impact the game rules (see: game context in the framework).

A third type of game challenge refers to activities that are part of a larger narrative and may be presented in a god mode; however, they are challenges that represent one's view of the role of their religious deity. For instance, from a Christian perspective, Schuurman (2013) argues that technologists should understand technology from a world perspective of being created, having fallen, and then having been redeemed. Games would therefore provide opportunities (either in their many challenges or in their overarching goal) of creating and redeeming the world. Hayse (2010) refers to many of these games as messianic in nature:

Many videogames cast players as heroes on quests to save the world. Along the way, players aspire to dominance in order to finally defeat an archvillain that holds the world in a dark grasp. The player's path to victory inevitably results in death and resurrection, not only once, but over and over again—all in a day's work for a videogame savior. Although these themes are messianic, they do not accurately reflect the life and work of Christ. Instead, they reflect

a form of messianism that Walter Wink (1992) has described as the “myth of redemptive violence”—the achievement of a so-called moral victory through the use of coercive force. For example, strength points, gold pieces, and powerful weapons are the ordinary means of grace in videogame salvation. He, who dominates, brings salvation. (pp 71-72).

Much of the research in this area has focused on media impact studies. For instance, does playing games with a violent nature then impact one's actions? Does it change their moral or theological beliefs? Unfortunately, most of the literature in this area is polarizing. Games can be good for cognitive growth (Annetta, Minogue, Holmes & Cheng, 2009) and cognitive development (Olson, 2010). However, research also provides evidence that games can lead to addiction, attention deficits, decreased school performance, and increased aggression (Anderson, & Warburton, 2012). Research has provided evidence of the potential impact on moral development (Weaver & Lewis, 2012), but less work has been done on the impact on theological and religious beliefs.

Player Capital. The final category in the framework is player capital. Each of the previous three concepts (content, context, and challenges) have related directly to a characteristic presupposed by the game designer. This last part of the framework attempts to take into account what a player brings to the table when they decide to play a game. This concept deals with the external religious and moral beliefs and actions starting from the actual decision on game choice to the actions and interactions in game play. These player characteristics obviously get put into practice during game play, but the focus here is on what a player brings to the controller.

The first aspect here is the theological and moral beliefs that a player possesses. There has been some research in this area; however, most of the research has focused directly on morals. Klimmt et al. (2006) conducted a study on how players handled moral concerns in violent video games. They described players who relied on game/reality distinction as well as a desire for winning as ways to temporarily place their morals on hold. "Overall, findings suggest that players mostly do not find it difficult to cope with moral concern; they frequently seem not to experience any moral problems at all" (p.324). The asterisk by that study, however, is that such research often includes players who are willing to play such games or who already play such games and therefore have self-selected themselves into a specific population.

The second facet of player capital is that many game players hear implicit or explicit insight into videogames from their theological leaders. Here, such leaders may refer to school teachers or principals, pastors, or parents. For instance, Pastor Josh Zoerhof (2013) recently told Ridge Point attendees that *Grand Theft Auto 0* should not be played because it is incredibly violent, sexually explicit, degrading towards women, has no moral redeeming qualities, and is too real.

These messages from theologians are not always negative. For instance, Richtel (2007) reported on a church near Denver where videogames (in this case, *Halo 3*, Microsoft, 2007) are encouraged and even played at church. Richtel writes:

Those buying it must be 17 years old, given it is rated M for mature audiences. But that has not prevented leaders at churches and youth centers across Protestant denominations, including evangelical churches that have cautioned against violent entertainment, from holding heavily attended Halo nights and stocking their centers with multiple game consoles so dozens of teenagers can flock around big-screen televisions and shoot it out. The alliance of popular culture and evangelism is challenging churches much as bingo games did in the 1960s. And the question fits into a rich debate about how far churches should go to reach young people. Far from being defensive, church leaders who support Halo — despite its “thou shalt kill” credo — celebrate it as a modern and sometimes singularly effective tool. It is crucial, they say, to reach the elusive audience of boys and young men. (n.p.)

The final piece of player capital are the characteristics that represents the essential beliefs or tenants of a religion that a player subscribes to. A players morals may include these beliefs; theology leaders might prescribe game play based on these principles. However, this third aspects refers more to the essential beliefs that draws a person to a religion. For instance, a person might believe they should live their life according to faith, hope, and love. Another might subscribe to the principle of doing no harm to others or loving one's neighbor as oneself. The insight here is not solely about commercial outcomes (e.g. what game does someone decide to buy). It is a reciprocal relationship between game play and game outcomes. Does a person decide to buy a game and are their interactions in that game controlled by their religious beliefs? Then, does actual game play strengthen or weaken those beliefs? Sadly, this is an area that needs more research.

4. Discussion

There are many people in the field who are interested broadly in the concept of digital games. Research has been undertaken in fields ranging from education and psychology to business and computer science. A strength of the more recent work is the development and continued refinement of a framework to understand the ways in which people from various disciplines can work together as they study games.

This paper has presented such a framework for the relatively nascent field of religion and videogames. The framework consists of four components summarized in Table 1. This framework is not meant to unmove; it is offered as a starting point to grasp where we are at in the field and

our future directions. The hope is that someone would be able to read a study on games and religion and then place the study in this broader framework. Under conditions where the framework fails to hold, an adapted framework would emerge.

Concept	Definition
Game Content	This concept refers to games whose purpose is to instruct about a specific religion or to teach characteristics that match desirable traits of one or more religions.
Game Context	This concept refers to the environment, symbols, rules, and characteristics (of players and worlds) that represent explicit or implicit religious tones in a game.
Game Challenge	This concept refers to the challenges that are presented in a game such as undertaking a god role, being good or evil, and representing characteristics of a religion's deity (e.g. creating or redeeming).
Player Capital	This concept refers to the moral beliefs, the explicit and implicit feedback from others, and the religious essentials that a player brings to a controller regardless of the game play.

Table 1. An framework for understanding and exploring videogames and religion.

There is a second hope for this framework. If we have learned anything about technology writ large and educational games more specifically, it is that we will never be able to answer broad sweeping claims about its use. Instead of asking whether games work in religion, or what role religion has in games, we begin to ask questions about the conditions of games, game players, and the interactions between the two that provide further insight. One use of this framework is to use it in a constant comparison method, checking back frequently to see if the research in the field fits within its boundaries. A second use is in the actual preparation and presentation of research. Rather than making broad claims about a particular game, we would be able to assess the conditions under which those outcomes occurred. A study might specifically be about a game context; researchers are then able to compare that to other research within similar or different contexts. Other researchers might produce outcomes on theological uses of games which could then be further refined by understanding the context, content, and challenges of the games as well as the characteristics of those playing the games.

A third goal for this framework is to set the stage for further research--to help assess what it is we know and what is yet to be learned. For content, what are the characteristics of games that enable others to learn or to question their religious beliefs? How do various game components put into context change the realism of the game and thus the beliefs and actions of the game players?

There are traditional narratives for the challenges present in games; how are those narratives changing or reinforcing theological beliefs and what are new models that could be created? Finally, what are the moral and religious essentials and characteristics that are critical for understanding game choice and game play (presumably not all will impact both)?

5. A Practical and Pedagogical Analysis

To test this framework, this paper concludes with an example from teaching and learning. How would this framework apply--or would this framework stand--for those interested in pedagogy? Pedagogy is used broadly here to refer to any situation where someone is attempting to teach or to learn across the lifespan.

Game Content. Game content is the part of the framework that most directly fits with those interested in teaching and learning. The focus here can be on the design of such games or research on whether said games help teachers teach or learners learn. Pedagogical research states that students learn best when engaged in authentic learning environments, where they have opportunities to show ownership, where they can create multiple artifacts demonstrating their growth, and where they practice and receive feedback (Ferdig, 2006). Exemplary learning environments, at least from a social constructivist perspective, push engage students in communities of practice where they can learn with and through more knowledgeable others.

Someone interested in game design for increased skill, knowledge, or attitudinal outcomes would want to first define their intentions as well as their instructional strategies to meet those objectives. What is interesting about the framework from a pedagogical approach, is that although game content is the most directly related, in order to create an authentic learning environment for learning, designers would need to draw on the other three components. For instance, they would need to build the game environment with rules and contexts that matched their pedagogical intentions. If the goal is to teach about Moses, it would seem ludicrous to not include Moses or contextual references to Moses. A goal of increased moral fortitude would seem unreachable without opportunities to test ones ethics and ideals. The same is true with the challenge; it becomes the pathway by which players practice and then receive feedback. Finally, it is critical from almost any theoretical stance to include the prior experiences and knowledge (e.g. capital) that a player brings to the game.

Pedagogical research on game content is where current and future discussions become the most interesting. There are 'religious games' whose sole intent is to teach a belief structure, knowledge about religion, or moral and ethical growth. However, there are games that can be used

directly or indirectly (just by their use) have the potential to produce similar outcomes. The challenge for many pedagogues relates to some of the basic tenants of most religions. Most religions have central beliefs that make them incompatible with other belief structures. As such, many educational games, including those with the sole intent of teaching religion, often end up becoming behavioral in nature. Said differently, players end up memorizing and/or utilizing central tenants rather than having the flexibility to explore within and outside of those tenants. It is possible that future pedagogical research will look more to multiplayer games where more knowledgeable others (e.g. pastors or elders) play with and act as sages and guides.

Perhaps a more important question for pedagogues has to do with when learning does *not* occur. If religion is a central component to most games, are there circumstances where players do not learn something about religion, ethics, values, etc.? A positive answer would mean further investigation was required to determine the variables by which outcomes were changed or impacted. A negative answer--stating that players always learn something about religion or morals or ethics in every game--would mean designers, parents, players, teachers, etc., would need to become more aware of the learning they did *and did not* know was happening.

Game Context. Although a majority of the interest in pedagogy seems to be focused on the design or research-based consumption of game content, the framework still holds for the other three components. What happens, however, is that the components become core variables in design *and* in understanding achieved (or unachieved) content, skill, and attitudinal outcomes. For instance, in game context, there has been a lot of work done in the area of virtual reality and realism (e.g. Ferdig et al., 2013). Sight, sound, and even smell all add to the realism of an environment, which can lead to improved outcomes. How much 'religion' is necessary in a game is required for intended or unintended outcomes? In other words, if the goal of the game is to directly teach religious content, how important are the religious artifacts not central to game play? Conversely, in a game that does not have religious skills, attitudes, or knowledge as its central objective, how important are religious artifacts to intended and unintended outcomes?

Game Challenge. Like context, game challenge becomes a variable to explore in understanding positive, negative, intended, and unintended consequences. The research here begins to focus on how important the challenge is to both the overall narrative and the player outcomes inside and outside the game. Does a religious game produce better outcomes if the player receives challenges that fit their current world view (e.g. being able to make moral choices) or one that contradicts what they believe (e.g. they get to play God)? Do players learn more about themselves and their morals, ethics, and religious beliefs when they get to make choices about being good or evil or when they are forced into being one or the other? Here again the proposed goal is a deeper understanding of pedagogical strategies by exploring the variations in challenges and their perceived impact on game play.

Player Capital. Outside of the pedagogical interest in game content, skill, and attitude learned, player capital is perhaps one of the most important for theoretical educational philosophers. Different theoretical stances place a greater or lesser role on key variables like prior knowledge, locus of control, motivation, and external communities of practice. A long-standing member and regular attendee at any given church will probably have a different game play experience than someone who is not affiliated with a religious group. That does not mean one will do better or worse, but the experiences will be different. A theorist who highlights the role of connected learning and the importance of more knowledgeable others will focus heavily on the relationship of multi-player games and artifacts in all games that challenge or strengthen a players' belief structure. Research in this area will not only need to explore the importance of capital, it will need to find a way to perhaps elicit that prior knowledge and belief within the game in order to compare and assess outcomes.

6. Conclusion

More research is required in the area of religion and games. This paper suggested that an evolving framework would support those efforts. A four-part framework was then presented that highlighted the goals of the game (game content), the contexts that influenced game play, the challenges that were presented to the players, and a deeper understanding of the religious, moral, and ethical capital that players brought to games. The paper concluded with a focus on teaching and learning; the goal of which was to test whether those interested in pedagogy could find their research interests within this framework. Although those interested in instructional strategies may find their easiest stake in the game content component, game context, game challenges, and player capital become critical variables that help explain the processes by which people learn--or fail to learn--about religion in video games. Thus, at its surface, this framework becomes an important place to continue conversations about the role of religion in video games.

There are at least two overarching objectives for those interested in religion and games. First, how do we develop more research in this important area? Schurrman (2013) and others make the case that no technology is value-free; it is embodied with belief systems. It would be a dangerous proposition to ignore that fact. Second, how can we use this research to make game designers, players, parents, and others aware of the sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit religion in games? It is hoped that such a framework would lend itself to continuing those conversations.

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Biography

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Locating the Locus of Study on "Religion" in Video Games

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Abstract

For Religious Studies scholars and avid gamers, a call for papers on religion and video games seems like the best of both worlds. However, in sitting down to reflect upon just what we might write about, it struck us that we had no idea what it is we're supposed to be discussing. What are the methodological and theoretical issues in writing about these topics? It seems to us that there are in fact three related (but not identical) areas for analysis: the "religious" responses gamers have to their games; how religions in games comment on religions "out there"; and, disinterested observation of the religions of fictional game worlds. Pursuing a broadly phenomenological methodology, this article will explore these three options of studying religion in video games using examples from a number of recent popular games. In particular, by drawing upon Alfred Schutz's notion of provinces of meaning we wish to highlight that in certain respects the religions of video games can be no less "real" than the religions we find out here in the "meat-world".

Keywords

video games, religion, methodology, Alfred Schutz

1. Introduction

Upon receiving the call for papers for this issue, the authors were pleased with what seemed a simple purview; religion and video games. As religious studies scholars, we realised that the first clause would require some theoretical scaffolding, the term having been used in various and often problematic ways by scholars, practitioners and the disinterested. Video games we understand to be a goal orientated activity, specifically a goal not determined by the player, be it framed in a narrative or competitive framework¹. Yet it was the "and" which gave us pause: what did it mean?

¹—Such a definition excludes environments such as *Second Life* which we regard as digital-worlds. Other scholars

Are we to take a sociological position and look at how the response to certain games might be considered “religious”? Are we to examine how the religions portrayed in the games relate to those in our own, meat-world? Or are we to examine “religion” as it appears to the characters within the games?

We are not the first to ask these sorts of questions. Bainbridge and Bainbridge (2007) produced a study of the religious implications of video games, focusing on research methods such as content analysis, natural language processing, participant observation, and online interviewing (2007:35). While these are all valuable methods, Bainbridge and Bainbridge do not explicitly address what sort of problem or question they are being applied to. Though they speak of the “religious implications” of video games, their article really only addresses itself to the second of the questions posed above, that is, how religions in games relate to religions outside of games, something which their use of the term “religious implications” obscures. Therefore, their conclusion that ‘sports games, games for small children, and realistic military games probably seldom involve religion’ (2007:51) must be questioned. As we mean to show, if we are asking the first of our three questions above, then “realistic military games” and “sports games” do indeed involve religion, at least in the Durkheimian sense of involving national identification. The methods presented by Bainbridge and Bainbridge are of no value unless we know what sort of question they are supposed to answer. It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to highlight the sort of research questions that can be asked when we consider the topic “religion and video games”.

To this end, we shall use Alfred Schutz’s concept of “provinces of meaning” to frame our discussion. We do not propose the provinces of meaning to be a method as such, but rather a conceptual tool to allow us to discuss the possible configurations that “religion” and “video games” may have with one another. These configurations determine the sort of research questions we can ask, and only then can the specific tools required for the study of that particularly relationship be determined - at which point the work of Bainbridge and Bainbridge becomes useful. The use of Schutz has allowed us to show the continuity of the various research questions without necessarily placing restrictions on the sorts of tools that may or may not be used for each question.

Further, in using Schutz this also allows us to counter the above conclusion of Bainbridge and Bainbridge; we propose that there is not a video game to which a relation to religion cannot be conceived. Of course, we do not have the space to catalogue every game and how it relates to religion, so for the purposes of this paper we have restricted ourselves to the following examples:

would, however, also include *6 orld of Warcraft* within the same classification as *Second Life*. However, as *6 orld of 6 ar!raft* involves a clearly defined levelling structure (i.e. is goal orientated) it is included within our definition.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (2009)², the *Elder Scrolls* series (particularly 2006 and 2011)³, *Bioshock- Infinite* (2013)⁴, the *Fallout* series (particularly 2008 and 2010)⁵ and the *Grand Theft Auto* series (particularly 2008)⁶. Firstly, these are recent and popular examples, and so will be familiar to most readers. Secondly, this generation of video games are typically narratively open-ended to a greater or lesser degree, which allows the player to guide the player character (PC) according to their own moral leanings. At the same, open-ended games need to take place in a richly-constructed world, in which religions are highly likely to be portrayed. Despite these similarities, however, the selection of games considered offers a broad range of narrative approaches, including military (*Call of Duty*), fantasy (*Elder Scrolls*), science-fiction (*Bioshock*; , *allout*) and the present day (*Grand Theft Auto*).

2. Schutz and “provinces of meaning”

Schutz’s most detailed discussion of provinces of meaning can be found in his essay “On Multiple Realities”, which begins with a discussion of William James’ claim that to call a thing “real” is to state that it exists in a certain relation to ourselves (Schutz, 1945 [1962]:207). James further argues that reality is not homogenous but divided up into various “sub-universes” which the mind engages with individually so that the other sub-universes are “forgotten”. Each sub-universe, James proclaims, ‘whilst it is attended to is real after its own fashion; only the reality lapses with the attention’ (James, 2007:293). Concerned with James’ psychologistic setting, Schutz adapts this notion of “sub-universes” to speak instead of *finite provinces of meaning*: ‘we call a certain set of our experiences a finite province of meaning if all of them show a specific cognitive style and are – with respect to this style – not only consistent in themselves but also compatible with one another’ (Schutz, 1962:230). The central caveat is given to indicate that while within itself a province of meaning must be consistent, this consistency does not have to hold across multiple provinces of meaning. Inconsistent experiences within a province of meaning does not entail that the province is unreal, but rather that the experience in question properly belongs to another province of meaning.

The cognitive style for a province of meaning contains the following elements: 1, a specific tension of consciousness; 2, a specific *epoché*; 3, a prevalent form of spontaneity; 4, a specific form of experiencing one’s self; 5, a specific form of sociality; 6, a specific-time perspective (Schutz,

2 The official website is no longer operational but a gameplay trailer can be found here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWIJTydRLt8>

3 The official website for all the Elder Scrolls games can be found here: <http://www.elderscrolls.com/>

4 The official website can be found here: <http://www.bioshockinfinite.com/the-game/>

5 The official website for all the Fallout games can be found here: <http://fallout.bethsoft.com/eng/home/home.php>

6 The official website can be found here: <http://www.rockstargames.com/IV/>

1945 [1962]:230-231). For present purposes our main focus is on the *epoch* by which Schutz means something akin to James' "forgetting"⁷. In effect, this implies that each province of meaning requires the "bracketing" out of other provinces in order to function properly. As each province has its limits, this means that no one province can adequately deal with all of reality as it is experienced. Thus we require "leaps" and "shocks" which compel us to leave one province and enter another. Schutz gives the following examples: 'the shock of falling asleep as the leap into the world of dreams ... Kierkegaard's experience of the "instant" as the leap into the religious sphere ... as well as the decision of the scientist to replace all passionate participation of "this world" by a disinterested contemplative attitude' (1945 [1962]:231). We propose a slight nuance to Schutz's account here and suggest that in the technical sense "shocks" occur when we are forced into a province of meaning and "leaps" occur when we choose to leave a province for another. Within "On Multiple Realities" Schutz then discusses the provinces of work, phantasm, dreams and scientific theory to which we add here religion⁸ and video games.

In addition to the above we must further explicate the relation of provinces in a way not fully discussed in "On Multiple Realities". In particular we must focus on the following comment: 'The selective function of our interest organises the world in both respects – as to space and time – in strata of major or minor relevance' (Schutz, 1945 [1962]:227). "Relevance", here, can be taken as a reference to provinces of meaning and we can take Schutz to be explaining that provinces do not exist on an equal plane but are stratified in a hierarchy dependent upon context and prevailing interest. Thus, in a given situation some provinces will be regarded as more important than others. To this we will adapt the phrase "meaning-context" from Schutz's earlier work *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1932) to mean the hierarchy of provinces of a given moment (Schutz, 1967:75-78). Meaning-contexts create configurations of meaning by which is meant that various provinces are grouped together as compatible. Drawing on Husserl, Schutz argues that within these configurations, provinces are made up of polythetic constituents that form monothetic unities, themselves provinces of meaning.⁹ For example, let us say we have two provinces of meaning, the United Kingdom and Europe. Europe, as a higher meaning-context level is a monothetic unity which subsumes the UK within it as a polythetic constituent. However, it must also be noted that if we were to consider the UK individually this too would be a monothetic unity. As stated before each

7 It is therefore not used in the technical Husserlian sense.

8 Note, "religion" is here being used as shorthand for "insert religion here". This is to say that properly speaking it is Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc. that are provinces of meaning. For a more general application of Schutz's provinces of meaning see Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011:1-4, 90-91). For variations of province of meaning in relation to religion that are not drawn from Schutz similar ideas can be found in J.Z. Smith's "economy of significance" (1982), Lease's "totalising systems of meaning" (1994), and McCutcheon's "social formations" (2001)

9 Husserl's first explication of polythetic constituents and monothetic unities is found in relation to his discussion of experiences in *Ideas I*. It is then further developed in the posthumously published *Formal and Transcendental Logic*.

province involves its own cognitive style and these configurations necessitate that the cognitive styles of polythetic constituents be derivative of the monothetic unity's cognitive style. Thus the UK can only be a constituent of Europe if the two have compatible cognitive styles. Finally it should be noted that provinces on the same level of meaning-context are incompatible and require "leaps" and "shocks". In the case of polythetic constituents on the same level this too means they are incompatible but that the "leaps" and "shocks" are facilitated by the monothetic unity.

This is only a brief introduction to the notion of provinces of meaning, to frame the discussion which follows. We propose that the relation of religion *and* video games can be understood via the relations formed between various provinces of meaning involved, as they form context dependent configurations of meaning. In the first section we look at religious responses to video games. By this we mean those cases in which a video game is treated as an object that is interacted with according to the style of a "religious" province of meaning. In the second section we view the religions of video games as critiques of religions in the meat-world. In this respect the video game is a representation of a "typified" province of meaning. In the third section we treat with the religions of video games as provinces of meaning in themselves. Treated at the level of monothetic unities, it can be argued that these religions are no less real than those in the meat-world.

3. Games as analogue of "Religion"

In our first configuration of configurations of meaning, that is, discussing "religious" responses to video games, we refer to analyses wherein the video game is treated as an object. The way in which the person interacts with that object depends on their province of meaning, although this is not to suggest that different people sharing the same province of meaning will necessarily respond to the same object in the same way. That video games engender responses according to various provinces of meaning has been seen on numerous occasions, most often revolving around the issue of violence.

A recent example of this is the level "No Russian" in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (46–8), released in 2009¹⁰. In the level the player assumes the role of an undercover CIA agent who has infiltrated an "ultranationalist" Russian terrorist group. In order to incite Russia into going to war with America, the group impersonate Americans and attack a civilian airport with the player participating. The response to this storyline from a number of countries forced the developer, Activision, to modify it in a number of ways. Across the board, the level was made optional so that

10 A video of the level can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN1TBRhDg3s>

the player could skip it. However, in Germany and Japan the level was altered so that if the player shot a civilian they would fail the level (Warmoth, 2009), and in Russia the level was removed altogether, on the grounds that Russia has no regulatory board for the content of video games (Welsh, 2009).

What is interesting about this particular response is not that a province of meaning dictated a negative response to the level, as we shall see below, but rather that there was a lack of appropriate province altogether. That is, we can regard these regulatory boards which give video games their rating and deem their content appropriate (or not) as provinces of meaning. Contrast this with the existence of the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) which does regulate video games. While the matter of the level was brought up in the House of Commons by Keith Vaz, who opposed the violence in the game and wished to have the game further censored (Parliament, 2009), he was overruled and it was regarded that the game operated within acceptable limits of the province that the BBFC established.

However, while the BBFC saw the level as acceptable within its province of meaning, the response from religious spokespeople differed. The level was discussed on an episode of BBC television's *The Big Question* dedicated to the question "Are Violent Video Games Damaging to Society?", and involved Alex Goldberg of the London Jewish Forum, Fazan Mohammed of the British Muslim Forum, and Reverend Stephen Lowe. The general concern of all three was that the level acted as what Steve Hoffman, talking about boxing clubs, has referred to as simulation. Hoffman, building on the work of Corsaro concerning "priming events" in children (1996), states that simulations 'enable practitioners to try out different techniques, behaviours, and social roles that may or may not be adopted later' (emphasis added, Hoffman, 2006:174). To have a social role, we suggest, is to operate according to a particular province of meaning which designates the techniques and behaviours appropriate to that role. Two important features of simulation are: everyday ontology - 'simulations are those repeatable activities that are defined by members of a task group as an approximation of some other scenario or activity that is more real'; and risk and consequence reduction - 'simulations significantly reduce the physical, psychological, and social risk of an activity by limiting or suspending formal metrics and long-term consequences of failure' (2006:175). A simulation therefore primes the style of a province of meaning that has application in the meat-world, but without the associated downfalls of failure.

Goldberg puts their concern lucidly: 'Surely this [level] puts the gamer in the position of being a terrorist?... We're asking gamers to be put in that situation' (quoted in Ingham, 2009). "Terrorist" is a province of meaning that exists here in the meat-world, one contradictory with provinces possessed by these men at any level of context-meaning. Therefore, they conceive of the

game as a simulation which primes the province “terrorist” in the player ready for meat-world application.¹¹

This simulatory aspect may be compared with another game, *World of Warcraft* (*Wo6*), which Reverend Lowe in particular regarded as non-contradictory to his provinces of meaning. *Wo6* is set in a fantasy universe containing mechanics which do not correspond to the meat-world¹². For example, the player can assume the role of a magic casting orc which fails to meet Hoffman’s criteria of *everyday ontology* as the activities cannot be repeated in the meat-world.¹³ Thus, even though *Wo6* contains violence which on face value might seem to be contradictory to the style of the Christian province of meaning, Lowe does not regard this as threatening because it is not a simulation. Both *46 8* and *Wo6* prime certain provinces of meaning, but the provinces primed by the latter cannot be extended to the meat-world. In this respect we might say that provinces of meaning involved in *Wo6* are self-contained in that they can only function within the game itself and therefore do not constitute a threat to any meat-world provinces.

Three things should be noted here. First, the notion that one province contradicts another is not dependent upon empirical evidence, as demonstrated by Kutner and Olson’s *Grand Theft Childhood* (2008) which uses empirical studies to show that video games do not statistically increase violent behaviour in children playing such games. Rather, the issue is not that the object in question is successful in priming a province of meaning, but that it does prime that contradictory province. Second, the question of whether the provinces of meaning of a game are self-contained, i.e. not simulatory, is dependent upon those accepted provinces of meaning carried by the person in question; that Lowe does not regard *Wo6* as a simulation is a product of his own provinces of meaning, and with a different set of provinces another person could regard *Wo6* as a simulation. Thirdly, it could be asked why similar responses were not forthcoming from humanist or atheist activist groups concerning games where the PC is co-opted into religious behaviours, as described below.

Even then it should not be assumed that because a video game primes provinces that are contradictory to those the player already possesses that the player is necessarily dissuaded from playing the game. Take, for example, *Grand Theft Auto 10* (“#”), a game that has received extensive media attention more often than not boiling down to a sound bite along the lines of: “You

11 An example of this actually occurring was revealed in the Anders Breivik trial who admitted to using *46 2* as a means of training for his attack on a political camp in Norway in 2011 (see Pidd, 2012).

12 See the following trailer, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wDk29Ismk>.

13 In his discussion of boxing clubs, Hoffman discusses the idea of a “gym fighter”: ‘A gym fighter performs exceedingly well in practice, but struggles to translate that performance in real matches’ (Hoffman, 2006:183). The phrase is somewhat context constrained, but the notion does capture to a degree what is happening in the case of *Wo6*.

get to sleep with prostitutes and then kill them to get your money back”.¹⁴ Some of the most ardent critics of the game come from religious quarters precisely because it is a simulation. However, we note one potential counterpoint from Christopher Knight, who exhorts his fellow Christians not to condemn the game because of the provinces it primes, but rather play it because of them (Knight, 2008). According to Knight, “~ # represents a “Giant’s Drink”¹⁵: a game which cannot be won without cheating. He exhorts Christians to play the game precisely because “~ # is filled with temptations: ‘So if you are someone who considers himself (or herself, no chauvinist we!) a righteous Christian consider this a test of your character’ (Knight, 2008). Knight poses the question to his fellow Christians that whether in “~ #5 *here their actions have no consequences in the meat-world, they would still remain good Christians in such a context. In this respect the game is not viewed as a simulation per se. Rather, the game serves as a test of existing provinces of meaning as Knight sees the point as not becoming the main character, i.e. adopting his provinces of meaning, but to ‘let your own raw morality become his own’ (Knight, 2008). In this respect the religious response involves overriding the primer province of meaning with another.

It should not however be thought that religious responses are limited to simulations. By this we mean to speak of those players who develop a positive religious response out of games insofar as they affirm or reinforce their religious provinces of meaning through representation. One example of this is Skip Cameron, who notes that as a Mormon, he is ‘much accustomed to seeing my religion portraying in unflattering and even disrespectful ways in entertainment media’ (2013). Thus while playing *Fallout(New Oegas (L0)*, a game set in a post-apocalyptic Mojave desert, he was interested by the discovery of the Old Mormon Fort. He found there ‘a group of people whose purpose is very much in harmony with aspirations of Mormonism and Christianity generally’ (Cameron, 2013). He associates the faction present in the Fort, the Followers of the Apocalypse, nominally with Mormonism, and went to an interesting level of depth in order to affirm this association, scrutinising the behaviour of particular characters in the game to identify Mormons, including Joshua Graham, Bert Gunnarsson and Driver Nephi. From this, Cameron draws a number of further associations: Graham comes from New Canaan which is the new name for Utah where many of the American Mormons are based; the original developer of *Fallout 3* intended to include a Mormon-owned vault before the rights to the game were bought by another company; Nephi is the name of the first author of the Book of Mormon; Gunnarsson is a Swedish name and Scandinavia is the second most successful mission site of the Mormon Church. In the case of Gunnarsson, the game itself reveals little of his Mormon origins, but Cameron did further research and tracked down dialogue that was cut from the final game that points to his being a Mormon. Cameron sees

14 “~ # is reported to have influenced a number of crimes (see for example: Calvert, 2003; Cochran, 2008; Leung, 2009).

15 Named after the computer simulation in *Ender’s Game*.

particular significance in these three characters. Graham falls from his Mormon faith and becomes a villain only then to be covered in oil and cast burning alive into the Grand Canyon for failing his new leader. After having lost everything he returns to New Canaan to seek forgiveness from the Mormons which, Cameron notes with approval, he received. He also sees it as significant that Gunnarsson is a ghoul – a zombie created by radiation fallout – as this ‘seems to indicate to me that *Fallout* Mormons are not the xenophobic other-hating religious stereotypes featured in some media’ (Cameron, 2013). In fact, Gunnarsson represents an exemplar Mormon to Cameron as he has come to New Vegas in order to bring Nephi, who has joined a psychopathic gang¹⁶, back to the church. Gunnarsson represents the ‘repentance, forgiveness, and redemption’ of the Mormon church and Cameron responds positively to this representation of Mormons as affirming his Mormon provinces of meaning even though the necessary information for this view was not present in the final game itself. A non-Mormon player, lacking the requisite provinces, is unlikely to notice that Gunnarsson is Mormon. We highlight Cameron’s case as but one among potentially many of gamers going beyond the game as it presents itself in order to validate or affirm its positive relation with their religion. Of course Cameron’s response is predicated on the game developer’s presentation of Mormons, and how developers represent religion in games is our next topic.

To argue for the reception of video games among fans as analogous to religion is to take a Durkheimian functionalist position whereby religion is constructed as a projection of the self-identity of a particular community. Hoffman’s work follows the Durkheimian tradition of analysis and we can see how important “priming” objects are for self-identity, either by affirming or destabilising it. In this respect video games present opportunities to either challenge or affirm religious identity. While, as scholars, we may be inclined towards those cases that challenge this, both Knight and Cameron’s cases indicate that the affirmations are just as interesting, especially when we consider what is necessary to take something that would otherwise challenge identity and use it as an affirmation.

4. Games as critique of “Religion”

Cameron’s response to *L0* indicates the second area of study of religions in video games, namely the way in which video games can critique religions by presenting “typified” versions of religions. This notion of typification is drawn from Schutz’s later essay “Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Actions” (1953). According to Schutz a typification: ‘what is experienced in the actual perception of an object is appreciatively transferred to any other similar object,

16 The name “Driver” is derived from the fact that Nephi likes to kill people with a golf club.

perceived merely as to its type' (Schutz, 1953[1962]:8). When the player encounters Rex in *L0*, for example, he comes along with such typifications as “dog”, “friend”, “mammal”, “animal”, etc. He fulfils all these expectations that I already have to hand as part of my “stock of knowledge” which is the totality of my gathered typifications¹⁷. That is, I have expectations of what a “friend” does (the typification) and Rex is a friend (instance) so long as he meets those expectations. When I encounter my very first dog there is a complete correspondence between instance and typification, it is the *exemplar*⁵ and it is through further encounters with similar objects that the typification becomes broader to accommodate these new instances. Video games, in constructing a representation of religion, do so according to various typifications of instances of religions in the meat-world. These typifications therefore form critiques based on the degree to which they correspond to, and the ways in which they diverge from their meat-world counterparts.

We admit that the identification of a typification of religion by a video game is often revealed by the religious responses people have to those games. Bainbridge and Bainbridge, for example, surveyed the content of a Christian website, christiananswers.net, dedicated to reviewing video games and found that within the negative reviews, seven games were criticised for portraying Asian religions favourably and nineteen for having positive portrayals of “invented” religions¹⁸ (Bainbridge and Bainbridge, 2007:40-41). Curiously missing from their typologies of Christian objections is a category for objections founded on negative portrayal of Christianity¹⁹. A notable example of this is found in *Bioshock Infinite (BI)*, which in many aspects is a critique of Christianity combined with American Nationalism. During development of the game, one of the developers tried to resign as he was offended by one level, which the game’s director admitted was due to the developer’s deeply held religious convictions and the importance he placed upon forgiveness (Makuch, 2013). At that point in development, the game’s representation of Christianity (the typification) clearly did not match up with the developer’s experience (instance). A second incident is the case of Breen Malmberg who demanded a refund for the game because playing it would require him to commit blasphemy (Hernandez, 2013). At the beginning of the game the PC must accept baptism in order to gain access to Columbia, during which the preacher proclaims: “I baptise you in the name of our Prophet, in the name of our Founders, in the name of our Lord”²⁰. Malmberg’s problem with the game is the addition of the Prophet (the game’s main villain) and the

17 Schutz adds that the typifications contained within an individual’s “stock of knowledge” are both derived from personal experience and are socially learnt (1953 [1962]:38-40).

18 More on “invented religions” below.

19 Though helpful, Bainbridge and Bainbridge’s study is somewhat flawed. The review system they use to base their conclusions off is only used by some of the reviews they cover. In particular their categorisation of *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* suggests that the reviewer responded negatively to the invented religion of the game (Bainbridge and Bainbridge, 2007:41). To the contrary the reviewer regards some of the deities of the game, a “fake world”, quite positively for the way in which they parallel the Christian God (Balrog, 2009).

20 A video of the full scene can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pVTBbkm4VU>.

Founders (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin) to the ritual. Conversely, other players have come to differing conclusions and argued against Malmberg that *BI* is intensely Christian (e.g. Ekeroth, 2013). While these religious responses help reveal the typifications present in video games, we propose to focus the rest of the section on how games have typified religion.

Like *BI*, the *Fallout* series of games are concerned with the US post-war religious landscape. The player must make their way through the remains of the US following a nuclear war, encountering hostile mutants, various military factions and isolated communities of survivors. This post-Apocalyptic world seems to be one in which religion has failed. Despite Cameron's insistence of the positive portrayal of Mormons, religion in the *Fallout* games is predominantly presented in the form of millennial sects, crazed preachers and cargo cults.

One example of this is the Church of the Children of Atom, which the PC encounters early in *Fallout M(M)*. The town of Megaton is constructed from abandoned or crashed aeroplane parts on the edges of a crater which surrounds an unexploded nuclear bomb. Many of the residents have turned to worshipping this warhead, the implication being that the threat of imminent destruction has led them into religious behaviour. The Church is clearly modelled on various Christian fundamentalist sects; they meet in a Church replete with pulpit and sacred book, they are baptised in the muddy radioactive water surrounding the shell and their leader is called Confessor Cromwell, obviously referencing the puritan English Protestant movement which was instrumental in the formation of the USA. What's more, by playing the imagery of puritan Christianity against the totem of the atom bomb²¹, the game is clearly making a comment on the sociological reasons for the rapid proliferation of New Religious Movements in the post-War period. A number of these groups' beliefs centered on the imminent annihilation of humanity through nuclear war, for example the Aetherius Society, Heaven's Gate and the Raelians (Partridge 2003, 13-21), as well as the nascent "New Age" milieu, which developed in alternative communities sharing a belief that Western civilisation was corrupt and sick (Hanegraaff 2007, 27-8). More often than not, these narratives involved UFOs, which were similarly a product of the early Cold War period, and despite their present connotations with extraterrestrials were originally most often interpreted as experimental military vehicles (Saler, Ziegler & Moore 1997, 6). Unsurprisingly, the *Fallout* games include much UFO-derived imagery, even including a crashed UFO and its occupants.

Another example appears in *L05* where the player encounters the Bright Brotherhood, a collection of ghouls led by Jason Bright. Giving up on the Wasteland and the bigotry of humans, the Brotherhood intends to reach the "Far Beyond", a place revealed in visions to Jason from the Creator, by going on the Great Journey. The Brotherhood shows a steadfast loyalty to Jason, all

21 Note that, although the game is ostensibly set in 2277 CE, the use of "Atom Bomb" is typical of 1950s and '60s discourse, as is much of the visual design of the *Fallout* games, reinforcing the Cold-War associations.

attempts at interaction by the PC will lead to a similar set of responses that always affirm that it is Jason, and Jason alone, who will lead them to the Far Beyond. The Brotherhood's journey to Far Beyond is blocked by "demons", other mutants preventing access to their sacred site in order to plunder it. This is perhaps intended to mirror discourses within millennial New Religious Movements which separate their "spiritual elect" from the masses more concerned with material gain. The Brotherhood eventually reveals itself to be somewhat of a cargo cult because the very apparatus of their Great Journey, jealously guarded from the player until they have rescued them from the demons, is a set of rockets built in the pre-war era and therefore presumably part of the apparatus of the war itself. Fixing the rockets is described as "worship" by Jason but is referred to as "work" by Harland, a more cynical member of the group. Harland, who by his own admission does not buy into the "religious mumbo-jumbo", potentially serves as a commentary on how such movements build some of their membership. As Harland describes his own situation, the Brotherhood provides him with supplies and female companionship, things that he struggles to find elsewhere as a ghoul. Nor is the Brotherhood without its sinister element, as much of their plan relies upon Chris Haversam, a human scientist who has been convinced that he is a ghoul. *Fallout* therefore offers a sophisticated critique of the religious and social fervour that the Cold War threat of nuclear annihilation incubated in the US during the 1950s and '60s. However, during this period it was also widely believed that atheist Communists were actively and subversively working against the Christian West, and it is therefore perhaps surprising that *Fallout* contains no positive portrayals of religion - or indeed, even ambivalent - with which to balance its satirical critiques. In short, *Fallout* is as disenchanted as the world it portrays.

Skyrim, on the other hand, despite an identical interface, is diametrically opposed in its portrayal of religion, presenting religion as part of the everyday discourse of the culture. The two groups of deities, Aedra and Daedra, are omnipresent in *Skyrim*, with shrines and temples present in almost every community. Particular cities are identified with the worship of particular deities, as are particular groups. Sometimes these are groups who identify with the particular quality embodied by a deity, for example, the Nightingales with Nocturnal; at other times they are racial identifications, such as the Nords with Talos and the Aldmer with Auri-El. While the Aedra are a mythic group whose interaction with the player is limited to the use of shrines, the Daedra are also present physically. They interact with the player as active agents, often without the player's ascension, and they seem to be pursuing agendas of their own. Thus, the gods of *Skyrim* are simultaneously mundane and dynamic, perhaps reflecting the enchanted fantastic setting of the game.

Yet this critique does not extend solely to pagan and polytheistic religions. Some of the Aedra belong to the Nine Divines, the "official" religion of the *Elder & Scrolls* games. Within the game the PC can find a number of books that reveal the religion's history, structure and beliefs. Among these books is *ten Commandments: Nine Divines* containing ten moral rules given down by the nine gods. A

copy of the book can be found on the wiki site dedicated to *Elder &rolls* games, and while wikis are hardly reliable sources, we draw attention to it here because it contains the comment: ‘This book bears intentional similarities to the Ten Commandments of the Christian faith’ (The Elder Scrolls Wiki, n.d.). For example Mara’s command is: ‘Live soberly and peacefully. Honour your parents, and preserve the peace and security of home and family’ (The Elder Scrolls Wiki, n.d.)²² which recalls: ‘Honour your father and mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you’ (Exodus 20:12). Further parallels can be found in the history of the religion of the Nine Divines. The religion was founded by St. Alessia who was a slave under Ayleid elves. Alessia not only receives visions from Akatosh who is referred to as a “King of Spirits” in *~rials of St. Alessia*, the book also mentions how the two enter into a “Covenant” which seals closed Oblivion, the *Elder &rolls*’ equivalent of Hell. Following Alessia’s death, the Alessian Order arose, a monotheistic group which brought the deities of other groups into a corpus of saints and spirits that were aspects of a single unknowable god. This then created theocratic rule in the now-established empire. Not only does the Alessian Order engage in crusader style practices against the Ayleids and those who reject the Alessian Doctrine they impose, their rule was also brought to end when its priesthood grew too large and unwieldy leading to greed and corruption. The fate of the Alessian Order seems to mimic that of the Catholic Church in a number of respects right up to the Protestant Reformation which goes under the guise of the War of Righteousness in the games. Visually the tie with Christianity is strengthened in two ways. First, the imperial race who form the cosmopolitan centre of the religion have a distinctively roman look, harking back to Christianity’s original spreading under the Roman Empire. Second, in Cyrodiil where *Oblivion* takes place there are a number of churches dedicated to the Nine Divines whose architecture is almost identical to late medieval churches replete with spires, stained glass windows, pews and monks in vestments.

While *Skyrim* may present a more enchanted game-world than *Fallout5* we cannot ignore the context of the game-worlds for this point. Magic, active gods, etc. would seem out of place in the *Fallout* game-world. Indeed, taking *Skyrim* as a typification of a particular religion is difficult precisely because of the contrasting contexts. *Fallout* is set in a world meant to be “our” future, built upon things with we are already familiar and it is therefore possible to make clear associations with meat-world instances. However, the same cannot be said of *Skyrim* which does not relate itself to “us”. As such, while we may identify certain typifications, we cannot conclusively say that the Nine Divines is a “critique” of Christianity *er se*. The Nine Divines also include typifications belonging to religions other than Christianity. For example, ancient Roman religion is invoked in the look and name of the Imperial army, as well as in the structure of the Pantheon. The divinities in *Skyrim* echoes the traditional classification of the Roman gods into two orders, the *di indigetes* (native) and *di nouensides* (adopted) (Wissowa, 1902).

22 Note, the accuracy of this has been confirmed by playing the game.

We recognise the need for care when exploring video games as critiques of religion; while it is possible to identify these games as typifying certain instances here in the meat-world, such identification may be incidental, and only possible because of our scholarly “stock of knowledge” (Schutz, 1953 [1962]). Can this really be called a critique if only we scholars recognise it as such? Surely we require the average gamer to recognise it as such, even if they do not have a personal stake in the matter, in order to speak in such terms? If the gamer does not recognise the critique as a critique are we, the scholars, not then engaging in some form of literary criticism? In such a case we would be doing little more than picking out religious themes, rather than providing analysis. As such, we may be constrained by gamers recognising a “critique” before we ourselves can begin such work. Another avenue, one we suspect is yet to be properly explored, is to investigate the intentions of the game developers themselves. If we, as scholar, recognise a critique of religion, we need to ask if this was intentional on the part of the people who made the game. Study in this area will need to go beyond the games’ content to the game making process itself and the people involved in that process.

5. Religions in Games

Although still contentious, the study of 'hyper-real' (Possamai, 2005) or 'invented' religions (Cusack, 2010) is a rapidly-developing field within Religious Studies. Religions drawn from popular culture (notably Discordianism, Church of All Worlds and more recently Jediism) began to emerge in the 1950s, but were largely ignored by the academy until Possamai's *Religion and Popular Culture* (# *Hyper-Real Testament* (2005). Yet the subject coincided with a number of trajectories within the field, including a general critique of the Protestant-centric theistic and orthodoxic approach to “religion”, the resulting scepticism concerning the supposedly “inspired” origins of religious traditions, and an increased concern with the relationship between popular culture and religion.

Here, we extend this argument and suggest that the religions of video games might usefully be considered as real in themselves. In particular, we mean to draw, as Schutz did, on W.I. Thomas' comment that ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (Thomas, 1928:14). If we combine this notion with Schutz's provinces of meaning, it implies that the province being occupied at any given moment determines what is ‘real’ for that individual; that is to say, something is ‘real’ only insofar as it accords to a particular province. Therefore, players engaging in the worlds created by video games - and thus engaging in the provinces of meaning

those worlds create - experience them as ‘real’. This line of argument suggests that the religions of the game-world might be considered as functionally ‘real’ as those of the meat-world²³.

Let us now consider some examples of game-world religions functioning for the character synonymously to meat-world religions, excepting only their particular province of meaning, as Thomas suggests. In *Skyrim*, there are numerous shrines to the Aedra scattered around the game-world, and if the player “activates” the altar found within these shrines (this is the on-screen command prompt), the PC will receive a blessing from the particular deity. These blessings then confer ‘real’ consequences on the PC; for example, the player may “activate” the shrine of Zenithar in order to make more money, and “activate” the shrine of Arkay when they go adventuring. This, however, begs the question whether these actions fit within a province of meaning that could be considered ‘religious’, as the player “activates” the shrine rather than “worships”²⁴. Of course, this question is perhaps predicated on the assumption that the player is somehow being incongruous in their actions; of course, numerous polytheistic religions do not require that individuals adhere to the worship of one god within the pantheon. These shrines are dedicated to the Nine Divines which operate within a single collective, but we should bear in mind that the player may also seek out the Daedra who give out quests for which they reward Daedric artefacts. The player is in no way penalised for having the blessing of Akatosh and owning Mehrunes Dagon’s artefact Mehrunes Razor (a dagger), even though the events of *Elder & rolls: Oblivion* revolve around a conflict between the two deities.

In the previous section we commented on how video games form critiques of religion by presenting typified versions; this also implies that game-world religions embody such typifications in order for us to be able to make the association in the first place. We suggest that the categories that many scholars of religion work with can themselves be considered typifications. To state definitively what these typifications are is beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless, we shall take the popular example of Ninian Smart’s seven “dimensions of religion”: to wit, the Mythic and Narrative; the Doctrinal and Philosophical; the Ethical and Legal; the Ritual and Practical; the Social and Institutional; the Material and Artistic; and the Experiential and Emotional (Smart, 1969; 1993; 1996). We do not argue for their universal applicability; rather, their broad range usefully includes the majority of typifications used by other scholars. In considering game-world religions as “real”, we shall apply these scholarly typifications see whether they are instantiated within those games.

23 We use ‘real’ in quotations as, by extension, this argument problematises the taken-for-granted assumption that what is real is self-evident and constant. Rather, Schutz suggests that each province of meaning has its own ‘reality’.

24 See, for example, Leo Strauss’ comments on what may be called a “mercenary attitude” to worship (Strauss, 1953:50-51).

Continuing with our example from *Skryim* in the previous section, we see that Smart's dimensions apply rather easily. First, the Mythic and Narrative dimension is presented through the story of Alessia and the founding of the Nine Divines, as well as other game-world texts revealing more on the history of the Aedra and Daedra. Such stories of "origins", "divine escapades"²⁵, and "Last Things" are typifications found in Smart's narrative dimension (1996:133-134)²⁶. The Ethical and Legal dimension is found in the *en) ommands: Nine ivines*, and we can find these commands being practiced in the game-world. For example, Arkay's command which calls for the proper treatment of the dead pertains directly to the practice of necromancy, and many NPCs in the game, especially those devoted to Arkay, respond negatively and in some cases violently towards necromancers. This also touches on a doctrinal aspect in terms of fulfilling a "responsive function"; examples can be found of all of the functions of doctrine detailed by Smart, another example being the question of Talos' divinity as a "definitional function" (1996:56).

Regarding the material dimension, we have already mentioned the churches in *Oblivion* and though the architecture differs in *Skryim*, the player can also find numerous statues of the gods, amulets and shrines all covered by the dimension. The presence of churches also indicates the Social and Institutional dimension of the religion, and one can also identify a range of functionaries matching Smart's description in the game-world (1996:215-235). Further, the overall structure of the Nine Divines accords with his discussion of Imperial religions as a 'relatively loose' unification, 'with cities and regions for instance having their own priesthoods and cults' (1996:237).

Under the Ritual and Practical dimension, Smart includes 'regular worship, preaching, prayers and so on,' (Smart, 1993:12). All these activities can be found within the Nine Divines; in *Skryim* alone we can observe, "Marriage" performed by priests of Mara, "funeral rites" performed by priests of Arkay, and "preaching" by a priest of Talos. Worship can be understood as not only belonging to the Ritual and Practical dimension, but also the Experiential and Emotional dimension. Worshipping Zenithar, for example, involves all the "important properties" of Smart's understanding of a numinous experience: we are put in touch with Zenithar who is "outside of time"; Zenithar is "ineffable"; this is in part because Zenithar has no bodily presence; Zenithar "cannot be spatially located"; and, the experience contains "potential bliss" in that we receiving a blessing from Zenithar (Smart, 1996:173). Nor are these experiences limited to the player. NPCs can be readily observed having such experiences, an observation made possible by the glow of light that accompanies worship.

25 Author's phrasing.

26 As an example of our point about the broadness of Smart's dimensions, these typifications are also found in Russell McCutcheon's definition of religion as 'discourses on origins, endtimes, and nonobvious beings' (McCutcheon, 2001:15).

This brings us back to the axial question; even though the Nine Divines may well meet all these dimensions (or other typifications that scholars of religion expect to be found within meat-world religions), does this make it a ‘real religion’? We note that Smart does not include a discussion of the ‘reality’ of practitioners and/or believers. Such scholarly arguments frequently take place regarding the objects of religious beliefs in the meat-world; for example, the reality or irreality of “foci” (Smart, 1973), “nonobvious beings” (McCutcheon, 2001), or “nonfalsifiable entities” (Cox, 2006), to name but a few. However, no such discussion occurs concerning practitioners. To put it simply can a religion be a religion if no one here in the meat-world ‘does’ it?

Such a question places the onus of “doing” or belonging to a religion as something unique to the meat-world. Stringer has argued convincingly that the beliefs of most Christians are “situational” and that in different circumstances many will express apparently contradictory ideas, for example concerning reincarnation (2008). We might say that these beliefs are both equally ‘real’ in different provinces of meaning. We return to Thomas’ comments about “real consequences” and Schutz’s provinces of meaning; that which is “real” is that which is consistent with the province of meaning being utilised at a given moment. As a person occupies many provinces in a day, this suggests a constantly shifting understanding of what is “real”. Thus, when in the province of *Skyrim*, the Nine Divines are very much a “real” religion, but that “reality” ceases once the player leaves the game.

Drawing on our comments about *Wo6* above, we suggest that the reality of the Nine Divines is (self-)contained, by which we mean that the province of meaning is not easily occupied in contexts outside of the game-world. We contrast this with the provinces of Christianity, for example, which are less contained in that they can be occupied in a wider range of contexts²⁷. This translatability of provinces of meaning is in turn dependent upon what level of meaning-context that provinces sits; the higher in the hierarchy a province is, the more translatable it becomes as more provinces are made derivative of it. Thus the only significant functional difference between the religion of the Nine Divines and Christianity in terms of their “reality” is that the former occupies a fairly low, restricted level of meaning-context.

We do not mean to suggest however that the meaning-context of the Nine Divines is fixed and thus contained. We have already discussed cases of “invented religions” escaping from fictions to develop meat-world presence. In fact, in the course of research for this article one of the authors discovered the existence of several Facebook pages dedicated to the promotion of the Nine Divines. Between the four most popular pages there are over a thousand “likes”, though we admit that this statistical point hardly indicates to what extent that Nine Divines has risen in the meaning-context

27 Based on our comments in the first section this occupation can occur in both meat-world and game-world contexts.

of the people who “liked” these pages²⁸. We do not, though, mean to suggest a theological enterprise by this sort of study. We regard this as a valid criticism, recent work by Bainbridge can be seen as an apologetic for transhumanism (e.g. Bainbridge, 2013). Yet by suggesting the study of religions in themselves in video games as a legitimate enterprise, we have intended the following: as scholars of religion we have our own typifications and applying them to cases like the Nine Divines can reveal some of the implicit assumptions and implications that these entail which had not been realised before. Further, the treatment of these game-world religions as religions in themselves raises a number of theoretical issues which intersect in potentially fruitful ways with other research loci in contemporary Religious Studies (i.e. invented religion, online religion).

6. Conclusion

We began by questioning the “and” in the statement of the topic “religion and video games”. We identified three approaches which scholars might take, and which we did not think were being adequately differentiated: religious responses to video games; critiques of meat-world religions in video games; and the religions of game-worlds as religions in themselves. Using Schutz’s model of provinces of meaning as a theoretical model, we then proceeded to untangle the various theoretical and methodological threads presented by each, placing them in their respective scholarly contexts. As we have demonstrated, these various positions are not methodologically neutral; rather they presuppose particular theoretical positions. Nevertheless, we do not suggest that they need be mutually exclusive; rather, we feel the need to encourage clarity as to which research question is being addressed in any work on “religion and video games”, in contrast to the untethered methods suggested by Bainbridge and Bainbridge. This is important to insure that we are doing meaningful analytical research, and not simply description.

This has broader implications for the field, however. The challenges presented here regarding scholarship on video games could fruitfully be extended to other academic studies in popular cultural production. Volumes recently reviewed by one of the authors concerning religion and comic books and science-fiction contained little or no attempt to address these theoretical issues, and as a result the volumes were a disappointing and aimless mixture of theology, literary criticism and descriptions of “religious” themes and imagery. The authors suspect that such material serves more to legitimise perceived marginal groups than to provide academic analysis. So too could the study

28 It has also not been possible to check how many individuals have liked multiple pages. Although on this point we have noticed attempts by the two most popular pages to merge other pages with theirs to expand their influence.

of video games. It is our hope that how we have here presented the three potential research loci will steer away from valueless, apologetic studies of “religions and video games”.

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Biographies

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Game Cultures as Sub-Creations

Case Studies on Religion & Digital Play

Elke Hemminger

Abstract

As online and offline spaces, digital and analogue worlds merge into each other and saturate our everyday lives, concepts of reality and its social construction need re-thinking. Digital game cultures, formerly often regarded as not only separate from reality, but also secondary in their importance for ‚real life‘, can give us insight into processes of cultural construction und re-construction, relevant for our mediatised society in general.

This paper analyzes digital game cultures as sub-creations (Tolkien 1947) that are consistent, significant and serve as comments on and additions to society. Focusing on religious elements in digital games, the paper states that game cultures reflect cultural practice in general and therefore contribute to the social construction of reality in essential ways.

The paper is based on the results of several case studies on digital games during which a system to categorize digital games concerning the way they use religious elements was developed, going beyond existing game categories.

The paper will introduce these classifications in order to support the assumption that religion in games can be seen not only as a key element in game cultures, but also as a reflection of social attitude towards and social status of religion in a wider prospect. Following this assumption, the paper will show how the analysis of digital games and their religious contents can help us observe and understand processes of social reality construction that might not be accessible or visible in other social contexts.

Keywords

game cultures, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, sub-creations, cultural practice, Sociology, new media studies

1 Religion & Digital Games: Introduction to an Ambivalent Coexistence

Every year in August, Cologne in Germany is hosting the world's biggest digital game exhibition, the ,gamescom'. Every year, the ,gamescom' is taken as an occasion to publish articles and comments on digital gaming, its vices and - in rare cases - its virtues. One especially interesting article this season was focussing exclusively on ,christian computer games' (Städter 2013). Religious bodies seem to have an almost traditional interest in digital games and media; they try to keep up with developments, use platforms and networks for communication and even develop their own digital games, although with little funds and even less economical success (ibid.). With the title ,Computer Games: Christian Content Nil Return (Städter 2013:16, author's translation), the article tries an analysis of religious contents in digital games. Apart from listing facts about the number of gamers in Germany, the average time they spend playing and how they differ in age and sex, the article's issue is foremost to lament the lack of ,christian computer games'. According to the text, it would be ,important to provide children and adolescents with a christian alternative not only in books and films, but also in computer games' (ibid.: 17), what is meant by the term ,christian computer game', how a player of games is defined and why the lack of ,christian computer games' might be a problem, stands without further explanation. From an academic perspective, the article is not interesting for its content, but more for its lack of it; obviously some of the problems a researcher on digital games has to face, especially if his field is in any way connected to religion in digital games, are reflected here in the obscure use of definitions and technical terms.

One problem researchers are frequently facing is the vast amount of digital games on the market. Even if we take into account only games available in Europe or the USA, neglecting the even more unmanageable Asian market, it is impossible to keep informed about every single game of every possible genre. Researchers therefore have to limit themselves to analyzing specific games or categories of games leaving any claims on totality behind.

The second standard difficulty is the classification of games. Even though there are genre theories to fall back on if necessary, they usually show serious demerits the moment you try to actually apply them on a specific issue such as religious content in digital games. Again, no genre theory is able to comprise and classify every single game on the market. They can only be used as a basis for comparison, presentation and description (Raczkowski 2012).

An additional challenge in game studies is the distinction between games and phenomena that merely resemble games, but are somehow different from a ,real' game. Again, there are elaborate theories to revert to and in many cases they will indeed help with this distinction, but as the gaming industry is a dynamic and creative one, there will always be games or not-quite-games that are hard to classify and therefore to analyze.

This paper will tackle the major challenges presented here with the help of case studies focussing on digital games and religious content. In analyzing these games, a new system for the classification of games and religious content will be introduced, going beyond existing game categories. The paper will also provide the case studies with a theoretical frame, allowing the analysis of game spaces as sub-creations (Tolkien 1947) and significant entities in the social construction of reality.

2 Digital Games: Genre Theory and Classification Levels

As stated above, academics in the field of digital game studies are still engaged in working on a generally accepted genre theory¹, but for classifications so far, we have to use categories as they are employed by game designers or the players themselves (Hemminger 2013: 25ff.; Raczkowski 2012: 61-74). These categories can be encountered mainly in relevant media such as game journals and are in no way meant as scientific classifications, but as a means to make communication about games, their content, development or design possible in the first place (ibid.). In the following, the commonly used terms for computer game genres will be explained in order to show why a new approach is necessary for the analysis of religious content in digital games. The presentation has no claim on completeness, as the existing genre categories alone would easily fill this paper on their own, but will offer a basis for the subsequent proposition of approaching the problem from a new perspective.

2.1 Four Categories of Digital Games

Digital games are usually grouped into four general genres and appendant sub-genres: simulation games, strategy games, action games and role-playing games (Apperley 2006: 6-23). Taking on myriad themes, simulations are characterised by simulating specific activities or actions such as racing (Gran Turismo Racing, SimBin Studios 2004), economy (Anno Series, Max Design & Sunflowers 1998-2012), piloting a plane or spaceship (Star Wars: X-Wing LucasArts 1993) or the evolution of an entire civilisation or environment, as in the sub-genre of god games (Populous, Bullfrog 1989; Spore, Maxis 2008). Regarding the fact that essentially every digital game can be interpreted as a simulation, definite classification is difficult, which is why usually for simulation games a certain authenticity of the visualisation is presumed as constitutive (Frasca 2003).

1 e.g. Dr. Gareth Schott (University of Waikato, Hamilton, NZ) in the Marsden Fund Project: Classification of Computer Games.

Strategy games are further divided into real-time strategy and turn-based strategy games; both sub-genres share certain visual features and technical rules, e.g. the bird's eye view for the players and the digital conversion of scenarios and systems of rules, based on traditional board games. Most important element of strategy gaming is the planning of a tactical course of action to achieve a goal which can range from destroying opposing military forces, populating new territories or the construction of buildings. These actions can be performed in limited turns (turn-based strategy games) as in *Civilization* (Sid Meier, series starting in 1991) or they are simulated in real-time (real-time strategy games) as in *Age of Empire* (Ensemble Studios 1997-2011). Apart from differences in themes and technical rules, strategy games use a great variety of settings (science fiction, fantasy, historical) and therefore differ greatly in their graphical realisation which again is challenging for definite classification.

Action games are essentially highly performative games; they can be further sub-divided into first person games (usually shooters) and third person games, relating to the perspective of the player on the screen. Both sub-genres are markedly fast and characterised by the necessity of quick decisions and continuous concentration, as well as the competent application of avatar skills (Apperley 2006: 16).

Especially complex in its appearance is the genre of role-playing games (rpgs), based on classic tabletop or pen-and-paper role-playing games. Rpgs are closely connected to fantasy literature, but use other settings like science fiction or historical scenarios as well. Often based directly on one specific tabletop model, rpgs visualise fantastic worlds as settings for sometimes intricate stories, in which the players move and act in the role of an avatar, accomplish quests, develop their characters and learn skills. These digital fantasy spaces and stories are limited by technical parameters, but still remain complex and multifaceted in both graphical realisation and gaming experience. Influenced by their roots in pre-computer gaming, digital rpgs still focus on the active role of the player, the engagement and immersion into the setting, the story and the character of the avatar. Manifold technical options for creative configurations of avatars, gaming experience and visualisation of setting has given the genre, especially the sub-genre of online role-playing games (MMORPGs), an almost artistic touch. Single-player rpgs as *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware 1998) or *Diablo* (Blizzard 1997) and MMORPGs as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) or *Everquest* (Verant Interactive 1999), in which thousands of players move in the game on central servers at the same time, differ massively in the way players experience the game; single-player games offer less creative possibilities and no in-game communication with other players. Even though the stories are usually multi-linear, varieties of action are more limited than in the online worlds of MMORPGs, which are meant to be explored according to the skills of the player, the characteristics of the avatar and the current season (christmas events are very popular in *World of Warcraft*). Especially MMORPGs can be played in myriad different ways, including the use of the game space as an

economical simulation, communication platform or social networking site. Therefore, the gaming experience of rpgs in general and MMORPGs in particular is hard to comprise by definite classification systems.

In describing the approach to game genres generally seen in relevant media and used by gamers and game developers for communication about games, the difficulties in using these terms for academic purposes have become clear. Even though the four categories simulation, strategy, action and role-playing game can give us insight into certain aspects by which games can be distinguished, it is also obvious that the margins between the genres are anything but marked and self-evident. In order to make the genres as defined by the gamer community more applicable for academic research, King and Krzywinska propose to consider genre as only one of four levels of classification for digital games (King & Krzywinska 2002: 26). These levels will be introduced in the following as this gives us the groundwork for the analysis of digital games and religious content from a further developed perspective later on.

2.2 Four Levels of Classification

King and Krzywinska (ibid.) use four levels to categorise digital games: genre, platform, mode and milieu; established terms of the genre level have already been discussed above. The platform level attends to the hardware system that is used for a specific game, e.g. a PC, Sony Playstation, Microsoft XBox or Nintendo Gamecube, to mention the most common ones. A possible other platform today are smartphones, which can be used to play various games that originally were developed for a specific hardware system. To differentiate between games by comparing gaming platforms is sensible in so far as the platform can have an impact on gaming experience, due to the fact that the means of controlling game mechanics or the graphic representation alter with the adaption for different hardware systems. However, in view of increasing media convergence², the platform level is not useful to establish fundamental criteria for game classification

On a third level, King and Krzywinska classify digital games by the mode, including every aspect of game settings and game characters that influence the experience of the game space. On this level, options for movement and decisions in the game as well as avatar creation and the difference between single-player and multi-player mode are analyzed. As already shown on the genre level, rpgs usually offer greater variety of options for the player than single-player simulations in having multi-linear stories and multifaceted avatars, examples as Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Rockstar 2004), which is, depending on the interpretation either race simulation or

2 Media convergence means the increasing murgence of different media such as television, internet, radio and phone into single devices offering varied user options, the most obvious example being the smartphone.

action game, illustrate however, that even these games can offer manifold possibilities for creative and individual gaming experiences.

According to King and Krzywinska (ibid: 26ff.), the level of milieu can be interpreted as a visual genre classification, taking into account the visual aspects of games in combination with typical structural and mechanical rules. Specific milieus are more likely to be combined with certain genres as the most popular milieus of fantasy, science fiction and horror illustrate; numerous fantasy rpgs and MMORPGs stand opposed to the rare fantasy simulation, whereas science fiction is utilised quite commonly for both MMORPGs and simulations. Horror scenarios appear in a variety of genres, most often in the action game sub-genre of ‚horror survival adventure‘ (Apperley 2006: 6-23).

In describing the existing concepts for game classification, it has been demonstrated that so far digital game studies lack an approach that shows the ability to manage the complex and rapidly developing field according to academic standards. After introducing relevant cases of games with religious content, the paper will therefore establish a new concept of game classification. In re-thinking genre theory, it provides a multi-faceted and dynamic system as an academic tool to analyze digital games by relating them to specific points of reference instead of trying to put them into definite categories.

3 Of Demons, Gods and Fallen Angels: Digital Games and Religious Content

In a perfect world, people wouldn't need gods. But perfect worlds can't exist and sooner or later someone, in trouble, desperate, will pray to the heavens. This is what happens in the beginning of *Bla!- D 6 hite*. Your new tribe bows before you in awe, and from this moment your prayer power starts to grow.³

The above paragraph is part of a description for *Bla!- D 6 hite* (EA 2001), a widely popular real-time strategy game, in which the player is acting in the role of god, which makes the game a god mode simulation as well. As the player takes over the role of god, his cursor appears on the screen as a hand that changes in appearance according to the player's interpretation of his role; the hand of a malicious or vengeful god will look more like a claw with withered dark skin and long fingernails, whereas a kind and caring god is represented by a gentle and neat hand. *Bla!- D 6 hite* can be

3 www.lionhead.com/games/black-white/: 25.september 2013.

played in single- or multi-player mode on PC, controlling is done with mouse and keyboard. The milieu of the game, based on classical fantasy settings, is loaded with historical motives from various cultures and eclectic religious aspects: as a god, the player can use mana (magical energy) to cast spells and he control a creature that takes on the form of an animal and learns to act as a representative of the god (similar to conceptions in egyptian mythology). The battle of God and Nemesis, the greek goddess of vengeance, is used in addition to a great number of elements common in christian as well as in other religions, such as the working of miracles by a god, punishment through plague and draught, but also the motives of salvation and godly assistance in battle. Dependent on the interpretation of the player, god can be worshipped in a sparkling white temple, reminiscent of an ancient greek building, or in a black, fire scarred temple.

In summary, we can state that referring to conventional classification, *Black & White* is a real-time strategy or god mode simulation game for PC (platform), set in a fantastic milieu and can be played in both single or multi-player mode⁴. The game offers a great number of options for creative decisions and gaming experience in a multi-linear plot. Religious elements are taken from various different religious traditions and mixed with historical motives; game space is, however, clearly separated from the offline spaces of the players' everyday lives (the relevance of this will be discussed below).

Whereas *Black & White* is set in a fairly familiar milieu for western conventions, the following case again shows the elusive diversity of digital games. Based on japanese culture, *Ōkami* (Capcom 2007) contains for us unfamiliar elements of design and content. *Ōkami* is a single-player action adventure game for Sony Playstation and Wii⁵. Just as in *Black & White*, the player takes on the role of a god, but here in form of a visible avatar, who is moving in the game world. A by now rare gaming element is the solving of riddles and puzzles as it was common in adventure games, for example in the popular series Legend of Zelda (NES 1986-2011). *Ōkami* means 'great God' or 'spirit', but also 'wolf', and the player is accordingly navigating the game world in the role of the goddess Amaterasu, goddess of the sun, meant to save the world from eternal darkness and capable of transforming into the form of a wolf. The game is set in historical Japan (Nippon) and is visualised as animated calligraphy, a non-realistic design called 'cel-shaded animation'. In the space of this unusual milieu, *Ōkami* comprises manifold elements of japanese mythology and folklore. The mode is determined by a relatively strict story, which is compensated by a number of options for sideline activities, such as helping trees to bloom, markedly reducing the pace of the story. One special feature, the 'celestial brush', is closely connected to the platform of game consoles⁶: with the

4 There are no official multi-player mode options for the more recent sequels of the game.

5 www.okami-game.com/gameinfo.php: 25.10.2013.

6 With the further development of touch screens, other platforms as PC or tablet computer can by now offer similar features to the players.

help of the consoles controller, the player is able to draw magical symbols on a canvas, helping him to solve riddles, defeat enemies in battle or conjure wind or fire. By summoning different gods, all highly influenced by the chinese sign of the zodiac, the player learns the necessary symbols and improves the ability to use the celestial brush during the game (ibid.).

In comparing *Black & White* with *Ōkami*, the heterogeneity of digital games is again obvious. Even though in both games the player acts in the role of a god, the games differ so completely on other levels as platform, milieu and mode as to make them almost incomparable. Even in genre, they can hardly be comprised in the same category, as *Black & White* is more a strategy game, whereas *Ōkami* is rather an action game. One similarity are the religious elements, which are constitutive for the game in both cases, but eclectic in one case (*Black & White*) and more consistent - namely adapted from japanese Shintoism - in the other (*Ōkami*).

In the following, the paper will introduce two more games comprising religious elements in a completely different way than in the above cases. The first game is *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2008), developed for Sony playstation and later also for PC. *Assassin's Creed* is a single-player action game, set in the time of the Third Crusade in the Holy Land (1191). Initially in the role of Barkeeper Desmond Miles in the year 2012, the player is kidnapped by a modern Knights Templar organisation and sent back into the memories of his ancestral assassin Altaïr by a computer device. As Altaïr, the player now lives through a story mostly based on historical facts, in which he fulfills various missions for the secret society of the Assassins. While moving through game space, the player can interact with his surroundings and his actions have immediate influence on his missions, as non-player characters react to him. A player can acquire respect and support among townsmen by showing consideration for them, whereas thuggery will only gain the player commotion and tumult, ultimately alarming the guards. Apart from this interactive feature, the plot is rather linear and missions follow the same basic course throughout the game. There is, however, a special feature to *Assassin's Creed* concerning the control of the game avatar, making the gaming experience somehow unique: instead of following the common assignment of specific keys to certain functions or performances, the keys control body parts of the game character instead. Initially presenting the players with difficulties, they now mostly regard the control system as logical and comfortable⁷. Religious aspects as stylistic devices are ever-present in the game and as the plot revolves around the rival secret societies of the Assassins and the Knights Templar, they are used to tell a historically coherent story. While the religious content is omnipresent and essential for the design of plot and setting, the game mechanics and missions of the game character could easily be transferred into other milieus.

⁷ As can be seen in numerous discussions on online gaming platforms, e.g. <http://www.spieletipps.de/pc/assassins-creed/meinungen/id-36154/>: 28.09.2013.

The last case introduced here for the time present is the very well known and immensely popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004), a fantasy role-playing game for PC that can only be played online, so that in addition to the PC an efficient access to the internet is required. *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) offers so many options to the player that it creates manifold types of user practice, ranging from complete immersion into the role of the avatar, to the focus on economical aspects of buying and selling artefacts, potions or pets, to the use of communication channels as social networks or chat platforms (Hemminger 2009 & 2010; Hemminger/ Schott 2012). The graphical design with its comic-like characters is reminiscent of *WoW*'s roots in tabletop role-playing games, which is also reflected in the great number of creative options for playing the game. The digital game space is wide and multi-faceted and can be explored according to the status and skills of the player; depending on the initial choice of avatar, the player begins his story in different parts of the game world and the gaming experience varies immensely as both the quests to be solved and the skills to be learned differ greatly between races and classes. While a player in the role of a troll shaman will be engaged in using spells and totems to heal or make battle, a dwarf warrior will probably focus on close combat and learning weapon skills. In addition to the classical quests (the solving of tasks for rewards in form of experience points, money and items), the players can choose from a variety of professions to learn and activities to try. Some players fancy spending their time in dealing with items for hours, others like to enhance their cooking skills or to gather plants for potions. If you need to relax, you can sit down with your fishing tackle on the shores of a quiet lake anytime. Other activities include raids (the organised attack on hostile territories or powerful adversaries in a selected group of players), competing in battlegrounds or arenas and the playing of dungeons in groups. Many players are affiliated in guilds, differing widely in their focusses: a guild can offer the players anything from a familial and comfortable union of fun-seeking gamers to a highly competitive and strictly organised system for efficient gameplay. Typical for MMORPGs, online and offline spaces mingle frequently in *WoW*. The mergence of spaces is a special development in digital media with serious impact on our views of reality and virtuality, as will be discussed in this paper later on (Hemminger 2009 & 2011).

Religious elements are apparent in many places in *WoW*. Different races are provided with individual religious systems, partly taken in entirety from existing religious traditions in order to design a race. The tribal culture of the Tauren is clearly inspired by North American native cultures, admittedly in a simplified and idealized form. Many fundamental game aspects can be traced back to classic christian motives such as helpfulness, readiness to make sacrifices for others or the courage to fight evil; in all cases, religious elements in *WoW* are eclectic and serve as stylistic devices (ibid.).

The above cases show the complexity and heterogeneity of popular digital games in its full dimension and illustrate once more the difficulties involved in trying to analyze these games

according to a coherent system of classification. As already pointed out, existing classification systems so far can only serve as indications regarding content and mechanics of a game. In order to analyze digital games in detail - as we need to do regarding religious aspects in gaming - conventional classification must be abandoned in favour of innovative approaches. The following chapter therefore presents a dynamic concept of analyzing digital games.

4 Re-Thinking Game Genre: Relation Parameters as Reference Points

For the analytical concept of relation parameters, four basic questions, partly refining the classification levels of King and Krzywinska (2002) as described above, have been identified, which allow the systematic analysis of digital games in respect of specific elements, in our case religious motives. At this point it has to be made clear, that even though the following illustration refers to religious elements, the concept can be adapted for an analysis concerning other cultural elements (e.g. communication options, immersion enhancing elements, social learning et al.). The four basic questions each supply two opposed reference points or poles; in between these reference points, the games can be arranged according to their proximity to the poles, thus giving us relation parameters rather than fixed and definite criteria for classification. The relation parameters include the following reference points:

1. Player Perspective: between god mode and hero mode;
2. Significance of Religious Elements: between constitutive and stylistic;
3. Origin of Religious Elements: between specific and eclectic;
4. Relation of Online- and Offline Spaces: between Magic Circle and Mergence of Spaces.

In order to further explain how the above relation parameters can be applied and what they exactly mean, I will fall back on the already described cases, before elaborating on the interpretation of digital games as culturally significant sub-creations.

Parameter number one refers to the player perspective and opposes the two poles of god mode and hero mode as reference points; in a god mode game, the player takes on the role of an ever-present god, overseeing the entire game world from a bird's eye view, whereas in hero mode, the player moves through game space in third-person mode as a game avatar or hero. In between can be settled the first person mode (common in shooters), where the player experiences the game

as self, often represented by a weapon-wielding hand. With the exception of *Black D 6 hite*, where the player experiences the game world in god mode represented by a hand on the screen, the introduced cases are all played in hero mode. Even though the player takes on the role of a goddess in *Ōkami*, the avatar is visible on the screen as a third person, *Assassin's Creed* is entirely experienced in the character of the hero and in *Wo6*, after creating and modifying the game avatar, the player is meant to immerse into the role and move through game space as a coherent third-person character.

In contrast to classifications in traditional game genres, which usually comprise the players' perspective as given for specific categories (Shooters are played in first person mode, action games in third person mode etc.), the implementation of a parameter of player perspective allows the analysis of games concerning possible effects of the perspective on gaming experience. No doubt, the differences in player perspective can have great impacts on gaming experience, such as immersion or the identification with the game character (Gomes 2005). It can be a vastly overwhelming or gratifying experience to act as omniscient and mighty god, whereas in contrast, the sudden onslaught of a wild wolf on a newly created avatar can make the players heart jump, just as the exploration of a beautiful landscape or dwelling is comforting and soothing to the mind. There is, so far, no research existent regarding a possible impact on religious experience and player perspective. By adopting the here proposed system of reference points, an analysis in this direction becomes feasible and might render interesting insights in player motives and immersive narratives.

The second parameter refers to the significance of religious elements for a game. In the previous case descriptions, this has already been addressed to some extent. For both *Black D 6 hite* and *Ōkami* the religious content is constitutive for the game, as the player is slipping into the role of a god and the entire gaming concept is based on the comprehension of religious aspects. *Assassin's Creed* and *6 orld of 6 arcraft*, although full of religious elements per se, are not constituted by them, but rather rely on religious or spiritual aspects for a dense and coherent story and atmosphere, as well as the stylistically conclusive design of game characters and cultural details. In further comparing *Assassin's Creed* and *6 orld of 6 arcraft*, the benefits of a classification of games by reference points is again obvious. Even though in both games the religious elements are omnipresent, their importance for the setting, the plot and the game mechanics are rather different. *6 orld of 6 arcraft* relies on the dense atmosphere of a fantastic setting that is endowed with detailed cultural depictions of the lives and traditions of the peoples. These depictions naturally include references to the religious and spiritual traditions and practices, because they are needed to show a consistent picture and thus construct a believable game world. For *Assassin's Creed*, religious elements are not especially important for the creation of credibility, because the setting is based on historical facts rather than a mythopoetic fantasy. But in contrast to *Wo6*, *Assassin's Creed* takes religious elements as a device to construct an exciting and consistent narrative. The plot

is staged as a religious quest and while the game mechanics and actions would easily function in other contexts, the religious content is used as a stimulating device to keep the story moving. We can therefore state that in our cases the significance of religious elements ranges from constitutive for the game (*Black D 6 hite* & *Wo6*, *Ōkami*) to essential element for the plot (*Assassin's Creed*) to merely stylistic device (*Wo6*). By using a system of reference points, it is possible to analyze these subtle differences and place *Assassin's Creed* closer to the pole of religious elements as constitutive elements than *Wo6* or *Wo6*. To comprise fine distinctions between games as shown above - and these distinctions can, after all, make for some players all the difference between a game that is worth playing or not - is not possible in an inflexible classification system solely concerned in placing a game in a ready-made casket with no regard to specific plot elements or stylistic devices.

On a third level, the system of parameters relates religious elements according to their origins. Both *Black D 6 hite* and *Wo6* use eclectic religious and spiritual motives based on diverse traditions as greek mythology, animism, aztec sun worship and many others. One conspicuous concept noticeable in both games and in fact very common to games in a fantastic setting, is the idea of an all-pervasive force (mana) as a technical adaption of a spiritual life force that can be regulated, channelled and systematically applied, but also choked by evil influences or dwindle. The term 'mana' is borrowed from polynesian mythology and means power⁸. The concept of an elementary, ever-present energy or cosmic force is present in various other traditions, comparable to Prana in Hinduism, the japanese Ki or chinese Ch'i. In digital games the concept of a spiritual energy is frequently used, but hardly ever a specific issue. As part of the game mechanics it is taken for granted and used as any other skill or power a game character might possess. Usually, the avatar needs only simple mechanical procedures to apply or replenish the force, such as drinking a potion or water in *Wo6*, and thus the game adaption has only little in common with the complex models in religious culture.

Ōkami and *Assassin's Creed* present themselves as more specific in the origins of religious elements. *Ōkami* is largely based on japanese shintoism with assets from chinese signs of the zodiac, *Assassin's Creed* is framed by the history of christianity in a coherent setting. Elements taken from historical reports around the time of the Third Crusade as well as legends ranking around the Knights Templar and the Assassins complete the christian-occidental milieu. Even though many historically correct details are portrayed in *Assassin's Creed*, the presentation of the ancient secret societies of the Knights Templars and Assassins lack historical accuracy and partially rather depend on common modern conspiracy theories e.g. in depicting the Assassins as an atheistic society⁹ or the Knights Templar as a secretly operating and ruthlessly powerful society.

8 www.allenvarney.com/av_mana.html: 28.09.2013.

9 The Assassins are in fact an ancient ismailitic order. See: www.eslam.de/begriffe/a/assassinen.htm: 25.11.2012.

Again, the relating of the origins of religious elements in different digital games illustrates the multifaceted adaption as a mere matter of course. In anticipation of the following analysis of game cultures as sub-creations, it can already be stated that the implicit use of religious content is significant in itself as a reflection on modern society. It is again obvious that an analysis like this can only be attempted on the basis of a dynamic classification of games as proposed above, because a rigid genre theory offers no possibility at all to distinguish games according to the origin of innate religious elements.

Referring to a last parameter, digital games can be arranged according to the relation of offline and online spaces. The opposed reference points ‚magic circle‘ and ‚mergence of spaces‘ are terms from the discipline of game studies and therefore in need of exemplification.

The emergence of digital media, especially the internet, has resulted in the creation of new spaces, in which people communicate, learn and experience social companionship. Despite all scepticism, these spaces have become an essential part in everyday life for a great number of people and are used in differing ways and circumstances. The virtual spaces of games (always excepting game spaces of online multi-player games; see below) represent a unique type of space, detached from everyday offline spaces by intrinsic rules and definite boundaries, which is entered with the particular intention of playing the game. The magic circle, a term originally coined by ludologist Huizinga (1955), tries to comprise just these special characteristics of game space (Rodriguez 2006). Ludology classically distinguishes games according to the significance of rules, on the one hand the clearly defined, systematic and rule-based game with a defined goal (*ludus*) and the free and unsystematic play (*paidea*) that usually has neither clear boundaries nor a defined purpose (Dormans 2006). The english language offers two different words for the purpose of distinguishing between the types, in other languages, such as german, there is only one word for both game and play, so that the difference is not always readily understood. It is, however, fundamental for the analysis of digital games.

With the development of online digital games, which are shared by a multitude of players competing, communicating and cooperating at the same time, the boundaries between offline and online spaces, between everyday life and game world, can no longer be retained. The moment people engage in social interaction in a game, spaces can mingle; this process is not an imperative, it is perfectly possible to experience online game spaces in interaction with other players as definitely bounded off from everyday life, but the option to start communicating about or commenting on completely irrelevant (for the gameplay) everyday issues using trade channels or guild chat is at hand and can be seized anytime. In doing so, players transgress boundaries of everyday life and game world easily, the spaces mingle and naturally merge into each other: a mergence of spaces, as this process has been called in digital game studies (Hemminger 2009; Hemminger/ Schott 2012). Various academic disciplines are engaged in analyzing the impact of this

mergence of spaces on social interactions, individual development and society as a whole. These questions, although highly significant, cannot be addressed in detail in this paper. For the issue at hand, mergence of spaces is most notably relevant, because it illustrates once more the significance of game spaces, particularly online game spaces as culturally and socially important spaces for experiences and learning which cannot be ignored in analyzing social conditions in general and the construction of reality in particular.

Returning to the selected cases and the classification of digital games, the relation of online and offline spaces once more presents itself diverse. Two of our cases (*Ōkami* and *Assassin's Creed*) are straight single-player games without options for interaction between players. The magic circle of game space manifests itself with clear boundaries and is entered with a definite intention to play. As will be demonstrated below, this does not mean that everyday life and game space are entirely separated, but share elements from our everyday experiences.

Black D 6 hite can be played in single-player or multi-player mode. If the option of multi-player mode is chosen, the game offers more possibilities for interaction, but still takes place in the magic circle of the game space. As the game is not played online, the players communicate simply by talking to each other (in the case of LAN gaming by headsets). Mergence of spaces in the sense of a mingling of online and offline spaces is occurring in *Wo6* and other online games, particularly in MMORPGs, offering highly versatile experiences and creative options for gameplay. Moving away from playing in the boundaries of a magic circle, MMORPGs range into our everyday lives, boundaries dissolve, mechanical rules are flexible and not crucial for the game, the individual game experience coming to the fore instead. For the classification of games, the relation of offline and online spaces is therefore instrumental, not only regarding religious elements. Once more, the dynamic system of reference points offers important advantages to a rigid genre theory in providing the means to include the all-important aspect of merging spaces in the analysis of gaming experience. In the following chapter, the paper elaborates on the significance of the mergence of spaces as well as on the general relation between game space and everyday life.

5 Game Spaces as Sub-Creations: Religion in Games and Everyday Life

As already stated, game worlds are never utterly separated spaces, but always share elements - however remote and fantastical - taken from the everyday lifeworld of the players, as indeed all creative work does. As strange and unfamiliar as a virtual world may seem to us, they are invariably re-constructions of the world we live in and therefore part of this world. The concept of literary work as sub-creations can be found in English literary studies since the Cambridge Platonists and

their philosophy of a compatibility of reason and faith (Hutton 2013). It was, however, the author of one of the most beloved and discussed fantastic stories ever, J.R.R. Tolkien, creator of Middle Earth and the Hobbits, who in one of his rare excursions into the academic discussion of fairy-tales (Tolkien 1965) coined the term ‚sub-creation‘ in literary discussion of this phenomenon. The ability of creating a secondary world with its inner consistency and laws is for Tolkien one of the fundamental characteristics of humans. To reflect and portray God's good creation in mythopoetic work is a gift that enables us to become makers ourselves, always drawing on primary creation, reflecting it, interpreting it, idealising it. In his comments on *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954 & 1955), C.S. Lewis (1982: 90) put it like this: „The Value of the myth is that it takes all the things you know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the veil of familiarity.“

The successful creation of a secondary world allows us to step back and take a look at ‚all the things we know‘ from a distance. This has nothing to do with retreating from reality or escapism, but with a rediscovery of real things. „By dipping them in myth, we see them more clearly.“ (ibid.)

What C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien state for fairy tales and myth can be - and indeed should be - applied on game spaces today. What the consistent fairy tale can do for us, the game set in a world „with the inner consistency of reality“ (Tolkien 1965: 47) might do in its own way also. Weaving a story from the material of the primary world in words and vision, digital game spaces draw on everyday life, are derived from reality and flow back into it (Tolkien 1965). For both C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, the concept of sub-creation is as much a literary term as a reflection of their religious beliefs. A secularised use of the term as a metaphor for the adaption and construction of game worlds from the material of reality proves to be prolific and valuable for the analysis of digital games as will be shown below.

Before further elaborating on the process of constructing reality (a term which certainly needs explanation) in digital game spaces, the paper is delving deeper into the issue of religious elements in the sub-creations of digital games; for this purpose we will draw on the already analyzed cases once more, adding new, illustrative cases as needed.

The analysis of the exemplary cases has shown that religion in digital games is frequently connected to battle, conflict and violence in general, most obvious in *Assassin's Creed* and *Ōkami*. Research on the US market of digital games found similar results (Hurst 2012). In its extremes we find the connection in *Messiah* (Shiny 2000), a first-person shooter played in the role of the fallen angel Bob, who is sent to earth in order to fight against sin and corruption. Bob, a chubby and harmless cherub, is capable of inhabiting external bodies and using their skills, thus transforming into a killer, a pimp, a policeman or a superhuman battle machine. With might and main he is engaged in his battle against sin by abusing the sinners bodies themselves. Depictions of violence

are bloody and realistic and are found to be extreme in their detailedness by the general gamer's community.¹⁰

The frequent depiction of religion in connection to violence in digital games is not due to an intentionally negative presentation of religion by game designers or developers, but are based on rather more trivial ground. Looking closer at the in-game conflicts, superficially caused by religious aspects, it turns out that in many cases the real cause for violence is money or power (as in *Assassin's Creed*). As this perception is coherent with most people's everyday experience, games with this kind of setting and story are found to be authentic and substantial. Religion is perceived merely as a story element, not as an issue in itself. The implementation of religion into a story as stylistic device for creating a consistent setting is therefore nothing less than the sub-creation of reality, a reflection of everyday experiences of both player and game designer.

On a second level, the implementation of religious content in game worlds is significant for being multi-faceted and often eclectic. Drawing again on the concept of sub-creation we have to ask in what ways this might be an interpretation of the primary world. The answer can come hardly as a surprise for anyone who is engaged in the field of social analysis and religion; it has long been obvious that the social and cultural significance of religion in modern society is, if not exactly declining, certainly changing (Hemminger, H. 2003: 17ff.; Utsch 2011). The modern individual is not educated and socialized by religious capacities of one single faith, he does not grow into a society that is influenced in all its facets by a christian code of ethics and conduct. The modern individual is a tinkerer, a handyman, constantly serving himself on the market of options for composing faith, religion, spiritual attitudes and practices (Beck 1986; Eickelpasch/ Rademacher 2004). In taking what seems to be practicable, using what seems comfortable and discarding unloved elements, religious and spiritual traditions are re-interpreted, re-combined and individually applied. Again, this cultural practice of patch-working is reflected in the implementation of religious elements into digital game settings. Whereas some games (as shown for *Ōka i* and *Assassin's Creed*) draw mostly on one religious tradition and depict them historically correct to some extent, alterations and modifications are made and accepted if suitable for the story or game mechanics. In a similar way, religious and spiritual elements are mixed and re-matched for other games in order to create a consistent game world and a dense atmosphere for the plot (e.g. in *World of Warcraft* or *Blade & Soul*). Transcendancy in game worlds as in the god mode simulation *Blade & Soul* is an exception and even though the player in the role of god is representing an incomprehensible power and dark secret for his people, the transcendancy is part of the game world and therefore not genuine in the sense of occurring out of the familiar world of the player himself. The simulation of such a power that is genuinely transcendent for the player might be possible in a

10 All information on game and story are taken from several user platforms and descriptions of the producer, e.g. on www.ciao.de/Messiah_CD_ROM_Test_2756211: 29.11.2012.

game, but the question remains if such a game would be attractive for the users. It seems that even in this aspect the virtual game space is a reflection of everyday life: in the course of individualization and pluralization, individuals are searching for useful cosmic principles and recipes for applicable religious or spiritual motives. Just as a mage in *6 orld of 6 arcraft* channels energy to cast a spell, religion for most people nowadays should be easy to use for specific purposes like solving a problem. The eclectic supply of religious and spiritual choices on offer in modern society is naturally taken from the primary world and woven into the material of the sub-creation.

Religion seems to constitute an essential part of our culture, despite every prophecy of doom for it. True, very often it serves as a mere stylistic device both in the primary and the secondary world. But the fact remains that for the human mind religion is still an important element of the coherent story, the consistency of characters and cultures. Some games can go without religious aspects entirely as can some individuals; for many, religion is a stylistic device, an embellishment for padding the story of life in-game or out of the game; and still for some, religion is the constitutive part of the story, life being unthinkable without it, for reality is both an individual and a social construction and therefore differs and changes within persons and time.

6 The Digital Construction of Reality: Game Space as Lebenswelt

Game spaces as sub-creations are part of our everyday life; as players make experiences, interact and merge their online and offline spaces, the secondary creations of game worlds become a space of cultural and social significance, constructed from the material of the primary world, from what seems real and natural to us in everyday life.

The concept of a socially constructed reality as well as the all-important terms reality and knowledge have been philosophically discussed since the beginnings of the discipline, whereas social sciences are concentrating on the question of what constitutes reality. Alfred Schütz' description of the universal structures of human lifeworlds or *Lebenswelt* (Schütz 1932 & 1971), based on Edmund Husserl's phenomenological philosophy (Husserl 1936), as well as the analysis of a social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann (1966) are by now scientific classics.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) can be seen as the founder of phenomenological philosophy and greatly influenced a number of important philosophers as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre or Jaques Derrida. Husserl's philosophy breaks with the then predominant tradition of psychologism and states that the analysis of reality should be based on phenomena that can be perceived by consciousness thus discriminating between a natural and a phenomenological mode of understanding reality (Husserl 1936). Husserl also introduced the term lifeworld (German:

Lebenswelt), meaning the world that is closest, the everyday world of an individual (ibid.). The term Lebenswelt is standing for the world that an individual experiences as given, self-evident and shared with others. It is a subject's everyday reality in which there is generally no need to challenge what is real or not. Even though every individual carries his or her personal lifeworld, it is characterized by intersubjectivity, meaning that it can be communicated to others and shared in its essentials. This is not to say that lifeworld is a static concept, but it must be understood as the dynamic and developing surroundings of individuals and their everyday lives. As they move and develop, their lifeworlds change and the horizon moves with them, but remains obvious in that the subject lives (German: *erlebt*) the lifeworld and shares it with other individuals (ibid.).

It is Alfred Schütz (1899-1959) who takes Husserl's concepts of consciousness and phenomena as well as the term Lebenswelt and integrates it into his own theory, thus creating a phenomenological sociology. Alfred Schütz' description of the universal structures of human lifeworlds (Schütz 1932 & 1971) is following the initial assumption of phenomenology of a reality constituted by human consciousness. Its issue is not reality as such, but always reality as related to individual interpretation.

Alfred Schütz continues to develop Husserl's philosophy of lifeworld, meaning and consciousness in his concept of a phenomenological sociology by combining it with Max Weber's focus on subjectively meaningful actions (Schütz 1932). Schütz interprets the social world as both constituted by individual experiences and constructed as the world that we take for granted for ourselves and others. The everyday life is special for Schütz in that it is generally taken for granted in contrast to other systems of meaning like the sciences or religion. Schütz' concept of subjective meaning in everyday lifeworlds as the constitutive elements of prime reality for individuals influenced a number of highly relevant theories in the social sciences, among them the sociology of Ervin Goffman and the sociology of knowledge by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Berger/ Luckmann 1966; Schütz/ Luckmann 1979 & 1984). Both concepts share the basic assumption coined by Schütz of social meaning being the result of intersubjective interpretation and assignment of meaning by the acting individuals (Abels 2009: 49ff.).

The analysis of social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann (1966) can be considered to be among the classics of social science theories and has for some paradigmatic character. Berger and Luckmann are well aware of the intellectual roots of their sociology of knowledge in the concepts of Marx, Nietzsche and Dilthey (ibid.: 17 ff.). They also relate their own theory of the social construction of reality to Scheler's and Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, if only to set their own work apart from these conceptions, especially in excluding the „epistemological and methodological problems that bothered both of its major originators“ (ibid.: 26). In stark contrast to Scheler or Mannheim, Berger and Luckmann are interested in everyday knowledge of everyday lifeworlds, not in theoretical ideas or concepts. If we seek to understand the

processes of constructing knowledge in society - so Berger and Luckmann - we have to concern ourselves with everything that is knowledge, not only with theoretical interpretation, ideologies or philosophical truth (ibid.). Therefore for them,

sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people ‚know‘ as ‚reality‘ in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. (...) It is precisely this ‚knowledge‘ that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist. (ibid.: 27)

Berger and Luckmann's concept of social reality is the result of combining central elements of Weber's and Durkheim's sociology. In doing so, they ask both for the subjective meaning-complex of action (Weber 1920) and for the objective facticity of society (Durkheim 1903) and thus attribute to society the essential characteristic of duality. For Berger and Luckmann the elementary concerns of sociological theory merge into the central question: „How is it possible that human activity (Handeln) should produce a world of things (choses)?“ (ibid.: 30) The analysis of this process, which also effects the constructing individuals, is the task of the sociology of knowledge.

Berger and Luckmann take into account anthropological assumptions, in particular Gehlen's and Plessner's concept of the peculiar position of man as a being with under-developed instincts (Abels 2009) that is characterized by a general world-openness and cultural formability: „(...) man constructs his own nature, or more simply, (...) man produces himself.“ (Berger/ Luckmann.: 67) For this act of construction Berger and Luckmann describe three dialectically aligned and interacting processes, externalization, objectivation and internalisation, which result in the construction of social order. Permanent externalization or human activity lead, by producing shared complexes of meaning through interactions, to habitualisation and institutionalisation (ibid.: 69ff.). The products of externalization, like meaning-complexes, institutions or artifacts gain a certain independent facticity which in turn affects the subjective human consciousness as compulsory and binding and an objective institutional world is constructed in a process of objectivation; the product acts back upon the producer. Externalization and objectivation are moments in a continuing dialectical process. (ibid.: 78). The third moment in the process is internalization, which in the broadest sense can be interpreted as socialization by which the „objectivated social world is retrojected into consciousness“ (ibid.). Summarising, Berger and Luckmann express their theory in the following declaration: „Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.“ (ibid.: 79)

Current approaches to research on social communities, in which influences and user practices of digital media become increasingly important, are following in the tradition of Berger and

Luckmann's sociology of knowledge. Included in these concepts is the basic notion that reality can not be seen as absolute. Rationalities are pluralized, reality and accordingly everyday lifeworlds are not implicitly and automatically identical for every person involved. Reality and knowledge are socially constructed as a means to reduce complexity, which is only possible by tagging events, interactions and communication with specific meaning. Reality therefore constitutes itself through interaction and communication and must be interpreted by individuals. This interpretation, so the social sciences state, has become increasingly difficult in the course of meta-processes of social change such as individualization, pluralization and globalization, followed by diverse challenges and risks for individuals and societies alike. Depending on which aspect is to be emphasized, society is tagged with different names, ranging from risk society (Beck) to network society (Castells).

With Jürgen Habermas we can state that modernity shows itself like the ancient Roman god Janus with two socialisation faces (Habermas 2001), leaving it to individuals and their ability to cope with these challenges whether they experience their personal lifeworlds as pluralized and individualized in the sense of creative freedom or rather in the sense of a risky lack of security. These pathologies of modern society have been identified and analyzed for decades with focus on different aspects; recently social sciences have been confronted with a - at least historically - new and rapid development, changing the lifeworlds of individuals as well as structures and communication in entire societies: the permeation of life by digital media. The concept of mediatization (Krotz 2007) comprises among other social meta-processes as individualization, pluralization and globalization also the meta-process of mediatization.

Mediatization is understood as a meta-process - meaning a long-term process with unforeseeable effects and duration on a global scale - of social change, including various developments resulting in the acquisition of media skills and knowledge, the permeation of media in varied sectors of everyday life and the following changes to individuals and their environments. The process of mediatization is both a condition and a result of other meta-processes as can be clearly demonstrated in the cases of globalization and pluralization, without which the development of digital media would be unthinkable on the one hand, which are on the other hand fundamental causes and conditions for this development and therefore constantly influencing each other.

In a mediated society communication and interactions are increasingly effected through digital media. Communication generates social relationships, identity, cultural and social structures. In consequence, mediatization becomes significant as an extension to the concept of a social construction of reality: Mediatization is conceived to be a „basic process of everyday life and the pre-condition for the constituting of the individual and his identity, as well as his interpreted world and reality.“ (Krotz 2007:17, author's translation)

7 Game Spaces as Looking-Glass Realities: Conclusion

Berger and Luckmann have demonstrated in their classical work on the social construction of reality how all our individual *Lebenswelt* is socially constructed by processes of externalization, objectivation and internalisation. Today, social construction of reality connotes a digital construction of reality as well, as the digital spaces of world wide web, digital games or social networking sites can no longer be separated from offline worlds, but are indeed essentially part of everyday life for many people. In interpreting game spaces as secondary worlds, the process of construction and re-construction of *Lebenswelt* is a constantly shifting and dynamic reciprocal development: as we design game worlds, a digital reality is intentionally constructed from material of the primary world; every impression, every action or word that carries back into the primary world from these game worlds again influence our concept of reality and thus again the design of future game worlds. As we have seen in the analysis of our cases *Bla!- D 6 hite*, *Ōkami*, *Assassin's Creed* and *6 orld of Warcraft*, the sub-creations of game space reflect and interpret their origin in the primary world in manifold ways. With a view to the implementation of religious aspects this might feel uncomfortable for some, but this is not the crucial point. It is only of consequence regarding the ways we can or have to react to this development of new and in some respects unregulated spaces of social construction of reality. Digital game spaces are as real as we perceive them to be, as important for individuals and significant for society as everything else that we take as a given reality in our everyday lives. That might be one reason for skepticism and in some cases even fear of virtual worlds: they are not yet taken for granted by everyone, they still might seem unfamiliar and strange and therefore not completely internalized. The fact remains that for a majority of people, game spaces and other digital spaces constitute their reality, their everyday life, their *Lebenswelt*. Maybe for this reason the initial lamentations over the lack of ‚christian games‘ (Städter 2013) seems now even more absurd: if a ‚christian game‘ is a game were christian knowledge or content is intentionally conveyed to the players (at least this is the most obvious interpretation of the author’s meaning), it is no wonder that such games hold no great power of attraction to the general player, who is seeking for a sub-creation with the inner consistency of his *Lebenswelt*. For how can an educational game without a coherent story and setting, without the conflicts, suffering and rejoicing of the human mind and soul ever be alluring to a player? If we wish to learn about facts, we can choose such a game, but usually this is not the motivation that drives the player. It is the eventual challenge, the new and creative experience, the trying out and failing or succeeding that makes a game. A good, alluring game in a christian setting is certainly possible, why not? The bible is full of deeply moving stories, featuring battle, love and sorrow - which only emphasizes the absurdity of the notion of a consistent sub-creation without the characteristics of human life itself.

The ability to create a secondary world, so Tolkien (1965), the gift of fantasy „remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker“ (ibid.: 55). On this note of the creation of game worlds as an emulation of God’s primary creation by His subjects, the presence of religious elements in digital games gains a new and rather surprising quality. Even if used merely as decorating elements in a story or in order to give consistency to a character, religion in its many peculiarities is so frequently implemented in game worlds as to seem almost indispensable. Maybe religion is more essentially present in human mind and the individuals Lebenswelt than we commonly choose to recognize. Maybe the loss of the myth, the disenchantment of the world, is compensated in this playful and creative way. This might be what another master of the written word, G.K. Chesterton, meant by stating that „it might reasonably be maintained that the true object of all human life is play. Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground“ (Chesterton 1908).

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Maker's Breath

Religion, Magic, and the 'Godless' World of BioWare's Dragon Age II (2011)

Kristin M.S. Bezio

Abstract

The core conflict of BioWare's 2011 digital role-playing game *Dragon Age II* places the Christianesque Chantry in opposition to both the hierarchical Qunari and the Circle of Magi. In *Dragon Age II* religious beliefs, particularly those of the Chantry, prove destructive; by demonstrating the chaos of religious conflict, the game guides the player to recognize the danger inherent in extremist devotion to religion, and argues that interpersonal relationships should form the basis of our ethics. In *Dragon Age II*, the player-character, Hawke, is evaluated by each of his (or her) non-player companions; the mechanic forms the basis for a fundamentally humanist ideological framework in the game's world, despite the prevalence of a variety of religious beliefs. I suggest that the game retreats from systems of belief as ideal sources of ethical mores, instead turning to human interaction as a preferable means of determining social and personal ethics.

Keywords

Dragon Age II, videogame, ethics, extremism, religion, oppression, humanism

BioWare's 2011 digital role-playing game (DRPG) *Dragon Age II* stands as an example of the complex ethical self-reflection possible for players of DRPGs.¹ Zachary McDowell (2012) explains that such games

require a massive time investment, often requiring from forty to over eighty hours (or more) of game-time to complete the basic story (and much more to complete all of the other content). This provides a unique situation where RPGs become more than just a simple story. This story takes up an incredible amount of the player's time and therefore a large

¹ The official *Dragon Age II* website contains a link to the official game trailer: <http://dragonage.bioware.com/da2/>.

percentage of the narratives that the player participates in. The game becomes an adventure that the player inhabits – lives through, not just digitally, but corporeally as well. (p. 183)

The player's level of investment in a DRPG contributes to his or her dedication to succeeding at the game and also his or her engagement with the thematic concerns which the game presents.

Within the digital space of any videogame, especially DRPGs, players confront a variety of obstacles to which they react based on their individual experience and ideology. In *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009), Miguel Sicart explains that, as in the 'real' world, in virtual gameworlds "Players interpret the game experience from their game cultural background, making ethical choices that affect the way the game is experienced" (p. 102). In constructing gameplay decisions, then, the player must evaluate both the narrative (story) and the ludic (strategic gameplay) significance of each choice (Henton 2012). Because "Players act in a game as ethical beings as well as goal-oriented, rational players" (Sicart 2009, p. 112), it is important to consider not only the in-game narrative and mechanical frameworks of the game, but also the game's ideological objective in presenting both narrative and ludonarrative (the gameplay-event sequence).

In the case of *Dragon Age II*, the narrative, ludics, and context create a synthesis which focuses primarily on the problems of religious and cultural intolerance, oppression, and extremism. In the gameworld, the player "encounters a recognizably hierarchical social structure, including class distinctions and organized cultural, religious, and military institutions," explains Karen Zook (2012), which have "expanded to include familiar fantasy elements such as elves, dwarves, and magic" (p. 222). Within this fantasy context, the game challenges the player to grapple with familiar 'real' concerns of oppression and intolerance produced by religious fanaticism and cultural prejudice. These themes resonate with the game's players as relevant to contemporary global struggles with terrorism, insurgency, rebellion, and cultural oppression, as well as more generalized Western cultural intolerance and religiously motivated bigotry.

Through its narrative and setting, *Dragon Age II* explores a diversity of religious beliefs and practices, and the struggle amongst them for supremacy and survival. The player – as the game's central player-character, Hawke (whom the player can choose to make either male or female, but to whom I will refer as male for the sake of simplicity) – must choose sides in each conflict, and those player-driven decisions help to shape the game's narrative and the player's in-game interactions with non-player companion characters (NPCCs) and other non-player characters (NPCs) in the gameworld of Thedas. The player may choose to make Hawke a warrior specializing in hand-to-hand combat, a rogue with skills in archery and lock-picking, or a mage capable of healing and attack spells. As Katie Whitlock (2012) explains, the ability to customize the player-character is a hallmark of the DRPG genre, and of BioWare DRPGs in particular. This allows the player to become "imaginatively connected to the character...which engages the player in building a

reflection of some facet of self” (Whitlock 2012, p. 137), and encourages the player to explore and experiment with systems of belief.

The game’s overall narrative structure is dramatic, with a frame story narrated by Varric Tethras (one of Hawke’s NPCCs, a dwarf rogue); a three-act central framework with choric interludes from Varric; and an epilogue. During the first act, the game narratively establishes the socio-religious tensions between the Chantry and the Qunari and the Chantry and the Circle of Magi within the city of Kirkwall. The player’s goal, as Hawke, is to build reputation and influence in the city, and to develop individual relationships with the game’s NPCCs. During act two it becomes clear that the Chantry’s treatment of the Qunari is one of the main causes of stress between the Qunari and the population of Kirkwall. At the end of the second act, these tensions come to a head, and the Qunari attack the city, a circumstance the player must resolve before moving on to act three, which concentrates exclusively on the struggle between the Chantry and the Circle. The game concludes with open war in which both sides bear equal and significant fault. In the game, the player has the opportunity to choose from required primary (“Main”) quests; optional “Companion” quests, given to Hawke by the NPCCs; optional “Side” quests, which involve hunting down thugs, thieves, assassins, smugglers, or slavers, or finding objects and returning them to their owners; or optional non-specific “Secondary” quests which typically concern mounting a rescue, finding multiple objects, making an area safe, or solving a mystery. Of these, only “Main” quests must be completed in order to progress through the game. Some quests may not ever become available, depending on the choices a player makes during gameplay (and even in the earlier games *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age II*). But while the narrative focuses on religion, the game’s friendship-rivalry evaluative mechanic prioritizes relationships.

This mechanic, separate from the influence of a universal scale of ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ evaluates Hawke’s actions relative to each NPCC. *Dragon Age II* thus stands in contrast to other DRPG games like the *Mass Effect* series (2007, 2010, 2012), the *Fable* series (2004, 2008, 2010), *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), the *Fallout* series (1997, 1998, 2008, 2010), and *La-Mulana* (2001), which employ a single universal code concerning good and evil, light and dark, helpful and selfish.² *Dragon Age II*’s friendship-rivalry mechanic works by measuring the ‘response’ of each NPCC to Hawke’s speech and actions in terms of “approval” or “disapproval” (BioWare 2011). The more ‘approval’ Hawke earns from interacting with an NPCC, the closer the slider moves toward the blue “Friend” end of the spectrum, while ‘disapproval’ moves toward the red “Rival” (BioWare 2011). The friendship-rivalry status of NPCCs not in the party is unaffected by Hawke’s choice, so that if a

2 Other games – *Bioshock* (2007), *Dishonored* (2013), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) – use a similar system to evaluate a player’s “reputation” or empathy, but have no visible representation thereof. Instead, they alter gameplay and narrative elements (NPC remarks, number of enemies, available powers, and alternate endings) to reflect the player’s style.

character is not an active party member (the active party consists of Hawke and up to three NPCCs), their status will not change. The limit on active party size allows the player to better manage the friendship and rivalry levels of the party by choosing which NPCCs will accompany Hawke on ideologically sensitive quests.

As the sliders advance (in either direction), additional secondary “Companion” quests and conversations become available to the player, allowing him or her to advance the slider even further by completing them. It is also possible to reverse the slider’s direction through Hawke’s choices, at least until the slider reaches one endpoint or the other, at which point the NPCC’s friendship or rivalry becomes ‘locked in’ and cannot be changed. As well as ‘unlocking’ additional gameplay, Travis (2012) notes that

sliders of approval/disapproval differentiate the player-performances with respect not only to any idea the player might have about liking, disliking, loving, or hating this or that NPC[C], but also with respect to the much more embracing question of what the PC [Hawke] should do. (p. 249)

What is important about this system for the player is not simply that the game records the NPCC’s ‘opinion’ of Hawke, but that the narrative and gameplay reflect those choices as significant. The purpose of such a mechanic, Travis (2012) explains, is to enable the player to associate the game with

an overdetermined version of the player’s world that productively mystifies him or her about the meaning of his or her choices, both in the game and in ‘real’ culture. (Travis 2012, p. 246)

The friendship-rivalry mechanic, also used in *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2010), thus ‘guides’ the player to decisions based on Hawke’s relationships with the NPCCs, but it also situates the player’s gameplay decisions within a complicated evaluative system that relies on multiple and often conflicting points of view.

In order to understand the metrics by which Hawke’s companions evaluate him, it is necessary to know the beliefs of each NPCC. The game is careful to clearly introduce the NPCCs’ opinions early in the game, and each encounter Hawke has with them presents opportunities for them to further explain their stance on major ideological and social concerns. Hawke himself comes with no preset conceptions, and is controlled by the player’s choices. Varric approves of humor, diplomacy, and decisions that make for good stories. Hawke’s sister Bethany, a mage, is sympathetic to mages, to family, and to inclusion. Hawke’s brother Carver approves of independence, aggression, and honor. Aveline Valen, a human guardswoman, approves of lawful actions and fairness, generally sympathizing with the Chantry. Anders, a human mage, approves of freedom for mages. Merrill, an elf mage, approves of anything that helps the elves, freedom for

magic, and friendly actions in general. Fenris, an elf and former slave, despises magic and approves of Chantry restrictions, but is also sympathetic to the Qunari. Isabela, a human pirate-rogue, approves of freedom for everyone and mercenary actions. Sebastian Vael, a human Chantry brother, is an optional downloadable character (included in early-release copies of the game) who approves of Chantry beliefs. Within gameplay, the player must account for the responses of NPCCs to his or her ludic and narrative decisions, forcing the player to examine both the NPCCs' ethics and his or her own in the process.

As Sicart (2009) suggests, gameplay “can be understood as an act of interpreting the game system and choosing the appropriate strategies, which need not be the optimal strategies,” because “Ethics play a role in that interpretation process” (p. 118), and the player should be free to choose based on an ethos (whether his or her personal ethos or one ‘constructed’ by the player for Hawke) rather than optimization. However, *Dragon Age II*'s friendship-rivalry mechanic encourages the player to consider him- or herself relative to others, rather than relative to an ostensibly ‘universal’ ethos or moral code. In a game saturated with religious images and language, the game's use of humanistic (character-based) evaluative processes introduces an agnostic element into the narrative. This is not to say that the game is exhorting the player to adopt an agnostic or atheistic ideology; rather, the only way for *Dragon Age II* to make its point about religious (or social, or political) extremism is to ensure that it does not ‘take sides’ in the narrative's religious conflict, because to do so would lend some measure of legitimacy to one faction over the others.

1. Martyrs, Magic, and the Way of the Qun: Belief Systems in *Dragon Age II*

In their official guide, *Dragon Age: The World of Thedas*, the team of BioWare writers explains that Thedas, the world of the *Dragon Age* series, “would not be what it is without religion” (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 111). Yet despite the importance of religion, the beliefs that (fictionally) underpin these religions do not manifest as ‘real’ within the gameworld, as *Bitgamer* writer Joe Martin (2010) notes:

magic definitely exists and is used regularly. The Chantry god, though, is not. The Maker never comes down himself to give you a +2 Sword of Archdemon Slaying, he acts in mysterious ways instead. There are lots of references and legends about miracles and holy powers, but who is to say that these aren't either natural or magical phenomenon? (para. 5)

Martin's observation illustrates how the creators of the *Dragon Age* series deliberately allow for an atheist or agnostic viewpoint, as well as a religious one. Blogger Adam Ryen Daniels (2011) remarks that the *Dragon Age* games “allow [] you to embrace the religion if you choose” (para. 5).

Another gaming and popular culture blogger known as Salo (2011a) explains that “When dealing with religious responses, BioWare typically includes a response from the perspective of 1) devout believer, 2) lax believer, 3) apologist/agnostic, 4) atheist” (para. 2). What is noteworthy about the ‘option’ of religion in the game is that it by necessity requires the world of *Dragon Age* to fall into an agnostic framework: in order for a player-character (or an NPC) to be able to believably adopt either a religious or an atheistic viewpoint, the world itself cannot foreclose either possibility, making it by default an agnostic gamespace.

However, despite the agnosticism of the world, the characters within it – both NPC and NPCC – exist in a richly religious culture. The complex systems of belief in the game include the Christianesque Chantry, the polytheistic nature-religion of the Dalish elves, the use of magic and worship of the demonic Old Gods by the ancient Tevinter Magisters, the ancestor-worship of the dwarves, and the ascetic and hierarchical belief structure of the Qunari. *Dragon Age II* focuses specifically on the conflict between the Chantry – the dominant religion in Thedas – the Qunari, and the mages. Although sidelined, the beliefs of the dwarves and elves appear in minor plots and individual quest missions, present but not vital to the core gameplay or main narrative.³ These systems of belief are important to individual NPCs and NPCCs (like Merrill) associated with them, but neither presents a significant opposition to the Chantry as Kirkwall’s primary religion and source of both spiritual guidance and institutional oppression.

Within Kirkwall – a city whose name (“Church-wall”) indicates the centrality of religion to its infrastructure and culture – the oppressive dominance of the Chantry ostracizes non-believers both socially and geographically; elves and Qunari are marginalized into the eleven alienage and Qunari compound respectively, kept in the poorer slums and working-class districts, while the Chantry building dominates the noble district of Hightown. Mages are even more geographically shunned, literally enclosed within the confines of the Gallows, a former slave prison on an island in the harbor. By pressing these minority beliefs to the ghettoized spaces of the city, the game’s developers create a cartographical representation of social and ideological oppression. By focusing our attention as players on the spaces of marginalized belief as well as on the treatment of the individuals within those spaces at the hands of the city’s religious and political authorities, the creators of *Dragon Age II* present the sociopolitical dangers of institutionalized extremism tacitly authorized by those in power in the name of the very security their actions eventually destroy.

At the center of both the main conflicts in *Dragon Age II*, the Chantry is the most important institution both for our purposes and in the game’s narrative framework. The Chantry’s core belief system and structure appears to have been modeled roughly on the late medieval Catholic church,

³ The religious beliefs of both the Dalish and the dwarves play a much larger role in the narrative of *Dragon Age: Origins*, released by BioWare in 2009.

with a monotheistic creator god, a divine martyred prophet, and a foundational tenet which states that

Humankind has sinned and must seek penance to earn the Maker’s forgiveness. When all peoples unite to praise the Maker, he will return to the world and make it a paradise.
(Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 111)

Yet although it ascribes to a Christianesque framework, the Chantry doctrine – referred to as the Chant of Light – is not meant to parallel Christian dogma. Most obvious, perhaps, is the distinction between Christ and Andraste, the Chantry’s martyr. The third tenet of the Chant states that “Andraste was the bride of the Maker, a prophet and martyr whose ultimate sacrifice must be remembered and honored” (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 111). Within *Dragon Age II*, the details of the Chant remain largely unspoken, although they appear more prominently in specific portions of *Dragon Age: Origins*. In the earlier game, the player learns that Andraste’s husband, jealous of her relationship to the Maker and the powers granted to her, betrayed her to the Tevinter Imperium, and burned her at the stake (BioWare 2009; Gaider et al 2013). Following her death, the religion elevated her to the status of divine bride and prophet, and – like Christ – she serves as the liminal intercessor between mortal believers and the Maker.

Most significant to *Dragon Age II* is the Chantry’s doctrinal condemnation of magic. According to the Chantry, “Magic is a corrupting influence in the world” (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 111), and the mantra “Magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him” (BioWare 2011) is repeatedly quoted throughout the *Dragon Age* series. The Chantry’s active opposition to magic and to mages forms the central conflict of *Dragon Age II* between the Chantry Templars and the Circle of Magi. In an interview with BioWare lead writer David Gaider, Kimberly Wallace (2013) asks about this opposition:

According to Gaider, *Dragon Age: Origins* was about setting up this dilemma. As the team moved on to *Dragon Age II*, the focus shifted: “Then it was, ‘What would it take for that to come crashing down?’” Gaider recalls. (para. 6)

In the *Dragon Age* series, mages are gathered into Circles, compounds in which mages are restricted by Chantry proscription, but in which they are also trained in magic. The mages themselves are not necessarily opposed to Chantry doctrine so much as they object, especially in Kirkwall, to their (mis)treatment at the hands of the Templars.

Although not made explicit in *Dragon Age II*, the source of the conflict between the Chantry and the Circle is based in ‘historical’ religious opposition between the Chantry and the Tevinter Imperium. Mages, as practitioners of magic, enter into and draw upon the Fade, a spiritual dimension that is home to spirits and demons:

The Fade is an otherworldly realm of great power and mystery, a wellspring of magic, and, to some, the source of creation. They say you enter this kingdom of spirits when you sleep, as well as when you die, and that a corruption at its heart set in motion the Blight. (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 131).

The power of the Fade is also linked both to the darkspawn and to Archdemons, corrupted Old Gods in the form of dragons (Gaider et al 2013). In Thedas, the Old Gods were worshipped in the Tevinter Imperium, where political and religious authority are concentrated in the hands powerful mages whose power acts in open defiance of the idea that “Magic was meant to serve” (BioWare 2011). Mages in Kirkwall are not specifically devotees of the Old Gods, but their use of magic has the potential to turn to ‘blood magic,’ which is often linked in *Dragon # e II* with the Tevinter Magisters and worship of the Old Gods (Zook 2012). For the developers of *Dragon # e II*, the creation of a ‘history’ of religious opposition produces a parallel to the player’s ‘real’ world, in which religious intolerance is often also the product of historical conflicts, such as the centuries-old conflict between Islam and Christianity, alluded to in the game through the choice to call the Chantry’s military branch “Templars.”

Although the game’s final major source of theological conflict – the Qunari – agrees with the Chantry practice of restricting magic, the Qun is defined by the Chantry as “heresy” (BioWare 2011) because the doctrine of the Qun is “godless” (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 127). Gaider et al (2013) explain that “Any worship of a god or gods, such as the Maker, is forbidden and stopped with violence if necessary” (vol. 1, p. 127). In the Qun, roles define the individuals completely; a “sten” warrior, for instance, is referred to as “Sten” by name because his identity is bound up with his place in society (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 128). In *Dragon # e II*, the Qunari leader, the Arishok, explains to Hawke that within the Qun individuals are “Free to accept and succeed, or leave and die” (BioWare 2011).

In the game, it becomes the player’s goal – through Hawke – to mediate between and negotiate with these different religions and the various factions they produce. Even within the followers of a particular faith there is little solidarity, as some within the Chantry favor the extermination of mages or Qunari, while others encourage tolerance or cooperation. Similarly, some mages willingly submit to the Templars, others turn to blood magic, and still others remain apostate outside the Circle but reject blood magic. Even the Qunari are not universally intolerant: Tallis, an elven follower of the Qun, befriends Hawke and his companions in the downloadable mission “Mark of the Assassin” (BioWare 2011). It is important to note that the creators of *Dragon # e II* neither show preference for nor discriminate against any specific religion, but against the unwillingness to compromise demonstrated by the extremist devotees of all of them.

2. The Law & The Qun: Government, Religious Intolerance, and the Qunari

The clash between the people of Kirkwall and the Qunari provides the source of both narrative and ludonarrative action throughout acts one and two. One of the first interactions Hawke has with the Qunari takes place during the act one “Secondary” quest “The Unbidden Rescue.” The player triggers the quest when Hawke first learns of the disappearance of the Viscount’s son, Seamus, who has supposedly been abducted by the Qunari. As the player explores further, it appears that Seamus joined the Qunari willingly. When Hawke finds Seamus, he has been captured by mercenaries and his Qunari companions killed. After being rescued, Seamus explains that despite popular opinion to the contrary, the Qunari are not “brutes,” and are worthy of friendship (BioWare 2011), complicating the initial impression created for Hawke by other NPCs.⁴

At the quest’s conclusion, the player has the ability to consider not only what opinion he or she wants Hawke to express to the Viscount, but how the NPCCs accompanying Hawke will react. If Hawke chooses “Yes, your son went too far,” confirming the Viscount’s policy of social segregation from the Qunari, Hawke earns rivalry from both Aveline and Carver (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age 6 iki* 2013). The option “Seamus is right to question,” sympathetic to the Qunari, earns disapproval from Aveline, but approval from Carver (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age 6 iki* 2013). “You’re both stubborn fools,” suggesting derision of both sides, but with a desire for compromise, reverses the previous option, with rivalry from Carver and friendship from Aveline (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age 6 iki* 2013). Remaining neutral and uninvolved by responding with “This is clearly not my affair,” however, earns only friendship, from Aveline and Isabela (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wi-i* 2013). The mechanical feedback in this instance suggests that neutrality is the choice most favored by the game’s creators, since the player can earn +10 approval by remaining non-confrontational (as opposed to +10 disapproval for agreeing with the Viscount’s restrictionist policies, or +5 to each for the other options). Furthermore, if Hawke is respectful toward the Arishok throughout the game, he will earn the Qunari leader’s respect in return, giving the player the “Worthy Rival” achievement or trophy.⁵ Earning respect from the Arishok can also alter the eventual outcome of the final quest in act two (“Demands of the Qun”) by allowing Hawke to fight the Arishok in single combat, suggesting that the player’s willingness to respect the Qunari is ultimately the ‘right’ decision (in order to minimize bloodshed).

4 For a playthrough of “The Unbidden Rescue,” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKYG_ZcuRwA (RedLightGamers 2011). This playthrough contains a male warrior Hawke accompanied by Aveline, Anders, and Isabela. The player chooses an aggressive early conversation option, then later chooses “You’re both stubborn fools” when speaking to the Viscount and Seamus (RedLightGamers 2011; BioWare 2011).

5 The game has built-in achievements or trophies (on the Xbox 360 console, the rewards are called “achievements,” on the Play Station 3, they are “trophies”) that players can earn by competing quests, demonstrating combat skills, etc. Players earn points for their gamerscore, a tally external to the mechanics of any individual game but which is linked to the player’s online public profile.

However, regardless of Hawke's actions, tensions between the city and the Qunari is exacerbated by the intervention of an extremist faction within the Chantry, introduced in the act one "Main" quest "Shepherding Wolves." During this quest, Hawke is asked by Chantry cleric Sister Patrice to escort a Qunari mage outside the city. When the party arrives, a group of Qunari are waiting to ambush them, which Hawke immediately recognizes as having been planned by Patrice to escalate the antagonism between the city and the Qunari, a precursor to the Chantry's treatment of the Qunari in act two. In the second act, the 'problem' of the Qunari accelerates as the Arishok grows impatient with the citizens and the citizens, in turn, become increasingly hostile to the "heretics" in their midst at the urging of extremists like Patrice (BioWare 2011).⁶

When the Viscount tells Hawke that an emissary from the Qunari has gone missing "almost from my doorstep. What do you imagine will be the Arishok's reaction?" (BioWare 2011), the inevitability of open violence begins to become apparent. The Viscount says, "I feel as if I have been trying to turn a stampede for some time now. Someone has been pushing, and very hard" (BioWare 2011) to escalate rather than defuse the latent violence between the Qunari and Kirkwall. The Viscount's comment is a clue to the player that the conflict has been constructed in an effort to eliminate the Qunari from the city and starts a new quest, "Offered and Lost," which sends Hawke on a city-wide search for the lost emissaries. Upon tracking down the guards who failed to protect the emissaries, one of them informs Hawke's party that a Templar with the seal of the Grand Cleric paid him to "look the other way" (BioWare 2011) with the Maker's approval, locating the source of the "stampede" within the Chantry. When Hawke arrives at the Chantry, Patrice intercepts him and Hawke has the option of saying, "Funny how you and issues with the Qunari seem to go together" (BioWare 2011). Patrice replies that "The Grand Cleric trusts her servants to enact the wishes of the Maker" (BioWare 2011), excusing her actions under the guise of religious piety.

The player finds the Qunari delegation held captive by a group of radical extremists led by Templar Ser Varnell. Patrice appears soon after, chastising Varnell, but the deliberately wooden tone adopted by the voice-actor suggests that this is meant to be understood as an act, since Varnell asks for her blessing (BioWare 2011). Hawke must choose between expressing disinterest in the lives of the Qunari or fighting Varnell, but both decisions result in the murder of the delegation. Interestingly, a player who has been choosing 'aggressive' actions and conversation options for Hawke throughout the game has an additional selection: to join Varnell's cause and help to kill the Qunari himself (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age 6 iki* 2013).⁷ The design choice to allow an aggressive

6 For a playthrough of "Shepherding Wolves," see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smbfwzAHaDk> (VideoGameSophistry 2012b). This playthrough contains a male mage Hawke accompanied by Carver, Isabela, and Anders. Hawke makes pro-mage choices, freeing Ketojan from the Qunari.

7 'Aggressive' choices are marked on the player's choice wheel (the mechanic that allows the player to choose Hawke's dialogue and actions within a cut-scene) with crossed red swords, a red fist, or a red gavel. Other options include 'mercenary,' indicated by gold coins; 'diplomatic,' with a pale blue olive branch; 'idealistic,' with a bright

Hawke to participate in the oppression of the Qunari allows the player to explore the consequences of that aggressive intolerance: the deaths of the Qunari and responsibility for escalating the conflict.⁸

After Hawke defeats Varnell, the Viscount confirms the devastating effects of extremism on the overall social harmony of Kirkwall: “Madness! Madness! And with Chantry support! Even if they are fringe elements...this couldn’t be worse” (BioWare 2011). Hawke is able to counsel the Viscount to either burn the Qunari or return them to the Arishok so that the Qunari leader can see the torture inflicted on his delegates. If Hawke exposes the truth about Chantry involvement, the Viscount makes “inquiries” (BioWare 2011), but cannot do much more. Revealing the truth to the Arishok earns Hawke additional respect, but cannot repair the damage done by the extremists, confirmed by the Viscount’s line, “I’m losing my sense of how to balance this nightmare” (BioWare 2011).⁹

Interestingly, at this point *Dragon Age II* temporarily abandons the Qunari quests, requiring the player to complete several other “Main” quests that do not involve the Qunari before triggering “Following the Qun.” This constructed waiting period allows the player to grow complacent, even possibly forgetting the Qunari in the midst of the escalating tensions between the mages and Templars and Hawke’s family concerns. The intentionality of dismissing the Qunari for a portion of act two makes their reemergence both jarring and poignant, reminding the player that social issues like oppression and intolerance simply do not vanish when they are not central to the player’s attention.

“Following the Qun” begins with a summons from the Viscount, who reveals to Hawke that Seamus has converted to the Qun, a circumstance which the Viscount cannot condone because his office has been accused of being “in Qunari hands” (BioWare 2011), ranking political expediency

blue wings-and-halo icon; ‘charming,’ with a pink gem; ‘deceptive’ as a pair of crossed fingers (uncolored); ‘flirtatious,’ with a pink heart; or ‘neutral’ with uncolored arrows or question marks (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). Some conversations also include a green profile, which defers to one of Hawke’s NPCCs, and usually gains approval from that NPCC. In special circumstances, a yellow star option will appear, which is only available if a player has fulfilled certain criteria during gameplay (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). Not all of these choices appear in every conversation; generally, the player is given between two and four options at any given juncture. Interestingly, the words which appear on the screen are not the same words that Hawke actually speaks, which leads, in some circumstances, to ‘poor’ choices being made by a player who misinterprets the conversation hint. In fact, there is an entire forum thread on BioWare’s *Dragon Age* fan page dedicated to accidental conversation choices based on misleading hints (“Dialogue Wheel Mishaps” 2011).

8 For a video of the cutscenes featuring an aggressive Hawke in “Offered and Lost,” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Kr_YB4CK8k (WebFoo 2011c). This playthrough contains an aggressive female mage Hawke accompanied by Fenris, Anders, and Aveline. The player chooses to support Varnell and kill the Qunari.

9 For a non-aggressive playthrough of “Offered and Lost,” see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s83L73IK3eI> (gamingarcadia 2011). This playthrough features a female warrior Hawke accompanied by Anders, Varric, and Isabela. The player condemns Varnell and reveals the circumstances of the emissaries’ deaths to the Arishok.

over his son's personal beliefs.¹⁰ When Hawke confronts the Arishok about Seamus, the Qunari expresses frustration:

In four years I have made no threat, and fanatics have lined up to hate us simply because we exist. But despite lies and fear, Baah [non-Qunari] still beg me to let them come to the Qun. They hunger for purpose. The son has made a choice. You will not deny him that.
(BioWare 2011)

In Kirkwall, the “lies and fear” of “fanatics” produce the Viscount's political imperative much in the same way that irrational fears of Islamic terrorists have produced in Western culture an almost automatic rejection of all Muslims. Like the Viscount, American and other Western politicians distance themselves from one religion or espouse another for the sake of political popularity, and belief itself becomes secondary to open religious practice. The game's inclusion of references to “torture” (in “Blackpowder Courtesy”) and Anders's act of terrorism at the game's conclusion reinforce the smaller parallels between Western marginalization of Islam and the treatment of the Qunari in *Dragon Age II*. While the Qun does not ideologically parallel Islam, even the name “Qun” echoes that of the “Quran,” deliberately turning the player's attention to this parallel. However, it is important to note that in *Dragon Age II*, it is the dominant ideology – the Chantry – and not the suppressed ideology that first instigates violence, although the Qunari rapidly escalate it in response.

It is important to the game's argument that Hawke is no longer able to control the outbreak of violence, and when the party arrives at the Chantry, Seamus is already dead. Patrice reveals her plan to blame Seamus's death on Hawke and “your Qunari masters” (BioWare 2011), justifying murder because Seamus “deliberately denied the Maker” (BioWare 2011). She argues that “People need the opportunity to defend faith, starting with you,” upon which she exhorts her followers to “Earn your reward in this life and the next. The heretics must die!” (BioWare 2011). Patrice's rhetoric is, as the Arishok's earlier description suggests, fanatical, and her embrace of violence is meant to destroy any sympathy the player might have for her defense of her faith. Even Elthina, as Grand Cleric, rejects Patrice's fanaticism, proclaiming that “The Chantry respects the law, and so must she” (BioWare 2011), neither turning nor slowing her climb up the Chantry steps when a Qunari executes Patrice with an arrow to the forehead. Yet the game makes clear that both the Chantry-Qunari and Chantry-Circle conflicts are ultimately outside of either Elthina or Hawke's ability to stop or even control.

The final quest in act two, “Demands of the Qun,” instigates open warfare between the Qunari and the population of Kirkwall when the Arishok discovers that the city has been harboring

¹⁰ For a playthrough of “Following the Qun,” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_knF5Lko46c (Revan657 2011). This playthrough contains a female rogue Hawke accompanied by Varric, Merrill, and Isabela, whom the player replaces with Aveline.

the thief (Isabela) of a sacred Qunari relic. Violence rapidly spreads throughout Kirkwall as the player guides Hawke through the combat-riddled Docks and Lowtown, and toward the Viscount's Keep in Hightown. Mechanically, the player's path is restricted by the destruction of open battle, mimicking Hawke's inability to choose any path but the one on which he and his party have been set by the escalating oppression and violence.¹¹ Inside the Keep, the player discovers that the Viscount has been killed by the Arishok, whose rant at the court of Kirkwall addresses the citizens' complacency:

You feed and feed and only complain when your meal is interrupted. You do not look up.
You do not see that the grass is bare. You are blind. But I will make you see. (BioWare 2011)

Complacency – like that possibly experienced by the player in the interim between “Blackpowder Courtesy” and “Following the Qun” – enables oppression, *Dragon Age II* suggests, by encouraging blindness; without a personal connection to oppression or intolerance, we – as Westerners – are content to “feed and feed” until our own lives are “interrupted,” unconcerned with the suffering of others. The Arishok's diatribe reveals an attempt on the part of *Dragon Age II*'s creators to encourage engagement on the part of the players through the friendship-rivalry mechanic; Hawke must interact with his companions, must pay attention to their grievances and beliefs, in order to secure their friendship.

At this point in the game, friendship and respect born of tolerance become important to the resolution of the Qunari attack. First, if Hawke has secured the Arishok's respect, he will not attack the party (*Dragon Age 6 iki* 2013). Second, if Hawke has cultivated a high enough “friendship” quotient with Isabela (more than half the distance between neutral and full friendship), she will return the relic she stole to the Arishok. The Arishok accepts it, but is unwilling to let Isabela go unpunished, and Hawke will have to make the decision to turn her over (earning disapproval from Isabela, Aveline, and Merrill) or fight for her life (earning approval from Isabela, Aveline, and Merrill). If Hawke surrenders Isabela, the player does not need to fight the Qunari, and the act ends with their departure. If he fights for her, the player has another choice: whether to fight all the Qunari with the full party, or to engage the Arishok in single combat. Without Isabela's friendship, Hawke will be forced to fight, although single combat remains an option with the Arishok's respect.

The variety of options that appear at the end of “Demands of the Qun” demonstrate the power of tolerance and cultural respect; it is possible for Hawke to minimize bloodshed by accepting Qunari culture and condemning the Chantry's extremism. It is in fact possible to avoid bloodshed (in the Keep) altogether if Hawke is willing to sacrifice friendship for ideology, although the

11 For a playthrough of the end of “Demands of the Qun,” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fU_MytxPagk (Welcome to Bonertown! 2011). This playthrough features a female warrior Hawke accompanied by Varric, Aveline, and Merrill. Hawke has not earned the Arishok's full respect, but has earned Isabela's friendship.

friendship-rivalry mechanics of the game punish the player for making this choice (through the disapproval of three NPCCs). Instead, the game mechanically rewards a player unwilling to betray a friend (Isabela) in the name of religious belief, emphasizing the importance of human connections over abstract ideology. In the end, irrespective of the player's choices, the Arishok must be defeated, and Hawke is proclaimed "Champion" by a resentful Meredith (BioWare 2011).

3. "Belief is No Excuse": Templar Oppression & The Rise of Blood Magic

During the interlude between acts two and three, Varric says of Meredith, "the more she squeezed the mages, the more they resisted. The more they resisted, the tighter she squeezed" until "it all came crashing down" (BioWare 2011), encapsulating the essence of the Chantry-Circle conflict throughout the game. This cycle of oppression and rebellion appears repeatedly in *Dragon Age II* through both quests and interactions with Hawke's NPCCs, almost all of whom express opinions concerning the mage-Templar dispute. Unsurprisingly, Merrill, Anders, and Bethany support the mages, while Fenris, Carver, Aveline, and Sebastian support the Chantry. Isabela supports freedom for everyone, but Varric is neutral, disliking both sides and in fact saying at one point, "I think I'm sick of mages and Templars" (BioWare 2011). As Hawke, the player is caught in the midst of the debate and must ultimately choose one ideology or the other by the end of the game.

Even as early as the prologue, the player confronts the hostility inherent between apostate mages and Templars when Aveline's Templar husband, Ser Wesley, threatens Bethany (and Hawke, if Hawke is a mage). Although Aveline convinces her husband that "the Maker understands" (BioWare 2011), the game's immediate introduction of this animosity establishes it as foundational to the game. It reappears in act one almost immediately, when Hawke must help Anders to free a friend, Karl, from the Circle, because he has been threatened with being made "Tranquil." When a mage is made Tranquil by the Templars, he or she is cut off from the Fade, robbing mages of their magic and destroying their emotions and personality.¹² In the game's narrative, Tranquility appears as the proverbial 'fate worse than death,' and mages, including Karl, often choose suicide or execution instead. This episode introduces the player to the inhumane treatment of mages at the hands of the Chantry, and narratively encourages the player to be sympathetic to mages. However, the game also presents the Chantry's objection to magic as legitimate through both quests and the opinions of Hawke's other companions.

12 The physical marker of Tranquility – a Chantry sun (a red circular sun with wavy rays) in the center of the Tranquil's forehead – visually depicts the act as a kind of magical and emotional lobotomization.

In the act one “Main” quest “Enemies Among Us,” for example, Hawke goes in search of a missing Templar recruit who has been abducted by a group of rogue blood mages seeking to undermine the authority of the Chantry and restore the old Tevinter Imperium (and the worship of the Old Gods) to Kirkwall. An insane blood mage also murders Hawke’s mother during act two, indelibly tainting its practice from the player’s perspective (presuming the player sympathizes with Hawke). The harmful potential of blood magic thus lends legitimacy to the suppression and even incarceration of mages, as Jonathan Moeller (2009) notes on his blog: “it turns out the Chantry’s hostility to mages is not irrational prejudice but completely justifiable self-defense” (para. 6). Moeller’s response echoes the espoused Chantry viewpoint throughout the *Dragon # e* series, but in *Dragon Age II* this position is hardly presented as “completely justifiable.”

In fact, the point of the conflict is that both sides – and neither side – can justify their position. Wallace (2013) notes that “even within BioWare’s own staff, team members disagree about who’s in the right” (para. 7). Gaider explains to Wallace (2013) that

the idea is that if we can successfully argue either side of an issue and not feel like a sociopath doing so, then that is a good avenue for us to explore. (para. 9)

In the game, when Hawke returns the recruit to the Gallows, Templar Captain Cullen asserts that mages are universally dangerous, and Hawke has the opportunity to agree with him, contradict him, or state that “there must be another way” (BioWare 2011) to handle the situation than Tranquility or extermination. If the player chooses the last, most moderate option, Cullen will agree, suggesting that there might be a way to mitigate both danger and oppression through Templar-mage cooperation.

The Templar Thrask – like Cullen – also represents a viewpoint of moderation among the Templars. In “Act of Mercy,” another “Main” quest, Thrask asks Hawke to help find a group of apostates so that they may be safely returned to the Circle, rather than killed.¹³ When Hawke finds the escaped mages, he learns that their leader, Decimus, is a blood mage; Hawke kills him, and the game then asks the player to decide the fate of Decimus’s followers, now led by a mage named Grace: to help them escape either by killing Thrask or lying to him, or to turn the mages over to the Templars with the promise of mercy. Refusing to help the mages earns rivalry from Bethany, Anders, and Merrill, but friendship from Carver, Aveline, and Fenris. Choosing to convince Thrask that the mages are dead in order to help them escape earns friendship from Aveline, Varric, Anders, Isabela, and Merrill, and rivalry from Fenris. Agreeing to kill Thrask in order to help, however, earns friendship only from Anders, Merrill, and Isabela, but rivalry from Fenris, Aveline, Varric, and

13 For a playthrough of “Act of Mercy,” see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp1uAEHBL2Q> (VideoGameSophistry 2012a). This playthrough contains a male mage Hawke accompanied by Merrill, Varric, and Anders. The player takes a pro-mage stance, convincing Thrask that the mages in the caves are all dead so that they can escape.

Carver (BioWare 2011; *Dragon # e 6 iki* 2013). This would seem to suggest that the game promotes freedom for the mages, but not at the expense of others' lives, so convincing Thrask to give up his search (rather than kill him) minimizes the damage.

However, irrespective of the player's decisions in "Act of Mercy," Thrask (if alive) and Grace return as Hawke's adversaries in the act three "Main" quest "Best Served Cold."¹⁴ In this quest, Hawke learns that "someone close to" him (*Dragon #ge 6 iki* 2013) has been kidnapped by a faction of mages and Templars opposed to Meredith's increasingly strict control.¹⁵ Interestingly, the group appears ideologically moderate in their argument for unity between mages and Templars, but have been driven to radicalism by Meredith's oppression. If Hawke agrees with Thrask that Meredith has become too extreme, Thrask attempts to convince the others to release the victim, but Grace insists that both the victim and Hawke have to die, perhaps causing the player to regret that she was allowed to live and encouraging sympathy with the Templars. In the ensuing confrontation, Grace kills Thrask, Hawke kills Grace, and Hawke then has to rely on another mage, Alain, to resuscitate the victim using blood magic. The player then must decide what to do with Alain: killing him earns disapproval from Aveline, and telling Captain Cullen to kill all the mages earns disapproval from Varric. Defending the mages' actions earns disapproval from Fenris and Sebastian, but approval from Varric and Merrill; condemning the mages' actions earns approval from Fenris and Sebastian, but no disapproval (BioWare 2011; *Dragon # e 6 iki* 2013). This combination confirms the game's stance against extremism, because although ideologically the group may have been moderate, their turn to violence delegitimizes their argument, however rational it might otherwise appear.

By this point it is obvious to the player that extremism has begun to infect not only the actions of the NPC Templars and mages, but also some of Hawke's NPCCs. Anders, in particular, is increasingly extremist in his beliefs and actions, and suggests that mages "turned to blood magic as their only option" (BioWare 2011) given Templar oppression. He asks Hawke to help him collect ingredients for a "potion" which are, in fact, the components of an explosive: "sela petrae" (saltpeter) and "Drakestone" (sulfur) which combine to form gunpowder (BioWare 2011). Hawke has the option to ask, "Was there ever even a potion?" (BioWare 2011), to which Anders admits that there was not. He then asks Hawke to distract Elthina, but will not reveal why, saying only that "It's easy to support freedom when no one has to die to achieve it" (BioWare 2011). The player may

14 For the cutscenes from "Best Served Cold," see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Icn8Np4mF6A> (astrophile1987 2011). These cutscenes feature a female mage Hawke accompanied by Varric, Anders, and Aveline, with Carver held prisoner by the rebels. The player chooses to save Alain and show the prisoners mercy.

15 If Bethany/Carver survived act one, he or she will be the victim; if Bethany/Carver died in act one and the player is pursuing a romance with one of the NPCCs, that NPCC will be the victim; if Bethany/Carver died and the player is not pursuing a romance, the NPCC with the highest friendship quotient will be the victim (*Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). The game's use of friendship to choose the victim whom Hawke must rescue emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships to the game's argument.

choose to help him or not, but Hawke's decision here has no impact on the outcome of the game.¹⁶ During the ensuing conversation, Elthina remarks to Hawke, "I favor peace. Which is not the goal of either side, I'm afraid" (BioWare 2011). In an atmosphere in which extremism and oppression have become the norm, moderation and "peace" are no longer tenable options for those seeking to end the cycle.

4. "A Friend of Yours is a Friend of Mine": Friendship, Rivalry & Humanistic Ethics

Throughout the course of *Dragon Age II*, the player has been building friendships and rivalries with the various NPCCs who comprise his party, beginning with Bethany or Carver and Aveline in the prologue and moving through all three acts of the game, recruiting and securing the loyalty of the others. At various stages, it is possible for Hawke to lose the loyalty of his companions, by surrendering Fenris to the Tevinter slavers, turning over Isabela to the Qunari, and banishing Anders from Kirkwall. If the player has been deliberate about cultivating friendship and rivalry, however, by the end of act three it is possible for Hawke to have secured the loyalty of all the NPCCs, whether through friendship, rivalry, or a mixture of both. The friendship-rivalry status of each NPCC becomes vital when Hawke must decide whether to place his allegiance with Meredith and the Templars (the Chantry) or with Orsino and the mages (the Circle).

In the game's final "Main" quest, "The Last Straw," Hawke is summoned to mitigate an argument Meredith's invocation of the "Rite of Annulment" (BioWare 2011), the ritualized extermination of every mage in the Circle, enacted when a Circle has become indelibly corrupted by blood magic.¹⁷ Orsino argues that there are innocents in the Circle who do not deserve death, but Meredith states that she would rather punish the innocent than let the guilty go free, saying that "it breaks my heart to do it, but we must be vigilant" (BioWare 2011). Anders appears, proclaiming that the Circle and Chantry both have "failed us," and "there can be no half measures" (BioWare 2011) a moment before the Chantry explodes. Anders immediately takes responsibility, and the First Enchanter asks him "Why? Why would you do such a thing?" (BioWare 2011). In committing an act of terrorism, Anders becomes what Meredith has accused mages of being, confirming the

16 Refusing to help Anders earns Hawke +30 rivalry. A typical action will earn a player between +5 and +10 friendship or rivalry; major plot-related actions typically earn +15, so the severity of Anders's reaction is an indication to the player of the extremity to which the mage has been driven.

17 For a playthrough of the beginning of "The Last Straw," featuring the destruction of the Chantry, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky4N0C-Imsg> (FluffyNinjaLlama 2011). This playthrough contains a male mage Hawke who sides with the mages and has a high friendship quotient with both Aveline and Fenris.

Chantry's fear of magic and legitimizing Meredith's call for the Rite of Annulment, although Sebastian points out that there is no need to kill all the mages since the act was committed by Anders alone.

Anders asserts that "I have removed the chance for compromise, because there can be no compromise" (BioWare 2011). Anders's radical extremism appears as the consequence of decades of mistreatment by the Chantry, placing blame on institutional intolerance in addition to individual extremism. It must be said that the game in no way excuses Anders's actions – rather, the game positions acts of extremism and terrorism as a product of socio-religious conflict allowed to burgeon out of control. In Kirkwall, the voices of moderation – the Viscount and Elthina in particular – are quashed by the actions of fanatics and radicals, reason made untenable by the escalating spiral of intolerance and oppression confronting rebellion and reactionism.

In *Dragon Age II* narrative conflicts are situated in specifically religious contexts, suggesting that the game views religion as a primary shaping factor in socio-cultural as well as political ideologies. Kirkwall itself, the "City of chains" (BioWare 2011) Varric explains at the game's beginning, encapsulates the image of people bound by their religious beliefs into perpetual strife and ideological servitude. As Hawke, however, the player is an outsider, and is therefore able to overcome the ideological oppression that seems to constrain those who live within its walls. Yet despite the relative freedom of choice the player has throughout the game in terms of ideology – Hawke can be pro-Chantry, pro-mage, pro-Qunari, or relatively unbiased at nearly every opportunity – the game refuses to allow the player to remain neutral at its conclusion. Even if Hawke says "I don't want to get involved in this" after Anders destroys the Chantry, he is told that "You are already" (BioWare 2011).

At this point the player must decide whether to support Meredith, the Templars, and the Chantry, or Orsino and the mages, and must also decide whether to punish Anders, to free him, or to require him to "atone" (BioWare 2011) for his actions.¹⁸ As all the available NPCCs are 'present' for these events, Hawke is able to ask for the opinions of each. Here, it is evident that the relationships between Hawke and the NPCCs take primacy over the opinions of Orsino and Meredith. If asked, Isabela remarks "Bold plan. At least I thought so" (BioWare 2011), the only NPCC who does not condemn Anders's actions. Fenris argues that "He wants to die. Kill him and be done with it"; Aveline says that "Belief is no excuse"; Merrill argues that "He should come with us. Do what he can to put things right"; and Varric remarks that "I think I'm sick of mages and Templars" (BioWare

18 For a playthrough of this sequence from "The Last Straw," see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhLbbaFKuA> (WebFoo 2011b). This playthrough contains a female warrior Hawke who sides with the Templars and executes Anders. For a playthrough of this sequence containing Anders's survival, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ydk_W0RiZbg (SeaMarchedFlame 2011). This sequence contains a female mage Hawke who sides with the mages and forces Anders to atone for his actions.

2011). If Hawke chooses to kill Anders, the player (obviously) loses Anders from the party. If Hawke frees Anders or chooses to bring Anders in the party, Sebastian will leave in disgust. Either way, the player must decide which of the two NPCCs to prioritize – and determine whether (and how much) ideology factors into that decision.

The player must also choose between the Chantry and the Circle, a decision which can also impact and be impacted by Hawke's friendship-rivalry status with each NPCC. High enough friendship status with the ideologically aligned NPCCs – Anders, Merrill, Fenris, Sebastian, Bethany, Carver, and Aveline – allows Hawke to persuade them to stay in the party despite their disagreement with the player's decision. If the player has taken the time and made the effort to cultivate friendship with all of the NPCCs, it is possible for Hawke to keep all but one (either Sebastian or Anders) through the final battle, using their abilities even when they are not members of the active party (those not actively chosen become non-controllable NPCs). If the player has not cultivated friendship with an NPCC with whom Hawke disagrees, then that NPCC becomes an enemy rather than an ally, and must be overcome, increasing the difficulty of the quest's combat sequences. Thus ignoring or minimizing ideology in favor of friendship is the better overall game strategy, one which encourages the player to choose a humanistic rather than religious ethos as he or she plays through the game.

If, at this juncture, the player chooses to side with the Templars and the Chantry, the friendship-rivalry status of most of the NPCCs becomes largely irrelevant. Bethany remains with the Circle until Hawke's party encounters Orsino in combat, when she assists the party as an NPC. At the conclusion of the combat, the player can allow her to rejoin the party or permit Meredith to execute her. Merrill sides with Hawke irrespective of her friendship-rivalry status, unless Hawke has full rivalry with Anders and the player has not completed Merrill's act three "Companion" quest, "Merrill, Friend or Foe?" (*Dragon Age 6 iki* 2013). If Anders is spared on the condition that he "atone" for what he has done but Hawke sides with the Templars, only a complete rivalry track allows Hawke to force him to comply, otherwise the player must choose between freeing him and killing him (*Dragon # e 6 iki* 2013). The fact that only rivalry allows Hawke to force Anders to go against his avowed ideology helps to confirm the game's condemnation of the mage's actions.

If, however, the player chooses to side with the Circle mages – whether approving of blood magic or simply disapproving of Templar oppression – friendship and rivalry become much more significant. If the player has maximized either friendship or rivalry with Fenris and has completed the act three "Companion" quest "Fenris: Questioning Beliefs," Hawke can convince him to remain in the party (*Dragon #ge 6 iki* 2013). If the quest remains incomplete, a friendly Hawke has the ability to convince him to rejoin the party, but a rival Fenris becomes an enemy. Aveline can be convinced to go against the Templars in most situations, unless her act three "Companion" quest, "Aveline: Questioning Beliefs," is incomplete and she is a rival, in which case she, too, becomes an

enemy who must be defeated (*Dragon # e 6 iki* 2013). Carver will initially resist, irrespective of friendship or rivalry, but will rejoin the party as an NPC for the final battle in the Gallows Courtyard.

From this comparison, it might appear that the game encourages the player to side with the Templars, as that decision is the least likely to produce enmity from Hawke's companions. However, the game has repeatedly emphasized Meredith's extremism, the oppression of the Templars, and the injustice of the persecution of mages, narratively contrasting this mechanical advantage. Additionally, because friendly companions will side with Hawke irrespective of the player's actual decision, maximizing friendship with all NPCCs negates any mechanical difference in choosing the Templars over the mages, rendering ideology irrelevant in comparison with human relationships. It is important to note that the events and narrative of the game are functionally identical from the moment of Hawke's choice forward, with only slight differences.¹⁹ This ludonarrative ultimately reveals the game's view that the beliefs of both the Circle and the Chantry are deeply problematic, produce intolerance, and foster violence and extremism.

Once the player makes the decision to side with one faction over the other, Hawke follows whichever side the player has chosen: to the Gallows if allying with the Templars, to the Circle if allying with the mages. If Hawke and his party are at the Gallows, Meredith persists in oppressive discourse, saying that "The Circle will know fear" (BioWare 2011), while at the Circle Orsino expresses despair, saying "Even if we win, what then?" (BioWare 2011). By siding with the Chantry, Hawke chooses the more powerful ally, while siding with the Circle represents a stand for the marginalized and persecuted driven to the end of their proverbial rope.

Hawke's address to each side expresses regret – yet another indication that the game ultimately argues for moderation and compromise over extremism – but each is differentiated in terms of tone. A Templar-allied Hawke speaks from a position of privilege and paternalism, arguing that

We didn't want this. The mages, they're our brothers and sisters. It's sad, but still necessary. Kirkwall needs us to set this right. We need order, or we lose ourselves. It's the only choice we have. (BioWare 2011)

Hawke here echoes Meredith's language, but his statements are patently contradictory to the game's mechanics: this wasn't the "only choice" the player had, although it may have been the choice the player made. Furthermore, the assertion that the Templars are obligated to destroy the Circle in the name of Chantry law presumes their superiority based entirely on ideological claims.

¹⁹ A mage-allied Hawke begins at the Circle and fights his way through the Gallows to the courtyard where the party encounters Meredith. A Templar-allied Hawke begins in the Gallows and fights through to the Circle before returning to the courtyard for a confrontation with Meredith. Either way, Hawke's party will have to fight Templars, mages, Orsino, and Meredith.

On the other side, however, a mage-allied Hawke speaks with the voice of the oppressed, saying,

We're cornered, and the Templars know it. But this is bigger than their hate, their fear. They've come to take your lives, and we're saying no. We didn't want this, but sometimes you just have to stand. (BioWare 2011)

This speech draws upon a tradition of social, cultural, and religious protest against oppression in which the persecuted eventually take “a stand” against those who would silence them. In cultural terms, a mage-allied Hawke's speech resonates more with a Western audience familiar with the rhetoric of freedom from oppression, appealing to the player's sympathy and sense of justice.

On both sides, however, the leaders of each respective faction have succumbed to the pressure created by the other to resort to extremism: Meredith to keep absolute control over the mages out of fear, and Orsino out of desperation to retain some level of autonomy under Chantry oppression. Neither is worthy of Hawke's support, as whichever side the player chooses betrays Hawke and his party. In both scenarios, Orsino turns to blood magic because he claims to have no other choice.²⁰ In the Circle, he says to a mage-allied Hawke, “I see now that there is no other way. Meredith expects blood magic, then I will give it to her” (BioWare 2011). To a Templar-allied Hawke, he says, “The irony of it is that until this moment, I have never used blood magic” (BioWare 2011). In both instances, Orsino is driven to blood magic by Meredith's persecution, adopting the persona she has assigned to him out of fear and hatred. Here, as in other encounters with blood mages throughout *Dragon Age II*, the player is presented with an image of extremism created by oppression; without Meredith's “squeezing” (as Varric describes it), the game suggests, the mages would not have felt obligated to turn to forbidden practices.

Once Orsino is dead, Hawke and his party return to the Gallows courtyard, where Meredith is waiting.²¹ For a mage-allied Hawke, her hostility is obvious, and she says “You'll pay for what you've done here” (BioWare 2011). She also says,

I'll be rewarded for what I've done, in this world and the next. I have done nothing but perform my duty. What happens to you now is your own doing. (BioWare 2011)

This pronouncement specifically aligns her radicalism with religious fervency. If, however, Hawke supported her, Meredith appears even more nefarious, saying, “I'm beginning to wonder how large

20 For a playthrough of Orsino's betrayal in “The Last Straw,” see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dyWft8R6SA> (WebFoo 2011a). This playthrough contains a female mage Hawke who has sided with the mages and is accompanied by Anders, Fenris, and Isabela.

21 For a playthrough of Meredith's betrayal in “The Last Straw,” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cUjGZpXKf4 (Carlos Torres 2011). This playthrough features a male mage Hawke who has sided with the Templars and is accompanied by Fenris, Isabela, and Sebastian. It plays through the final cutscenes to the end of the game.

your part in this really was,” proclaiming he is a “worse threat to this city than the Circle” (BioWare 2011). She then outlines a plan for explaining to the city that “you died battling the mages. A righteous cause” (BioWare 2011), intending to kill Hawke (and his companions) in the name of the Chantry.

After Hawke and his party defeat Meredith, the player views one of two possible ending cut-scenes. A mage-allied Hawke is allowed to leave the city unmolested, while a Templar-allied Hawke receives the loyalty of the Templars and is named the new Viscount of Kirkwall. But even a Hawke who became Viscount leaves Kirkwall soon after. When the Chantry Seeker, speaking to Varric in the frame-narrative, places the blame on Meredith, Varric counters, saying “Or that damned idol. Or Anders. Take your pick” (BioWare 2011).²² He then observes that

You’ve already lost all the Circles. In fact, haven’t the Templars rebelled as well? I thought you decided to abandon the Chantry to hunt the mages. (BioWare 2011)

The implication here is that the religious structures underpinning the Chantry and the Circles are deteriorating into chaos and factionalism. Certainly, this narrative sets up *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) as *Dragon Age II*’s sequel (Darrah 2013; “Game Overview” 2013), but it also suggests that religious ideology and infrastructure ultimately fail to guarantee stability and order.

The fact that the game’s conclusion remains fundamentally the same irrespective of Hawke’s decision has garnered some criticism, the argument being that the player’s ideological, narrative, and ludic choices should have a more significant impact on the final outcome of the game. Daniels (2011), for instance, argues that *Dragon Age II*

teased you. They’ve created an elaborate and stunning religion that you could have embraced but then it yanks that choice away. It teased you with the ability to choose to be a genocidal maniac, but it forced you not to be. (para. 15)

Daniels’s frustration with *Dragon Age II*, however, precisely embodies the rationale for curtailing the game’s concluding possibilities. In the end, Hawke, like most people in the ‘real’ world, is powerless to affect significant change in the world around him. The sense that players have of the game robbing them of their agency is deliberate; they are helpless in the face of the massive scale of institutionalized oppression, particularly when that institution is both religious and protected by cultural investment in its success, as the people of Kirkwall are invested in the Chantry.

22 The idol was discovered by Hawke’s party in the Deep Roads during the final “Main” quest of act one, and was stolen by Varric’s brother Bartrand, who subsequently went mad. Bartrand sold the idol to Meredith, who had it forged into her sword. During the final combat, she uses the weapon almost as a magical implement, and her eyes glow red (the same color as the artifact), seeming to suggest that a good deal of her fanaticism was exacerbated by the idol’s influence. However, Meredith was responsible for oppressing the mages in the Circle throughout all of act one, before the idol was discovered, so while it may have influenced her, it did not control her absolutely.

Mechanically, the game's focus on evaluating the player's decisions via the friendship-rivalry continua suggests an overall ethos that is unconcerned with the specific beliefs and practices of any of these factions. The point of the mechanic is for the player to negotiate with the beliefs of NPCCs in order to secure their friendship or rivalry, or to make the decision to play ideologically and allow NPCCs to be alienated by those choices. While the game itself does not present a clear answer in terms of a 'correct' belief (either for the player external to the game or for Hawke internal to it), it does ask the player to choose between taking a religious stance (with the Chantry or Circle) and losing companions, or taking a humanistic one and maintaining the majority of those relationships. The game presents a mechanical system that encourages the player to maximize their personal benefits by maximizing their willingness to compromise, cooperate, and tolerate the belief systems of others. The optimal ludic outcome for the player is one in which he or she has the most choices of active NPCCs, and the one in which the most NPCCs remain loyal to Hawke for the final confrontations with Orsino and Meredith. *Dragon Age II's* focus on cultivating positive relationships prioritizes human interaction and empathy over institutional religion.

So as we move outside the content of the game and reflect on the purpose of *Dragon Age II* to the twenty-first century in the 'real' world, we find that the game is attempting to use the context of religious extremism and oppression to encourage reflection on the part of the player about the conflict between personal relationships and the intolerance fostered by adherence to institutionalized ideologies, whether religious, cultural, social, or political. As Salo (2011b) suggests, *Dragon Age II*

shows the dangers of ideology, and what happens when one group oppresses another. It doesn't matter if the reason for the oppression is worthwhile or not; oppression often leads to violence, and that is something we should always be mindful of. (para. 9)

With much of the world suffering from genocide, ethnic cleansing, religious extremists perpetrating acts of 'holy martyrdom,' Islamic terrorism, Christian fundamentalist intolerance of homosexuality, and open warfare in parts of Africa and the Middle East, *Dragon Age II* focuses on the danger of even good intentions when those intentions become perverted by fanaticism, as under Meredith, or warped by oppression, as with Orsino.

Instead, the game asks its players to consider their friends and acquaintances – like Hawke's NPCCs – who most likely hail from a variety of ethnic, social, economic, and religious backgrounds. And in considering individuals rather than movements, the player is asked to reflect on whether those people (and their beliefs) are more or less important than their own religious, cultural, and political ideals. Within the world of *Dragon Age II*, the game argues that friendship should take supremacy by rewarding the player with a mechanical advantage for doing so, but – importantly – does not foreclose the possibility of playing the game with a religious or cultural bias:

some players may well choose to experience *Dragon Age II* as a devotee of the Chantry or a blood mage, and the game frames those decisions as within the player's 'right.'

In essence, without explicitly telling the player what to believe, *Dragon Age II* presents an argument that friendship and human relationships provide individuals with the greatest variety of experience and the broadest network of support without condemning those who choose to privilege ideology over companionship. The multiplicity of possibilities within *Dragon Age II* is in fact the greatest evidence that the game presents a "godless" (or at least an agnostic) world; because there is no universal judgment, no condemnation or even praise for any particular system of choices, because the player is able to play ideologically or strategically, selfishly or selflessly, the game suggests that the world is ultimately only what we make of it, and that the game means what we choose to have it mean. Such absolute freedom of choice comes with consequences – perhaps it alienates friends or family, perhaps it earns persecution or oppression – but by refraining from presenting a universal continuum of judgment, the game suggests that such choices are both made and evaluated by the individual – the player, not the Maker.

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Biography

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‘The Lamb of Comstock’

Dystopia and Religion in Video Games

Frank G. Bosman

Abstract

In the article “‘The Lamb of Comstock’. Dystopia and Religion in Video Games’ I will introduce four high quality, commercially successful videogames: *Bioshock*, *Bioshock Infinite*, *Dishonored* and *Brink*. All these four games present a dystopian scenery as a background for an intelligent plot to criticize distinct modern political, philosophical and economical theories and practices: respectively the ‘hyper-capitalism’ of the Russian-American philosopher Ayn Rand, the idea of religion based American Exceptionalism, idealized industrialization and rationalism, and an ecological Apocalypse. Within these four games, religion – primarily different branches of Christianity – plays an important but often implicit role in the game narrative, sometimes supporting the dystopian scenery of the game, sometimes opposing it. In this article I will give a definition of the difficult term ‘dystopia’, introduce the four dystopian video games and demonstrate the importance of religion within the four game narratives.

Keywords

utopia, dystopia, videogames, cultural theology, *Bioshock*, *Brink*, *Dishonored*

‘Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? “No,” says the man in Washington. It belongs to the poor. “No,” says the man in the Vatican. It belongs to God. “No,” says the man in Moscow. It belongs to everyone. I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose Rapture. A city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, where the great would not be constrained by the small.’

Thus spoke Andrew Ryan (born Andrei Rianofski), an American industrial, who was so disappointed by both the American and Russian governments, that he realized his own utopian dream, the city of Rapture on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Time: somewhere in the sixties of the past century. Andrew Ryan, an acronym of the Russian-American philosopher Ayn Rand (1905 -

1982), created his utopian dream in hyper capitalistic colors focusing on the virtue of egoism as the key element of his sociological and economical order: no government, taxes, censorship or altruistic morality.

The game *Bioshock* (2007) features this ‘super capitalist’ Andrew Ryan and his capitalistic utopia of Rapture as a criticism on the theories of Ayn Rand and the economical praxis based on her works.¹ *Bioshock*’s Rapture was may have been intended to be a utopia, when the player enters the underwater game world it has already turned into a nightmarish dystopia. The dystopian genre is very popular ever since H.G. Wells published his *The Sleeper #wakes* (1910) and brought forth international acclaimed best sellers like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949). Ironically enough also Ayn Rand published a dystopian novel of her own, *Anthem* (1938), unknowing of the fact that a little less than six decades later her own utopian novels *Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) would become the object of dystopian criticism themselves. Novels like *The Hunger Games*-trilogy (Suzanne Collins, 2008, 2009, 2010) and films like *The Matrix*-trilogy (Wachowski Brothers, 1999, 2003, 2003) continued this genre, opening it for even larger audiences.

The word ‘dystopia’ is derived from the Greek *dys* (‘bad’) and *topos* (‘place’), and is alternatively called ‘cacotopia’ (from the Greek *kakos*, ‘incorrect’) or ‘anti-utopia’.² The word was first used by the British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) in a speech before the House of Commons in 1868 in which he denounced the way the English government treated the occupied Ireland. ‘It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dystopians, or caco-topians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favor is too bad to be practicable.’ (Trahair 1999, p. 110) Mill was unconsciously the father of the genre of the ‘dystopian fiction’ which combines ‘a parodic inversion of the traditional utopia with satire on contemporary society.’ (Ferns 1999, p. 105) Dystopian writers can be characterized as having ethical and political concerns about ‘terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopias underside.’ (Baccolini 2003, p. 2)

The most important difference between utopian and dystopian fiction – literature, film, gaming – is its relationship with the actual reality in which we live. While utopian fiction stresses the *difference* between the ideal (and idealized) society it depicts and the reality of the everyday life, the dystopian writers present a nightmarish vision of a nearby future as a very real possibility for

1 When introducing a videogame, I will refer to the game website of the producer and to the game trailer on YouTube. For *Bioshock*, see: <http://www.2kgames.com/bioshock/> - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ymg2HzHF9-4>.

2 Lyman Sargent (1994) differentiates between ‘eutopia’, ‘dystopia’ and ‘anti-uptopia’, a division which received much following by scholars and critics alike. In this article the broader, inclusive term of ‘dystopia’ is used.

present society to ‘achieve’ if nothing is done to stop it. Dystopia seems then like ‘a no more than logical conclusion derived from the premises of the existing order.’ (Ferns 1999, p. 107) Utopias usually start with a long and sometimes magical journey to the ‘other land’, be it hidden in the future, an exotic place or even on other planets or galaxies. The dystopian texts usually begin directly with the terrible new world, as if one had only to leave his house to enter into it. (Baccolini 2003, p. 5)

Religion, in its institutionalized or individualistic form, sometimes plays a major part in dystopian literature. In some cases religion, often in its Christian form, is thought of to be a part of the dark new world while other authors depict religion as an antidote against totalitarianism and egoism associated with the ‘brave new world’. Philip Pullman (* 1946) for example has been heavily criticized for his *His Dark Materials*-trilogy (1995, 1997, 2000) by the conservative Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and the Focus on the Family Foundation, both claiming that Pullman demonized Roman Catholicism. Also *The Chrysalids* (1955) by John Wyndham and *Cat& Cradle* (1963) by Kurt Vonnegut featured a deranged form of religion as a part of the dystopian society depicted and criticized by them. But in the aforementioned game *Bioshock* however Christianity is used as an integral part of the creators’ criticism on Rand’s utopia. What to think of the relation between dystopia and religion?

Religion and dystopia are actually not a rare couple in modern day video games. In this article I will therefore introduce four different videogames, all featuring a dystopian scenery and narrative combined with more or less explicit traces of religion, most notably in its Christian form: *Bioshock* (2007), *Brink* (2011), *Dishonore* (2012) and *Bioshock- Infinite* (2013). Two questions will be asked. Firstly, what or whom do these games criticize by their dystopian fantasy? And, secondly, what is the role of religion in these dystopian games? The selection of the four games is based on the presence of a dystopian scenery and narrative, and contain at least traces of (institutionalized) religion. Moreover these games are considered as of very high quality by critics and gamers alike, and all the games have been quite a considerable commercial success.

Before discussing the four games a small warning should be given. In this article the games and their narratives will be discussed in detail. Those who would want to play the game by themselves should be warned that the outcome of the games will be disclosed.

1. Ayn Rand’s Martyrs. Bioshock (2007)

In the game *Bioshock-5* set during the 1960’s, the player is in charge of the past-less protagonist ‘Jack’, who – after a mysterious plane crash above the Atlantic Ocean – finds himself in a retro

futuristic dystopia with the name ‘Rapture’.³ The city, created by the Russian-American industrial Andrew Ryan (as stated earlier in this article), is heavily troubled by civil war, chaos and anarchy. The player can become aware of the history of Rapture, built in the 1940’s, by listening to the scattered audio recordings to be found in the game. Andrew Ryan’s utopia slowly built itself and scientific progress greatly expanded, especially by the discovery of the plasmid ADAM, harvested from the sea slugs on the ocean floor. ADAM allows the users to alter their DNA (and so the player does with Jack) to grant them superhuman powers like telekinesis and pyrokinesis.

While Ryan hoped for a meritocracy, class distinctions grew heavily and mobsters like Frank Fontaine tried to overthrow Ryan’s supremacy. Fontaine created smuggler’s routes to the surface (very against Ryan’s isolationism). Together with Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum he created a cheap plasmid industry by mass-producing ADAM by the way of implanting the slugs into the body of orphaned girls named ‘little sisters’. Fontaine and his plasmid enhanced army tried to overthrow Ryan, but did not succeed. Fontaine even appeared to have died in the attack. Some months later another figure, now by the name of Atlas, preached an uprising by the lower class against the ‘rich folk’, creating social and political chaos. Civil war broke out on New Year’s Eve of 1959 when Ryan ordered a full fledged attack on Ryan’s army of beggars and workers. The battle left many dead and the few remaining survivors kept on battling amongst each other. Because no one thinks about the maintenance of Rapture, the water of the ocean slowly regains control. What once was a beautiful utopia has now fallen into a crumbling dystopia.

When creator of Bioshock Ken Levine was asked by *The Guardian* (1-12-11) about the philosophical background of the game he replied: ‘What I tried to do, having read Ayn Rand, was to create Galt’s Gulch and stick real people in it.’ *Galt’s Gulch* is the name of the utopian, isolationistic village in Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* (1956). In this village the ‘mighty’ men and women of America (industrials, scientists, artists) have retreated themselves (‘went on strike’) as a protest against the ‘socialistic’ society of the United States. *Bioshock* is literally loaded with references to Rand’s work. Rapture is in fact Rand’s Galt’s Gulch revisited. Andrew Ryan is a fugitive from the Soviet Union and received American citizenship, exactly like Ayn Rand. Both the name of Atlas and Fontaine are references to Ryan’s major works *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1956).

The name of Dr. Tenenbaum is also a reference to Rand, who changed her Russian name Alisa Zinov'yevna Rosenbaum to more English sounding Ayn Rand. The public broadcasts the player hears in Rapture are a close reminder of the never-ending speeches of *Atlas Shrugged*’s hero John Galt. Multiple people in Rapture rather destroy their own properties than leave them to the

3 Retro-futurism is a trend in the creative arts showing the influence of depictions of the future produced prior to about 1960: the future as seen from the past. See: Gruffey (2006, p. 155-7).

raiders, echoing the ethics of Roark from *The Fountainhead*, and Wyatt and d'Aconia from *Atlas Shrugged*. Furthermore in the game the player discovers a bottle of wine named 'Fountainhead Cabernet Sauvignon', another reference to *The Fountainhead*. The Pharaoh's Fortune Casino in Rapture is localized in the Cameron Suites, a reference to the architect Henry Cameron (*Fountainhead*). The name H. Roark appears on an advertorial for the Eve's Apple strip club (idem). And on numerous posters in Rapture the words 'Who is Atlas?' are printed, yet another reference to *Atlas Shrugged*.

Rand's philosophical program, which she called Objectivism, is not easy to define. The fact that Rand has not been recognized by the academic philosophers as such, does not help either. (Peikoff 1991) The closest thing to a definition of Objectivism has been given by Rand herself. Once she was asked by a book salesman to tell him what her philosophy was all about, 'while standing on one leg' (Heller 2009, p. 281-2), a reference to the legendary story of rabbi Hillel (Sjabbat 31a). Rand accepted the challenge and replied: 'Metaphysics: objective reality. Epistemology: rationalism. Ethics: egoism. Politics: capitalism.' According to Den Uyl & Rasmussen (1986, p. x) the prism of Rand's philosophy is the political domain. 'The political positions Rand is most noted for depend on her defense of natural rights. To defend natural rights Rand believes she must formulate an ethical theory, and an ethical theory in turn requires a position on metaphysical and epistemological philosophy.'

But what about religion? Rand herself was highly critical on the topic of religion and especially Christianity (Bosman 2013). She described Christendom as the 'best *Kinder arden* of communism' and according to her every almighty being is 'by definition' a dictator whenever he uses this power of not (Heller 2009, p. 172). The 'drama of the Christian mythology' is, still according to Rand, that Christ 'did not die for his own sins' but for 'lesser' people. (Heller 2009, p. 324) In *Atlas Shrugged* every man must take a vow to enter Galt's Gulch: 'I swear by my life and my love for it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.' (Rand 1957, p. 680)

When Rand was so strongly against religion, any dystopian criticism on her philosophy would benefit from the presence of Christendom within it. Amidst of the rubbles of Ryan/Rand's demolished utopia the player is informed that there are smugglers in Rapture. Not knowing what it is they smuggle into Rapture, the player learns that the smugglers themselves are being tortured and murdered by Ryan's men. Off course the smugglers violate Ryan's isolationistic policy, but the player cannot do otherwise than establishing a firm sense that there is more to the case. What can be smuggled into or out of a place without government to forbid certain enterprises or to collect taxes? In Rand's hyper capitalistic society smuggling is simply an impossibility.

When the player enters the *& ugger's Hideout* he is confronted by a crucified smuggler. Above his tortured body the word 'smuggler' is written in blood. And at his feet the player finds bibles and crucifixes. No further explanations is made by the game, but the references to Christianity and the crucified Christ cannot be misunderstood. Further in the game the player meets tortured but still living smugglers singing a well know Christian hymn: 'Jesus loves me, this I know / For the Bible tells me so / Little ones to Him belong / They are weak but He is strong.' Other *splicers* (ADAM addicts) roam the borders of Rapture ranting: 'I'm sorry, Father... (...) Father...Why have you forsaken me? (...) Jesus! God! Somebody help!'

Bioshock criticizes Rand's hyper capitalistic utopia of Galt's Gulch by turning it into the dystopian fantasy of Rapture. According to Levine's creation, egoism, the lack of a central government and the absence of hope of a better life for the 'majority of mediocrity' leads inevitably to civil war, chaos and anarchy, and therefore to the end of the Randian utopia. Very remarkable is the role of Christianity within this dystopian criticism of Rand. While Rand herself was very critical about religion, in Rapture Christendom is the only thing so radically opposed to Randian capitalism, that its devotees are mercilessly murdered. Because if egoism is Rand's paramount virtue, than the inherent altruism of the Christian faith and tradition is the absolute opposite of everything Rand stood for. Levine uses the Christian tradition to enforce his already heavy criticism on Rand's political and economical utopia.

2. Noach's Arc Revisited. Brink (2011)

The game *Brink* takes place in the midst of the 21st century on an enormous floating city, called 'the Ark'.⁴ Originally the Ark was constructed off the coast of San Francisco as an experimental, self-sustaining, self-sufficient, climate neutral, man-made super island, designed to support around 5000 people. The island/boat is made of genetically-modified species of coral, called Arkoral, which is supposed to be stronger than steel. The highly ideological motivated original population of the Ark, called 'the Founders', moved the Ark to a certain position on one of the world's oceans. When the Earth's oceans and seas started to rapidly rise for further unexplained reasons (presumably because of global warming) the Ark soon became a place of refuge from the floated landmasses.

The Founders relocated the Ark because of the massive amounts of refugees coming to the island seeking shelter, but without success. The desperation of the refugees was soon exploited by smugglers, charging impossible high amounts of cash for a safe journey to the Ark. A large number of boats never reached the Ark because of bad water, bad equipment or straight on murder by the

4 <http://www.brinkthegame.com> - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG-zbNn2at0>.

ruthless smugglers. The number of refugees was too high for the Ark to harbor in terms of mere space, water and food. The Ark was only constructed to sustain 5000 people, a number very soon heightened to 45.000 people.

Soon the Ark lost contact with the outside world, presumably because everything else on earth was swallowed by the rising waters. The ‘Guests’, as the new arrivals were euphemistically dubbed by the Founders, built enormous ghettos of sea containers at the rims of the man-made island. Initially grateful for the rescue the Guests soon began to rise against the Founders, because of the ‘Apartheid’ between the two sections. The Founders keep on living in relatively health and wealth, keeping all of the essential positions within the Ark’s society. The Guests are ‘located’ in the overpopulated ghettos, exposed to all kinds of shortages and contagious diseases. Civil war seems inevitable, while both sides can make a more or less equal moral claim: the Founders want to defend the order on the Ark for the benefit of all, while the Guests want a more equal division of the Ark’s stocks. Both sides however are forgetting something. The Founders cannot image the poverty and despair of the Guests, while the refugees wrongly believe that the Ark has enough resources for everyone which is definitely not the case.

Now both sides have armed themselves: the Security Forces against the Resistance. And the player has to choose one side, to lead that side to victory over the other. As sad before, as both sides can secure a certain moral claim to back up their actions, the moral balance between the two groups seems to be perfectly even. It is to the player to decide which side wins, and which side loses. It is quite an impossible choice to make, which is exactly the point the game director Paul Wedgwood seems to impose upon the player: there are no obvious ‘good’ or ‘bad’ guys in this game. While playing as a team member of one of the two sides, the player learns that both the Founders and the Resistance have kept secrets for each other and for their own members. The Resistance frantically wants to lay contact with the outside world for help, the Founders already tried to do likewise. Their scouting pilots were however brutally tortured by the survivors of the float to describe the exact location of the Ark, which would inevitably lead to the conquest of the Ark. The leader of the Resistance, at the other hand, finds out that the Arkoral of which the Ark is made, is slowly beginning to disintegrate, jeopardizing everyone on board. He refuses to make his findings public, especially not to the Founders.

Brink sketches most clearly a utopia gone terribly wrong. Out of the noble intentions of the environmentalist Founders a terrible new world emerged from the waters of the world-wide flood. What started as an experiment on sustainability ended into a civil war about the sparse resources left on earth. The utopia was not in itself wrong nor is it criticized by the game as such. Unfortunately for the Founders, the disaster they were planning to counteract with their ‘green’ experiment, catch up with them before anytime could be learnt from the experiment. The utopia of the Ark changed into the dystopia of the civil war between Security and Resistance, between Founders and Guests,

not because of the inherent flaws in the utopian ideology, but because of global warming and a following ecological apocalypse.

The dystopian world the Ark has become, is a clear criticism by the game producers on several, very real and actual problems in our late-modern society: ecology and mass immigration. Global warming is threatening hundreds of millions because of the rising of the water levels worldwide. More and more inhabitable land will be swallowed by the sea, leaving sparse resources – land, food, water, energy – as the object of increasing tension between nations, regions, cities and even individuals. *Brink* warns us for the political, sociological and economical consequences of global warming by creating an dystopia of a future which is very likely to be just like the game predicts.

The second criticism of *Brink* is about the also very real and actual problem of mass immigration. Lured by the wealth of the Western world, deceived by ruthless smugglers, desperate to find something of a future millions of third world émigrés try to find a new home in Europe and North America. Every day hundred men, women and children try to cross the Mediterranean Sea, to land on one of the Greek or Italian islands, hoping to appeal for a residence permit. And the same amount of people try to cross the desert between Texas, USA and Mexico, hoping to find jobs in the ‘Land of the Free’.

Politics, civil protesters and nongovernmental organizations (NGO’s) alike tend to have the habit of voicing only one side of the problem. On the one side concerned (mostly right-winged) politicians warn us that the West is not capable of absorbing these kind of numbers of émigrés without a serious threat to the stability of the fabric of society. Western countries, so they plead, cannot take all those refugees in and provide shelter, education and work for all. At the other side, activists and protesters emphasize the moral obligation of the ‘rich’ West to help those less fortunate. They point to the incredible wealth of the western world and ask rhetorically if one could not hope to share some of this wealth with the poor émigrés from third world countries. *Brink* shows the two sides of the same coin, without taking a stand on either side, letting the player the decision about who is (more) right or wrong. Both sides have valid arguments and both sides are to be blamed for some part of the civil problems caused by mass immigration.

Brink features religion in a most indirect way, hardly visible for the untrained eye. There are no visible traces of religion on the Ark, nor with the Founders, nor with the Guests. Religion seems to be obliterated by the ecological Apocalypse letting the Ark to be the only place on earth save for the rising of the world’s seas. The Ark is named after the coral Arkoral, as the game explains while playing it, but in fact it is the other way around. Arkoral is named after the Ark, as a late-modern interpretation of the Genesis story of Noach’s Ark, reinterpreting the Christian concept of ‘ancestral sin’ in socio-ecological terms. In chapters 6 through 9 of Genesis the world is floated by waters,

because of God's anger with the sins of mankind. Only Noach, his family and a selection of animals survived the water apocalypse in a special designed boat, called the Ark. Noach's Ark was the only place where mankind could survive and eventually start anew. The parallel with the Ark of *Brink* is undeniable, and so is the reference to the biblical story.

There is however still a deeper level of the connection between the flood of *Brink* and the notion of mankind's sin. In Christian tradition the theological notion of 'original' (or 'ancestral sin') is widely known. In its core this theological notion is based on Genesis chapter 3 in which Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden because they violated God's commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. From this story theologians like Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther and Karl Barth have developed a full-fledged doctrine of Original sin, both referring to the primordial sin of Adam and Eve (*eccatorum originale originans*) and the ancestral sin of every man and woman somehow transferred from Adam and Eve to every human person ever born (*eccatum originale originatum*). All men have sinned because of Adam (Wiley 2002, p. 5).

The French philosopher Pascal Bruckner links the idea of an ecological apocalypse explicitly to the Christian notion of ancestral sin. In his book *La fanatisme e l'apocalypse* (2011, translated in English in 2013) In our agnostic society 'Ecologism' is the new religion. Bruckner: 'Consider the meaning in contemporary jargon of the famous carbon footprint that we all leave behind us. What is it, after all, if not the gaseous equivalent of Original Sin, of the stain that we inflict on our Mother Gaia by the simple fact of being present and breathing? We can all gauge the volume of our emissions, day after day, with the injunction to curtail them, just as children saying their catechisms are supposed to curtail their sins.' (p. 2) The French philosopher warns us that this 'credo of ecologism' has drafted a whole apocalyptic scenery and narrative 'already tried out of communism', and is borrowing from 'Gnosticism and medieval forms of messianism.' The 'prophets' of ecologism, as Al Gore and sir Martin Rees, 'constantly beat the drums of panic and call upon us to expiate our sins before it is too late.'

Brink reinterprets not only the biblical story of Noach's Ark, but also the old theological notion of original and ancestral sin. Traditionally Adam's sin is thought of as a biological or even metaphysical reality, closely connected with sexuality. *Brink* however changes the notion of original sin to a socio-ecological level. The sins both the Founders and the Guests gave to face are the collective sins of their ancestors, the generations who lived before them on the face of the earth, and who are responsible for the environmental condition from which the ecological catastrophe could take place. The ancestral sins of *Brink* do press on the actual living generation of the Ark, but are actually derived from the faults of former generations. The dystopia of *Brink* is primarily ecological in form, but is on a deeper level charged with the Christian notion of original sin. The Christian tradition is used on a very implicit level by *Brink*'s developers to express the immanent dark world which seems to arise from our own present.

3. The Abbey of the Everyman. Dishonored (2012)

The game *Dishonored* takes place in the industrial city of Dunwell, modeled on the actual cities of London and Edinburgh between the late 1800's and the early 1900's.⁵ Like *Bioshock* the game features a retro-futuristic scenery in which steam-powered technology and otherworldly forces coexist. More specifically *Dishonored* is considered as one of the first commercial 'Steampunk' games on the market.⁶ The dystopian city of Dunwell is clearly a criticism on industrialization and the unethical use of technology. When philosopher Esmond Roseburrow discovers the hidden power of whale oil, the steam powered machinery of Dunwell succeeds in reaching a technological level equal to that of the West just before the First World War.

Initially Dunwell is ruled by the empress Jessamine Kaldwin, a kind of Platonic 'enlightened despot', but when she is murdered a downright dictatorship is established by the Lord Regent Hiram Burrows and the High Overseer Thaddeus Campbell. The city is stricken with a plague spread by rats and dogs which is killing the poor and isolating the rich. The infected, known as 'weepers', cry blood and can become violent. The government uses the plague as an excuse to take or purge citizens as they wish. Order is maintained by the Tallboys, heavily armored officers on tall, mechanical legs, and districts are separated by barriers known as 'Walls of Light', which are made of energy and disintegrate people who try to cross them.

The player takes the role of Corvo Attano, the empress' special agent and body guard. Corvo is framed for the murder on the empress and the sequential kidnapping of her daughter, the Young Lady Emily by both the Lord Regent and the High Overseer. A covert group of activists, the Loyalists, plots to overthrow the government and install the Empress' daughter as the new Empress. They aid Corvo as well as they can. The player, in charge of Corvo's character, can choose from two different 'paths' to solve the game: violence or tactics. The player can choose to shoot everything and everyone on sight, adding to the gloom and darkness of the game world. Or the player can choose to tiptoe around most of his adversaries, only knock some minor enemies unconscious and get rid of his most important enemies by clever use of tactics and diplomacy, adding to the lightness and eventually salvation of Dunwell.

Within the dystopian society of Dunwell religion plays an important role, not in the form of traditional Christianity, but in the form of imaginary religion known as 'the Abbey of the Everyman'. The Order received a sort of 'kick-start' during the events known as 'the Siege of the White Cliffs', Whitecliff being the name of a nearby city. The order member, called 'the Overseers' purged the city of 'heretics, witches and thralls of the Outsider'. (More information about the

⁵ <http://www.dishonored.com/> - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcSc4uBc3nQ>.

⁶ Steampunk is a sub-genre of science fiction that typically features steam-powered machinery, especially in a setting inspired by industrialized Western civilization during the 19th century (Donovan, 2011).

Outsider will be given later in this article.) The Abbey succeeded in becoming the most powerful religions fraction on the island of Grislor, on which both Dunwell and Whitecliff are situated. The overseers are tasked with several civil duties like officiating marriages, regulating the isle's calendar (with 13 months of 28 days) and the Feast of Fugue. This feast is supposed to commence the time between the last day of the last month and the beginning of the new year. This day is said to exist outside time. Any events that occur during this period are not recognized to be happened at all, giving the population free reign to commit inappropriate, immoral and even criminal acts without official consequences. A parallel to our feast of Carnival is obvious visible.

When the actions of the game take place, the Abbey controls the public and spiritual life of the citizens of Dunwell by the authority of the High Overseer Thaddeus Campbell. Supported by the Lord Regent who took control of the city after the assassination of the empress, the Abbey starts an ongoing raid against all supposed heretics in the city by means of the seizure of property, financial recompense, public humiliation, service to the order, prison time and public burnings of heretics and witches. The plague that is ravishing through the streets (probably be spread by the vast amounts of rats in the city) is connected by the Order to the 'impurities' within certain heretical elements in the society. The Order has no stated deity, but its primary theology consists of the idea that the 'universe is unknowably vast and swarming with all manner of dangerous spirits and forces, most of which are hostile to man's existence'. Citizens are encouraged to put their devotion and faith in the Abbey, assuming a role as spiritual guard dog or official Magisterium. No other religions are allowed and everyone who dares to question the authority of the Order is merciless killed.

The Abbey's most important reason of existence is to stand against a mysterious figure, known as 'the Outsider'. The Outsider, only rarely to be seen by certain individuals (amongst others by Corvo), is thought of as being part angel, part demon, and is associated with everything magical and supernatural, like runes and bone charms the player can find during the game. (Surprisingly enough the Order itself deals with astrology, which is not thought of as 'magical'.) The Outsider is actually more a morally neutral force within the reality of the game, seemingly only occupied by following 'interesting' people. The deity seems to be habitually bored and in constant need of distraction, like delivered by Corvo. His shrines and devotees can be found throughout the game world, heavily opposed by the Order. The Outsider is associated in the book *& irit of the Deep* (to be found in the level 'Dunwell Sewers') with a primordial 'whale' or 'Leviathan', lurking in the deep waters of the oceans around the isles. The bone charms and the runes within the game are made of whale bones. And when an antagonist of Corvo dies, she cries out: 'Bones of the great Leviathan, protect me!'

Because the technology of Dunwell is so closely connected with whale oil as its primary source of power, the Outsider seems to have a far greater influence on reality than the Overseers think. The association with Leviathan is therefore not without meaning. Leviathan (or 'Levithian')

is a mysterious, legendary and primordial ‘monster’, often thought of living in the oceans. ‘You crushed the heads of the monster Leviathan, then fed him to wild creatures in the desert.’ (Ps. 74,14; cf. Ps. 104,26; Is. 27,1; 2 Esd. 6,52)⁷ Sometimes Leviathan is named with its ‘twin’ monster Behemoth: ‘You named two of these living creatures: one was Behemoth, and the other was Leviathan.’ (2 Esd. 6,49) In the book of Job the Lord replies to Job’s accusation by provoking him to take charge of the monsters of the primordial chaos himself (as God does every day). ‘Can you catch a sea monster [‘Leviathan’ in Hebrew] by using a fishhook? Can you tie its mouth shut with a rope? Can it be led around by a ring in its nose or a hook in its jaw? Will it beg for mercy?’ (Job 41,1–34) The majority of translators choose to translate ‘Behemoth’ and ‘Leviathan’ into existing animals, but it is far more likely these two form two symbols of the primordial chaos from which God created the heaven and the earth, as narrated in the first two chapters of Genesis (Good 1990).

If the Outsider of *Donshonored* is associated with ‘sea monsters’, ‘monstrous white whale’ and even with Leviathan himself, he symbolizes chaos and anarchy within the narrative of the game. His decisions are not immoral, but a-moral, his grace is arbitrary and prayers directed to him are more or less meaningless. His is associated with the primal chaos before creation, with the supernatural, and with magic and witchcraft. The Abbey of the Everyman, not accidentally (or inconveniently) abbreviated as ‘the Order’, is the Outsider’s opposite, fighting everything the Outsider stands for. The Abbey stands for order, discipline, separation and rationality, but also for the inclination of domination and control. Contrary to its name the Abbey is not ‘of every man’, but is closely connected to the elite of Dunwell, law enforcement and city politics, sharing its corruption and its oppression of the common people.

Within the animistic reality of *Dishonore*, religion – in the form of the Abbey of the Everyman – does not criticize the dystopian society the game depicts, but – quite the opposite – reinforces the dark and dangerous world of Dunwell. The Abbey is aggressively monotheistic, hunting down everyone who does not agree on their beliefs and theology. Instead of defending the rights of the common people, they have joined the intellectual and political elite of Dunwell to combine their strength in a never-ending search for power and control. The terminology of ‘disease’, ‘purity’ and ‘plague’ adopted by the Abbey, helps to divide the society between ‘good’ and ‘back’ along simplistic lines, set by the Order. The religion of *Dishonored* is an integral part of the dystopia of Dunwell.

⁷ All Biblical quotations are taken from the Contemporary English Version (1995).

4. The Lamb of Comstock. Bioshock Infinite (2013)

Six years after the initial *Bioshock*, Ken Levine produced the game *Bioshock Infinite*, also featuring a dystopian society drawn in retro futuristic colors, combined with steam punk influence (as *Dishonore* did earlier).⁸ In 1893 the United States government built a floating island based on an unknown technology called ‘quantum levitation’. It was constructed for the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the New World (1492), and intended to be a ‘floating world’s fair’ honoring the greatness of the American nation. The floating city, named ‘Columbia’ after the female personification of the United States, was built in the French neoclassical style of Daniel Burnham and Frederik Law Olmstead, who also designed a number of impressive buildings for the Columbian World Fair, concentrating on the concepts of the ‘Beaux Arts’: symmetry, balance and splendor (Gilbert 2009).

Unfortunately Columbia got involved in an international ‘incident’. Apparently it fired on Chinese civilians during the (historical) ‘Boxer Rebellion’ of 1899-1901. Unmasked as a weapon of mass destruction, the embarrassed US government banned Columbia from its territory, leading to the disappearance of the floating city into the clouds and harsh civil riots on Columbia itself. When the player enters Columbia in the person of Brooker DeWitt (who will be discussed in more details below), only two factions are left, bitterly striving each other for the supremacy over the power of Columbia’s weaponry. The Founders, led by a mysterious ‘Prophet’ called Zachary Hale Comstock, are at the upper hand. The Founders, who named themselves after the Founding Fathers of America (Washington, Franklin, Jefferson and the like) are basically ultra nationalistic white supremacists. They proclaiming ‘Father Comstock’ as the true ideological successor of the Founding Fathers, giving birth to an unholy alliance between American exceptionalism and religious zeal. A fanatical fraction of the Founders, called the ‘Fraternal Order of the Raven’ even worship Lincoln’s murderer, John Booth, as the glorious killer of the ‘Great Apostate’. Lincoln is famous for his abolishing of slavery in the United States. According to Ken Levine himself the competing ‘Vox Populi’ (‘the voice of the people’) are molded to the anarchistic and violent terrorist group the *Rote #rmee Fraktion* (Bertz 2010). Headed by Daisy Fitzroy, the Vox Populi has developed from a civil movement against the racism and elitism of the Founders into a terrorist organization, equally cruel and violent as the ones they fight against.

Levine explicitly stated that one of the major themes of *Bioshock Infinite* is the criticism on the concept of American exceptionalism (Matos 2010). The World Fair of 1893, held in the United States is considered as one of the birth grounds of this still popular notion (Gilbert, 2009). The

8 <http://www.2kgames.com/bioshock/> - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLHW78X1XeE>.

American political sociologist Seymour Lipset (1922- 2006) defined ‘American exceptionalism’ as the idea that the United States of America are ‘qualitatively different’ from other nations, the so called ‘first new nation’ (Lipset 1996). This notion is based on egalitarianism, individualism, republicanism, populism and laissez faire capitalism, thought off as all belonging to the one American history and culture. The origin of this exceptionalism is often linked to the words of the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), who was visiting the young American nation, thinking it was rather ‘exceptional’ among the nations (Tocqueville 1840), a notion later adopted by numerous generations of American intellectuals (Pease 2009). The political scientist Richard Rose summarized American exceptionalism as: ‘America marches to a different drummer. Its uniqueness is explained by any or all of a variety of reasons: history, size, geography, political institutions, and culture. Explanations of the growth of government in Europe are not expected to fit American experience, and vice versa.’ (Rose 1989)

As stated earlier in this article, the game *Bioshock Infinite* links the notion of American exceptionalism to Christianity, giving the whole notion a religious inclination. And this link is not without historical backup. Historically the idea of American exceptionalism has been linked to the puritan tradition (Gandziarowski 2010). Puritanism is a religious movement, started within the Church of England in the 16th and 17th century, influenced by the reformer John Calvin (1509-1564) and aiming at the purification of the established church’s morals, theology and worship. While gaining some influence in England during the English Civil War and Interregnum (1643-1660) a great number of Puritans fled to the New World, trying to establish a ‘new Eden’ along their own religious beliefs (Bremer 2009).

One of the most influential Puritan leaders going to America, was John Winthrop (1587/8-1649). Still aboard the migrant ship *Arbella*, he described in a sermon in 1630, the future of the Massachusetts Bay colonists. He referred to the city they were about to found (Boston) as ‘the city on the hill’. The notion of ‘the city on the hill’ is drawn from a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (5,13-16): ‘You are like salt for everyone on earth. But if salt no longer tastes like salt, how can it make food salty? All it is good for is to be thrown out and walked on. You are like light for the whole world. A city built on top of a hill cannot be hidden, and no one would light a lamp and put it under a clay pot. A lamp is placed on a lampstand, where it can give light to everyone in the house. Make your light shine, so that others will see the good that you do and will praise your Father in heaven.’ In their own view the New England Puritans were not mere political refugees fleeing to avoid persecution, but missionaries intent on setting up a light to the nations. (Litke 2012) In American folklore this notion has lived on to present day in phrase as ‘God’s own country’ and ‘the shining city upon the hill’. Both Democratic (John F. Kennedy) and Republican politicians (Ronald Reagan) have used the phrase to underline their patriotism, but the notion has become more and more the ‘possession’ of ‘neocons’ like Gary Bauer, Sarah Palin and Michael Regan.

The link between Christianity and American Exceptionalism is clearly established in the dystopian society of Columbia. The player enters Columbia as Booker DeWitt by passing through a candle-lit shrine dedicated to the Prophet Comstock and his deceased wife, the Lady Comstock. The stained glasses feature three Founding Fathers, depicted as traditional Roman Catholic saints, complete with ‘attributes’, virtues and Latin phrases. Washington holds a sword, symbol of strength. Franklin has got a key, symbol of justice. And Jefferson holds on to a scroll, symbol of wisdom. The only possible entrance to the city itself is through a church-like structure, ending in a shallow water-basin. Preacher Witting is ready to baptize everyone wanting to enter in the name of the Prophet and the Three Fathers. Witting’s baptism is by full body emersion, and DeWitt almost gets drown in the process.

When mysteriously ending up in the city, he ventures deeper into the city to an enormous tower, where a strange girl named Elizabeth is kept. Comstock claims she is his daughter, predestinated to become the next leader of Columbia. She is revered as the ‘Lamb of Columbia’ and a ‘miracle child’ by the people of Columbia. Comstock warns the people constantly for the coming of a ‘false prophet’, unquestionably being Brooker DeWitt. When DeWitt managed to free Elizabeth from her prison, the intertwined live lines of Elizabeth, Brooker and Comstock are revealed. The narrative of *Bioshock Infinite* is highly complex, even for the genre it belongs to. The main reason is the existence within the reality of Columbia of parallel universes and the possibility to travel between them by a machine called the Trans Dimensional Device, making it possible for one and the same person to exist more than once in the same reality. DeWitt’s storyline is only fully revealed at the end of the game, but needs to be told chronologically.

Born on the 19th of April 1974 the young Brooker jointed the American 17th Cavalry Regiment at the age of 17. Accused of being of native American birth, he viciously murdered all the Indians he came across, culminating in the (historical) blood bath of Wounded Knee in 1890. Brooker generally became overcome by grief and guilt, until meeting a preacher, baptizing people in the river, by the name of the aforementioned Witting. At this point there are two possible realities to keep in mind. In the first reality Brooker lets himself be baptized, eventually becoming the Prophet Comstock. Convinced his is chosen by God to purify the decadent American society, he seizes hold of Columbia, making it into his own ‘new Eden’ as the true inheritor of the Founding Fathers. Booker/Comstock succeeds in taking control because of the trans dimensional device by which he can predict the future. His frequent travels make him sterile, to the grief of both him and his wife.

In the second reality, that of the Brooker the player controls in *Bioshock- Infinite*, refuses the baptism by Witting, only to fall even deeper in alcoholism and debts. On a night, an agent of Comstock (Brooker in the other dimension) offers to trade Brooker’s only child, called Anna (the later Elizabeth of Columbia) ‘to wipe away the debts.’ Brooker accepts, but regrets its immediately.

Alas, he is too late to stop Comstock from abducting his ‘own daughter’ from another universe. Later on, the unbaptized Brooker is taken through a dimensional port by two repentant scientists (Rosalind and Robert Lutece) who invented the trans dimension device, to reclaim his daughter and to stop Comstock (thus himself). The tattoo ‘AD’ on Brooker’s hand only appears on the second (unbaptized) Brooker, as a memory of Anna Comstock, but also as a reference to the title Elizabeth received in Columbia. ‘AD’ stands for *Agnus Dei*, ‘Lamb of God’ in Latin, with all the liturgical and biblical notions associated to it.

Eventually Brooker succeeds in finding himself as Comstock, only to kill his baptized version by smashing him to a baptismal font and drowning him consecutively. When Elizabeth is finally freed of all bonds he supernatural ability to make ‘tears’ in the walls between the parallel universes, the player learns by her hand his own back story, especially that Brooker and Comstock are one and the same persona. The game ends with Anna/Elizabeth and Brooker standing at the river where Witting is performing his baptisms. Anna’s and Elizabeth’s of countless parallel universes urge Brooker to end Comstock’s nightmare once and for all. Brooker realizes only one solution is definite: he give himself into the hands of his daughters from the parallel universes who drown him on the spot. His last words are: ‘It is finished’, a reference to Christ’s last words on the Cross (Jh. 19,30).

The religious based American exceptionalism of the Comstock’s Columbia is the firm ground on which Ken Levine has created his second dystopian society. Levine explicitly wanted to criticize the American feeling of moral and technological superiority, supposedly given by God himself. Historians like Howard Zinn (1922–2010) have argued that American history isn’t just imperfect, but filled with morally questionable politics and ethics like slavery, civil rights struggles and social welfare issues. America cannot be an exemplar of virtue (Zinn 2003). ‘God’s own country’ is an utopia gone wild into the dystopian horror of Columbia, just like Rapture in the earlier *Bioshock* was Rand’s utopia destroyed in the face of harsh reality. The religious zeal of Puritanism and the ‘faith’ in the moral purity of the Founding Fathers and the American culture for which they stand, did not deliver a new Eden, but a dark and dangerous place full of racial and civil riots, with a distorted hint of Christian morality poured over it to hide the stench. The Christianity of *Bioshock Infinite*’s Columbia is an integral part of Levine’s dystopia, adding to the suppression of the ‘lesser’ people: ‘Papists, Gypsies, Irish, Greeks’, as Comstock at one point summarizes. Comstock’s actual ‘city in the sky’ is a decadent and violent cry from Winthrop’s idealistic ‘city on the hill’.

5. Conclusions

After examining *Bioshock*, *Brink*, *Dishonore* and *Bioshock- Infinite*, some conclusions can be drawn. As said before all the games feature a dystopian scenery and narrative. And all the games feature a form of organized religion, most notably Christianity. The role of that religion within the dystopian setting is however quite different from game to game.

All four games criticize certain political, economical or philosophical notions of ideas by ‘putting them into the real world’ to see what will go wrong. *Bioshock* criticizes Ayn Rand’s laissez faire capitalism by creating a Galt’s Gulch on the bottom of the ocean. *Bioshock- Infinite* criticizes the notion of American exceptionalism including its (semi)religious foundation and symbolism. *Dishonore* criticizes the unholy union between secular and religious powers into an almost unstoppable force, which is only aimed at self perseverance. And *Brink* criticizes both the way modern man treats the environment, and the one dimensional ‘solutions’ provided by some politicians and intellectuals from both ‘the left’ (‘let everyone in’) and ‘the right’ (‘keep everyone out’) for the Western problems with mass emigration.

The dystopian worlds of the game all started as utopian fantasies (with the exception of *Dishonore*, which society never was ideal or ‘utopian’). Rapture (*Bioshock*) started out as an Randian utopia in which ‘the great would not be constrained by the small’. Columbia (*Bioshock Infinite*) started as a prestige project of the American government, later ceased by Comstock who had plans for his own utopia, modeled after (his interpretation) of the ideas of the Founding Fathers and the image of the God sanctioned ‘city on the hill’. And the floating island the Ark (*Brink*) also started from an utopian dream: to life in a climate neutral society in harmony with the environment. All three utopias felt prey to anarchy and chaos. Rapture crumbled because of the anarchy of egoism, and Columbia because of its believed white supremacy. And the Ark is about to sink into the ocean because of the *hubris* of its creators and because of the uncontrollable amounts of refugees.

Except for *Brink*, all the games feature a retro futuristic scenery and narrative. Retro futurism paints an image of our future seen from the past. The technology of *Bioshock*, *Bioshock Infinite* and *Dishonore* is more advanced than that of our own in the beginning of the 21st century, but is suggest to exist in our relative past. *Dishonore* uses whale oil to boost the technology of a society much like that of England in the 19th/20th century. *Bioshock- Infinite* suggests that a certain sort of ‘quantum physics’ has been utilized around the passing of the 19th to the 20th century to built a flying city that even would not be possible to construct nowadays. And in *Bioshock* an underwater world has been built in the sixties of the last century, which – similar to *Infinite* – cannot be built even by today’s standards. Paradoxically this ‘alternative present’ of the retro futuristic genre

suggest an even more real threat to our society than dystopian fantasies taking place in a far and distant future. The dystopia of the four games are not so much a warning of a *future* dark world which will be realized if nothing is done to prevent so, as it is a warning that our *resent* day world has already began to turn into a dystopia.

The Christian religion plays an important role in three of the four discussed dystopian games. *Dishonore* features a non-Christian religion and will be discussed later on. The role of Christianity in *Bioshock*, *Bioshock Infinite* and *Brink* is not unambiguous. In *Bioshock* Christianity is used as a part of the game creator's criticism on the dystopian narrative. Christianity and its inherent altruism is the perfect critique of and antidote for the egoism of Randian hyper capitalism. In *Bioshock Infinite* however, the same Christian tradition (in the Puritan form) is depicted as a part of the dystopian narrative itself. The American exceptionalism of Columbia and its Prophet are expressed in clearly Christian words and symbols. The Christianity of *Bioshock* defends the weak and the poor, while the Christianity of *Bioshock- Infinite* helps to subject the needy to the will of the powerful. In *Brink* Christianity itself is not explicitly used, but by naming the floating island 'the Ark', the creators of the game hint to a surprising link between the theological notion of primordial and ancestral sin, the Biblical story of Noach's Arc and the ecological disaster taking place within the game narrative. Christianity nor supports nor opposes the dystopian narrative of *Brink*, but – at a deeper level – provides ingredients for the narrative itself. In *Dishonore* religion altogether is considered a part of the dystopian narrative of the game.

Religion and dystopia are not an unusually couple, nor in dystopian literature, nor in dystopian videogames. Religion is seen both as the criticaster of the dystopian society and as an integral part of the dystopia. All four games warns our modern day society that institutionalized religion has a Janus face: oppression and liberation, altruism and racism. No one knows to which side our future will fall: to utopia or dystopia. Nor does anyone know to which side Christianity and institutionalized religion will fall: against or in line with the utopia/dystopia. *Bioshock*, *Brink*, *Dishonore* and *Bioshock Infinite* warns us that religion is a human phenomenon not be thought lightly of or to be toyed with. It is capable of releasing and focusing the best mankind has to offer. And at the same time it is able to give birth to the greatest oppression imaginable: the oppression of the mind. Elizabeth is Comtock's lamb, to be sacrificed for our sins. Hopefully it will be otherwise.

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Biography

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Religion as Resource in Digital Games

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Abstract

Religion has long had a place in digital games, particularly in the fantasy role-playing game genre. Prominent games in this genre such as the *Baldur's Gate* series, the *Elder Scrolls* games of *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, and even sci-fi fantasy such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* all address themes of religion through the presence of deities, cults, and/or strict codes of morality. This paper explores the role of religion in these games in relation to the player character, in terms of both narrative involvement and of the game system itself. I argue that, while all these games portray religion as a moving force of change in their respective worlds, the player character's contact with religion is structured such that it becomes primarily a resource—a tool to be used on the path to accumulating power. I then examine some alternative possibilities suggested by these games' designs.

Keywords

role-playing, video games, digital games, single-player, religion, morality, ethics

1. Introduction

Themes of religion have long had a place in digital games, particularly in the fantasy role-playing game (RPG) genre (likely influenced by tabletop RPG predecessors such as *Dungeons & Dragons*). Prominent games in this genre such as the *Baldur's Gate* series, the *Elder Scrolls* games of *Oblivion*, and *Skyrim*, and even sci-fi fantasy such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* all address themes of religion through the presence of deities, cults, and/or strict codes of morality. This paper explores the role of religion in these games in relation to the player, in terms of both narrative involvement and of the game system itself. I argue that, while all these games portray religion as a moving force of change in their respective worlds, the player's contact with religion is

structured such that it becomes primarily a resource—a tool to be used on the path to accumulating power, overcoming challenges, and completing the game’s goals.

2. The Value of Analyzing Religion in Digital Games

In the wake of frequent public media attention to videogame violence, many studies of players’ engagement with videogames focus their attention on the effects of and approaches toward managing such violence (Anderson et al. 2008; Anderson et al. 2010; Bartholow & Anderson 2002; Bartholow, Sestir, & Davis 2005; Farrar, Krcmar, & Nowak 2006; Hartmann & Vorderer 2010; Hartmann, Toz, & Brandon 2010; Klimmt et al. 2006; McCormick 2001; Smith, Lachlan, & Tamborini 2003). Some of these studies (Hartmann, Toz, & Brandon 2010; Klimmt et al. 2006) suggest that players may look to moral codes established in a game’s narrative as justification for virtual violence. The presence of this type of justification for violence, a “narrative-normative justification” especially found in games not involving multiplayer competition (Klimmt et al. 2006, pp. 319-320), suggests that moral and religious themes built into the narrative and gameplay of single-player games may have a significant impact on the play experience. Examining these themes within particular games could explain how such games cue and manipulate player experiences.

Some religious studies scholars have recently noted that videogames offer an especially interesting, if problematic, space to explore themes of religion (Hayse 2010; Wagner 2013). Referencing the work of Salen and Zimmerman (2004) in describing game systems, Wagner (2013) argues “video games... perform their own externalization of the human wish for order, and thus also can work as a kind of religious performance of world-building,” and therefore, “like religions, can posit externalized spaces wherein the rules are discernible and expectations clear” (p. 250). This type of view sees the potential match between systems of religion and systems of videogames, and indeed both have code of a sort—moral codes and digital code. Hayse (2010) has a different emphasis, focusing on how “like religion, videogame worlds can give concrete expression to powerful myths” (p. 71). His interest lies in the ways “videogame play may imitate, simulate, emulate, reflect, or evoke a glimmer of religious enjoyment for those who play them” (p. 75). A thorough examination of religious themes in videogames should consider both of these expressions of religion—religion as a system and religion as a spiritual experience.

Videogames themselves operate along a similar dynamic of expression: the rules of the game and the player’s personal experience of and within those rules. As Salen and Zimmerman (2004) note, “the game designer only *indire!tly* designs the player’s experience, by *dire!tly* designing the rules” (p. 316). As an action, “play is free movement within a more rigid structure” (Salen &

Zimmerman 2004, p. 304). The structures of rules in a game—goals, possible actions, and the resources that allow a player to succeed at those actions—do not entirely determine the experience of play, but they do shape it. The player’s experience is a personal experience of interacting with these rules of the game system and also, I would add, with the representations (visual, audio, etc.) that convey the narrative of the game.

With regards to religion and morality, the particular ways in which videogames structure the player’s experience may cause some concern. Hayse (2010) is wary of games involving “moral victory through the use of coercive force” where resources such as “strength points, gold pieces, and powerful weapons are the ordinary means of grace in videogame salvation” (p. 72). Wagner (2013) sees in both the narrative structure and the rules systems of games an “oversimplification of complex real-life issues” and cautions, “if we want to use video games for good, we must think deliberately about their construction, their use, and their meaning, both implicit and explicit, for religious engagement” (p. 258). Of course, games by necessity involve both some degree of oversimplification and some marshalling of resources towards completion of a goal. Each game accomplishes this task and structures its rules and narrative in a particular way, however. Therefore, addressing these concerns must involve studying how these structures operate within particular games to identify precisely how they shape or contextualize religious and moral experience.

To move research in this area further, studies must go beyond discussion of game theory to engage in detailed analyses, particularly of those games designed primarily to engage players with a fictional world. Wagner’s (2013) work is an important step towards such detailed analysis, yet it is restricted to multiplayer games and/or games explicitly focused on real-world religions. As Klimmt et al. (2006) found, players’ negotiations of moral codes were more likely to take place in single-player games as actions in multiplayer games were viewed and justified as part of a competition (p. 319). Therefore, I argue analyses of single-player games are an integral part of this line of research. While single-player games focused on real-world religions are a useful addition to this research, such games are generally not as commercially successful. The greatest exposure gamers have to religious and moral themes occurs through single-player role-playing games set in fictional worlds, and this is where I situate the present study.

In the following analysis, I will look at the most prominent ways role-playing games structure the player’s encounter with moral codes and/or religious experiences. While I choose to present these beginning with one of the earliest forms, I do not wish to give the impression of a purely teleological progression. Methods similar to all these examples are very much in use today, at times even within the same game. Furthermore, after demonstrating how these moral and religious encounters are primarily structured to serve as a resource to help the player achieve his/her goals, I will offer alternative possibilities suggested by each of these forms.

3. A Brief Primer on Role-Playing Games

Before the analysis, I offer a brief introduction to some common features of the role-playing genre of videogames. All role-playing games involve a primary character whose actions in the game world are controlled by the player, known as the player-character (PC). Numerous other characters, called non-player characters (NPCs), populate the worlds of these games, and NPCs may be enemies, allies, or even companions to the PC. Many games also allow the player to control characters travelling with the PC, but such control is usually not as complete as what the player has over the PC. The central focus of any role-playing game involves the growth and advancement of the PC in terms of the character's power to overcome challenges, the character's position within the fictional world of the game, and the character's progress towards completing some goal or goals. Power to overcome challenges often comes in the form of abilities and powers—special skills or actions gained over the course of playing the game that the player can direct the PC to perform, which are advantageous towards defeating enemies and/or overcoming obstacles. Many of these games also involve the collection of virtual goods and equipment useful in overcoming the game's challenges. PC's may also have certain attributes, characteristics that shape the kinds of actions they can attempt in the world and/or the reactions of NPCs to the character. Finally, the challenges the player must overcome in role-playing games often take place in the context of richly developed story worlds with detailed cultural, religious, and political scenarios represented, and this feature is what makes them particularly useful for my present line of inquiry.

4. The Moral Scale as a Resource

One prominent method of structuring religion and morality in digital role-playing games involves instituting a moral scale. A moral scale in a game system is an attribute that determines where a given character sits on a continuum between values conceived as binary opposites such as good to evil, law-abiding to criminal, violent to peaceful. The game code sets certain choices made by the player to shift the PC one way or the other along a moral scale, and where the PC sits on a scale at any given point is a variable that may determine different situations faced or different responses to attempted actions. In theory, a single game may institute any number of moral scales, but many subsume various smaller binary oppositions into a larger opposition such as good vs. evil. The narrative of a game contextualizes these scales within the moral and/or religious codes of the game

world. Popular role-playing games using moral scales are the *Baldur's Gate* series of games (1998, 2000, 2001) and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003).¹

Baldur's Gate makes a useful case study for teasing out what is and isn't a moral scale in the context of a video game. Both its system and its narrative are drawn from the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D)—a game that, as many digital game histories have noted (Donovan 2010, Barton 2008, King & Borland 2003), was one of the primary influences for computer role-playing games. Narratively, religion in D&D was spread across pantheons of deities of differing moral status, and *Baldur's Gate* draws on this tradition of deities in the most popular D&D world of the time, Faerûn. As a system, tabletop D&D structured morality along two binaries: good vs. evil, but also lawful (that is law-abiding) vs. chaotic (not beholden to laws or perhaps even against them). *Baldur's Gate* replicates the D&D moral alignment system, but only superficially, not as a true moral scale. A player does indeed select an alignment for their character at the beginning of the game from one of nine combinations of the binaries: lawful good, neutral good, chaotic good, lawful neutral, true neutral, chaotic neutral, lawful evil, neutral evil, and chaotic evil. However, aside from determining some powers and options from the beginning of the game, alignment choice has little programmed impact on player actions and player actions have no impact on alignment.² A player whose PC's alignment is Lawful Good could make choices throughout the game to steal, kill, and perform other evil acts without any incremental alignment shifts along the way, while staying Lawful Good. Similarly, a player whose PC's alignment is Chaotic Evil could play the game without engaging in any unlawful behavior, doing good works at every opportunity, and yet remain Chaotic Evil. As the player's actions do not interact with the traditional D&D alignment system throughout the game, alignment should be considered an aesthetic label rather than a true moral scale. *Baldur's Gate* instead uses a single moral scale based on character Reputation, from villainous to heroic. The Reputation scale from 1 (villain) to 20 (heroic) fluctuates throughout the game based on player choices, decreasing with such activities as killing or stealing from innocents and increasing with heroic acts or by making donations to a church. Reputation also impacts the PC's development throughout the game, as well as the reactions of many NPCs. As such, Reputation, and not alignment, is an example of a moral scale in a game system.

The plot of *Baldur's Gate* revolves around religion at every turn, and yet the game is largely structured to limit the player's experience of the game world's religions to interactions centered on personal gain or loss. In brief summary of the story, the PC and several other characters are in fact half-mortal children of the deceased evil deity, Bhaal Lord of Murder, who might yet re-ascend

1 See <http://www.bioware.com/en/games/#previous-games> or long-running fan sites at <http://www.planetbaldursgate.com> and <http://www.starwarsknights.com> for screenshots and further information.

2 Very specific choices made at the end of *Baldur's Gate II Shadows of Amn* and in its expansion *Tomb of Bhaal* impact alignment, but actions throughout the game in general do not.

through his spawn. The villain of the game, Sarevok, is one of the spawn who seeks to bring this ascendance about and the PC seeks to stop Sarevok either to save the world or to take his place. The narrative attempts to impress upon the player some religious/moral conflict via the language of narrator voiceovers and via dialogue with other characters regarding the taint within him/her or the struggle within his/her soul. However, aside from these moments the player's ongoing experiences of the PC's transformation and the engagement with the deity within her/him involve the acquisition of powers as the game progresses depending on where the PC sits on the Reputation scale at points throughout the game. A more heroic Reputation will involve protective powers, while a more villainous Reputation will involve destructive powers. In gameplay, the player's moral struggle is very much related to possessing certain powers and missing out on others and this gain or loss interaction extends throughout the Reputation system. At higher Reputation levels, many NPCs will react more favorably to the character, and merchants might even offer discounts on items sold. At lower reputations, militia may pursue the PC as a fugitive and merchants may refuse service entirely. Churches to various good deities, while spread about the game world, offer little interaction aside from services such as casting curative spells and the opportunity to increase Reputation through a donation. Occasionally, the priests will discuss their deity's beliefs, but even in such discussions the player's dialogue options generally involve asking for information rather than engaging with the religion. Thus, despite having religious elements throughout the plot and the game world, religious and moral choices in *Baldur's Gate* largely function as a resource and are bound up with the PC's (and by extension, the player's) personal advancement more than they are any relationship to a deity or moral code.

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic utilizes a different moral scale, more attuned to the player's choices throughout the game. Set in the Star Wars universe, the religion of this game involves the moral and philosophical codes of two orders: the Jedi and the Sith, roughly representing good and evil, respectively—the Light and Dark sides of a mystical essence known as the Force. The Light and Dark side moral scale is a numbered scale, with the precise numbers in this system hidden from players. The player knows her/his position in the system via a graphical representation of the scale with an arrow marking the PC's place upon it. Unlike the Reputation system of *Baldur's Gate*, this system shifts not only in response to player actions but also at times to a player's chosen dialogue when it reflects a particular moral stance. For example, actions or dialogue that demonstrate disregard for innocent life, a propensity for violence and anger, or giving in to selfishness or emotion would shift the scale towards the Dark side. Actions or dialogue that demonstrate selflessness or going out of one's way to help others would shift the scale towards the Light side. The particular actions that will lead to point swings in one direction or another along this moral scale are not always clear, so this system also necessitates more careful consideration of actions and dialogue than *Baldur's Gate*'s more obvious Reputation system. Along the way,

however, much of the narrative will reveal tenets of both the Jedi and the Sith which form an almost codified religious doctrine that can serve as a guide.

Light and Dark side points also function as one of the most important resources in the game, and this instrumental use has a much greater impact on the play experience than the system's reflection of PC adherence to a moral code. To fully explain the impact of this moral scale, I will first need to discuss the particularities of gameplay in *Knights of the Old Republic*. The most powerful abilities in the game come after the PC has received training in the ways of the Force. After this point, players can choose from a variety of Force powers to learn as they progress through the game. Each of these powers costs points from a separate pool of Force points and the amount of Force points available increases as the PC progresses through the game. While some of the Force powers are neutral, such as the ability enhance a character's speed or push enemy NPCs with the Force, others are tied to the Light or Dark sides. Light side powers include the ability to heal characters or protect them from enemy attacks. Dark side powers include destructive acts such as Force lightning, crushing, or fear. The first way one's Light or Dark side status affects gameplay is by decreasing the cost for using powers of the same alignment as the PC or increasing the cost for using powers of an opposing alignment. The further along the scale a character is towards one extreme or another, the more dramatic these costs or penalties become. Another effect of the PC's alignment being closer to one of the poles of the moral scale is that Force points begin regenerating even during combat, as opposed to only outside of combat as is the norm with more centrist alignments. Finally, at the furthest extremes of the moral scale towards the Light side or the Dark side, the PC receives a very powerful bonus to aid them in combat. By intertwining the moral system of the game so directly to the combat system of the game, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* effectively makes taking a particular moral stance more of a strategic necessity than a personal moral choice. A player facing the end of the game without their PC's alignment on the moral scale close to one extreme or the other will find his/herself at a great disadvantage and may have difficulty overcoming the challenges faced.

5. The Deity Encounter as a Resource

Another method of structuring religion and morality in digital role-playing games is through direct interaction with NPCs representing deities in the game world. True to the key structure of role-playing games, such interactions often fall under the quest format. Deities will have a task that they wish the PC to complete as their agent in the mortal world and these tasks serve as an impetus for the player's future activities in the game. Such interactions might lead directly towards the main

goals of the game, or they might simply be sidequests that add to the overall experience but are not necessary to the game's completion. The interactions might be ongoing with a single represented deity, or the PC might only interact with the deity one or two times during the course of the game. Another mode of interaction is through prayer at altars to a particular deity in the game world, though this mode is often more impersonal. The best example of this method of structuring religion is a series of role-playing games called *The Elder &rolls*, especially *The Elder &rolls IO(Oblivion* (2006) and *The Elder &rolls O(Skyrim* (2011), exemplary for both the variety and frequency of such encounters.³

The central plot of much of *The Elder &rolls* series of games revolves around religion, with the presence of represented deities coming across particularly strong in the last two games of the series. All of these games take place within the same fantasy storyworld populated by two main sets of deific beings: the Aedra and the Daedra. The mythology, which a player may pick up from dialogue and/or from reading books in the game world, states that the Divine beings known as Aedra gave some of their own essence to bring the world into being, while the Daedra refused. Some cultures within the game world still worship the Daedra, but the game presents many (though not all) of the Daedra as evil in nature and demonic in appearance. The plot of *The Elder Scrolls IV(Oblivion* involves one of the Daedra attempting to invade and take over the mortal world, a plan that one of the Divines foils with the aid of the PC. While *The Elder &rolls O(Skyrim* revolves around the apocalyptic return of a powerful dragon that is not quite a deity, religion still plays a central role. The events unfold against a civil war fought over religious persecution after a treaty removes one of deities, Talos—once a man who became a god—from the pantheon and forbids his worship. Shrines to the various deities are spread across the world of both games, including shrines and cults of the Daedra.

Encounters with altars to the Aedra, or Divines, in these two games of *The Elder &rolls* are some of the easiest encounters to access, and also mostly impersonal—providing a quick service for a small investment of time. A player can navigate the PC to any city and find altars to the Divines, and sometimes may stumble upon one outside of a city, particularly in *The Elder &rolls O(&kyrim*. At these shrines, a simple button press on the player's end initiates an immediate action of prayer by the PC, which cures any diseases the PC had and may grant a small bonus to one attribute (differing by deity). I will reiterate that this takes hardly any time; the PC's hands do not fold in prayer, no text of a prayer appears on the screen, no sign of the deity occurs beyond a message about being blessed, and the player may even manage to activate the shrine while directing the PC in motion past it without stopping. A slightly more involved interaction occurs in *The Elder &rolls IO(Oblivion* with Divine Wayshrines in the wilderness. While these also require a short interaction for

3 See <http://www.elderscrolls.com/oblivion/> and <http://www.elderscrolls.com/skyrim> for screenshots, videos, and game information.

the reward of a temporary bonus to the PC, the game bestows a more permanent power usable by the PC if the player make a pilgrimage to all of the Wayshrines. The pilgrimage can be a more involved series of interactions if the player purposefully seeks it out, but one may also accomplish it simply by stumbling across every one of the Wayshrines while going about other business throughout the game. Regardless, these experiences are heavily structured towards value of personal gain for the player towards her/his goals, the removal of afflictions and the gifting of benefits with little personal investment required or even allowed for in the design.

Direct encounters with represented deities in these game worlds involve interaction in the quest format. In *The Elder &rolls* games, such encounters involve Daedra, rather than the Divine Aedra. These encounters often begin when the player stumbles across a Daedric shrine and directs the PC to interact with it. However if the player discovers some object of importance to one of the Daedra that Daedric lord may speak from afar entreating some favor. An example occurs in *The Elder &rolls 0(Skyrim* if the player finds Meridia's stolen beacon before stumbling across her shrine. Regardless, the encounters always involve the game playing audio representing the voice of the Daedra engaging in some conversation and asking for or demanding some favor. Encounters with the Daedra in these games involve the player more than encounters with Divine altars and shrines at every point, taking up more time, providing greater and longer-lasting rewards, and requiring more effort. Regardless of narrative framing, these encounters fall into the typical quest structure, as the player knows about a task and a promised reward for that task upfront and then has a choice regarding whether to pursue it. Rewards for these tasks are inevitably powerful Daedric artifacts, many of which are some of the most useful tools in the game (although there are exceptions). As such encounters are structured from the beginning as quests for a particular reward they function in the game more as a resource than as a form of religious encounter, despite the increased level of interaction involved.

In the above discussions, I do not mean to discount the agency of the player to imaginatively engage with the religious and moral themes of these games. A given player may indeed find some experiences of any of these games' narratives or systems morally or spiritually meaningful, just as any reader of any text might. My argument, however, is that the way systems of these games structure religion and morality steers the experience in a more pragmatic direction—as a resource that players may employ towards achieving the game's goals. The existence of alternative possibilities of interpretation does not negate this argument, which involves the dominant structure of the games that will influence the player's experience regardless of interpretation.

6. Alternative Possibilities

The prominent mode of encounter with religion and/or moral codes is primarily structured as a resource for player advancement, whether that encounter is through established moral scales or through encounters with represented deities. However, the above examples also suggest possibilities to do things differently. In this section, I will further examine examples discussed above to tease out some of these possibilities. I suggest that moral scales might have more potential for religious and/or moral involvement if the game's designers removed them from the game's power/reward structure or hid them from the player, and direct encounters with represented deities would have greater potential if they were ongoing and involved less immediate rewards.

As discussed above, known moral scales that are directly tied to chances of success and failure in games such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* form a more pragmatic than religious or moral structure. To a player who knows a PC's position on the moral scale and how far removed it is from a more advantageous position, the information the game conveys cannot help but also be strategic in nature anytime moral decisions are involved. One solution to this quandary is to place the moral scale behind the scenes of the game's system, with no information about it displayed to the player, while another solution involves creating moral scales that do not impact the success of gameplay. Regarding a hidden moral scale, one might argue the player of an aspiring Jedi facing a tough decision in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* may not consider that their position is awfully low on the Light side meter for this point in the game if they don't know what their position is—they will simply consider the decision itself. Similarly, a player of *Baldur's Gate* considering an evil action that might lead to merchants refusing to deal with his/her characters may not even think about those strategic repercussions if they have no knowledge of how low the PC sits on the Reputation scale, and will thus be less able to mitigate the consequences of the many evil actions taken thus far. On the other hand, if the moral scale for either of these games had no impact on a player's chances for success in the overcoming the game's challenges, they would be left as moral choices either reflecting the player's morality or the morality the player seeks to develop for a particular character.

Limiting the visibility or the impact of moral scales may be useful in preventing the games from structuring these scales as simply another resource, but these strategies prove problematic for structuring religion and morality in digital games. In *Rules of Play: Game Design, Fundamentals*, Salen and Zimmerman argue that, "meaningful play occurs when the relationships between action and outcomes in a game are both *discernable* and *integrated* into the larger context of the game" (2004, p. 34). A game is ultimately about making choices, and if one makes those choices completely blind or if they have no impact on the development of gameplay then their meaning is tenuous at best. Hiding the PC's position on a moral scale from the player may either frustrate the

player or make the player think her/his choices have no meaning. However, structuring such information to simply be invisible to the player does not mean it cannot be accessed in the game code, or via trial and error. Those experienced with the game and/or its code would soon make game guides and walkthroughs available to anyone online, so this strategy would ultimately lead to the same situation described previously, only with more frustrated players. If the moral scales had no impact on gameplay, choices would seem mostly cosmetic. Certainly, some players would relish identifying with one end of the moral scale or the other, but this identification would have little meaning within the game world.

One promising alternative use of moral scales presents itself in *Baldur's Gate*, though the larger structure of the game's systems overshadows it. While the player directs the PC in actions that take her/him up or down the Reputation scale, NPC companions that travel with the player have their own morality. Evil NPCs will express displeasure and eventually leave the group if the PC moves too far towards the heroic end of the scale, while Good NPCs will chastise and eventually leave the group if the PC becomes too much of a villain. In this way, the moral scale manages to significantly alter the player's experience of the game's narrative. Of course, as the game stands some types of NPCs are more rare and more useful for certain group configurations, so the group a PC travels with does have an impact on successful gameplay. If there were less disparity between certain NPCs, however, and if the overall Reputation structure were altered, it would be an excellent example of using moral scales in a manner that goes beyond resource management. Designers could use moral scales to impact the narrative in other ways besides which NPC companions a player has and what their interaction is—this strategy works with any moral scales that impact the player's experience without making the game necessarily easier or more difficult.

Another promising alternative lies in ongoing interactions with represented deities. As discussed above, the key problem with these interactions in terms of moral or religious engagement is their quest/reward structure. In both games of *The Elder Scrolls* discussed above, interactions with deities were limited to receiving a quest, carrying out the task or tasks involved, and then receiving a reward. Despite their focus on an immediate reward, the quests themselves in these games often do an excellent job of having the player replicate the beliefs and demeanor of the deities who assign them. As an example from *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, Mephala, the Daedric prince whose sphere is largely that of plots, lies, and orchestrated strife tasks the player with going into a peaceful community of two traditionally antagonistic races and turning them against each other. In completing this quest, the player embodies the beliefs of Mephala and must engage in plotting, lying, and orchestrating strife. Another quest from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* involves Malacath, the Daedric prince whose sphere involves sworn oaths. In that quest, the player is drawn into the leader of a village reclaim his honor and drive a giant away from a site holy to Malacath, and the leader attempts to go back on his oath, wanting the PC to kill the giant. Either way the quest

plays out, it demonstrates to the player the penalties of oath-breaking either at the hand of the giant or the PC, as the weak leader will either turn on the PC or be killed by the giant after attempting to break his oath. The game contains numerous examples of such Daedric quests, each emphasizing or requiring the player to embody some aspect of the deity involved in the course of its completion. The fact that the quests are a one-time deal for a reward limits their usefulness towards moral or spiritual engagement. However, in theory a game might have a more complex deity with many different aspects and beliefs, and many quests over the course of gameplay might emphasize or enact these beliefs in a more ongoing way, with gradual, long-term rather than short-term rewards and advancement. This offers a potentially powerful alternative to religion functioning as a resource, one that is also reinforced throughout the game.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I argue the importance of studying how videogames structure the player's encounter with religion and morality, particularly within popular single-player role-playing games. Through an analysis involving four popular role-playing games, I identify how these games utilize moral scales and direct encounters with deities to structure such encounters. I argue that the way these modes of encounter are utilized leads to religion/morality functioning as simply another resource directed towards increasing the power of the PC and completing the game's goals. However, I also analyze alternative possibilities found within these modes, and suggest ways to design religious encounters differently by exploiting those possibilities: extending moral scales to impact narrative in ways not tied to use value, and engaging long-term interactions with a deity that enact and embody the deity's beliefs and ideals.

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Biography

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‘When people pray, a god is born... This god is you!’¹

An Introduction to Religion and God in Digital Games.

Markus Wiemker

Jan Wysocki

Abstract

Notions of religion in media are not only found in literature, movies, or music but also in the growing field of digital games. We want to dive into this field by thinking about in what ways religion can be and is used by developers in the narration of a game and what religious motifs we encounter in our research. This essay attempts also to show that cultural studies can make a significant contribution to a better understanding of digital games, by regarding the ‘game-text’ together with its production contexts and acquisition processes. We try to highlight this through an examination of different aspects of religion in games and with a special focus on how the notion of ‘god’ is used in games. We will discuss the genre ‘god games’ that puts the player in a position to influence different layers of a complex game system, like a tribe, a city, or other social or economic systems, etc. There we will ask what this genre has to do with concepts of ‘god’ or gods. Ultimately we will explore games that present more distinct images of gods and show how concepts from different religious contexts, like Greek or Japanese mythology, are used in a game’s narrative.

Keywords

cultural analysis, digital games, religion, god, god games

1 Black & White (Lionhead Studios 2001)

1. Cultural Studies and Digital Games

Since their first appearance as entertainment-products digital games found their way into a broad range of society and inevitably will do so further. Besides other popular media digital games process different kinds of cultural input. They can deal e.g. with historical places and situations, like renaissance Venice, refer to different cultural practices, like farming, sports, or war, or tell adventurous stories of wondrous lands and fantastic characters – or something completely different. Digital games relate also sometimes to another cultural phenomenon or social practice: religion. Religion is a highly disputed field in science and society alike. Among other things because it can be strongly emotionally charged and is sometimes tied to political and social agendas either of marginalised groups that want to gain significance and respect or on the other side powerful actors that want to maintain a certain status quo. No matter how one moves up to this field there will be some kind of trouble. But as researchers this won't stop us from trying to conceptualize religion (and religion in games).

As we see it religion is a phenomenon that firmly resides in the interconnections of different cultural layers. Religion should be seen as a social practice that is dependent on its time, region, actors etc. and not something monolithic and timeless (cf. Smith 1984). Religion is part of culture and its highly intertwined dynamics. We consider cultural studies having the most practical theoretical and methodological toolkit for an approach towards religion. Anglo-American culture research that is based upon the theories and methods in the tradition of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has concentrated on the social role of popular media products for a long time. Games being a part of (popular) media can therefore be also understood through the lens of culture as we will try to argue in this essay.¹ Some features of cultural studies seem to be especially promising compared to the other paradigms of the social sciences and the humanities, as for example linguistics, film studies or educational science. Those approaches often have their own set of tools to dissect an object of research and do so effectively. But since cultural products, such as digital games in our example, originate from special contexts of society and since their creators, e.g. game designers, are influenced by these contexts, like religion, we should strengthen the analysis of games with the research of said environments. So a close examination of a game's production context can shed light on structures, processes and ideologies which influence the development of a game on a conscious or unconscious level. An inquiry about religious topics in

¹ Of course this is not an entirely new project. E.g. the journal *Games and Culture* is especially designed to promote such research. We find Adrienne Shaw's (2010) sharp analysis of how cultural studies and game studies can work together a very remarkable contribution to the field.

games should therefore also ask about the reception of historical phenomena of religious motifs and narratives.

The focus on reception and social contexts should not mean that an analysis of the game itself (and its ‘game-text’) will be made obsolete. On the contrary: Only through a combination of both approaches we can better understand games as cultural products influencing and influenced by their surroundings. In this way we can reveal e.g. models of society presented in the game, intrinsic identification potentials and creative acquisition potentials. But the way the game is eventually adopted by the player can only be made clear by a close examination of its acquisition and the various forms of reception it induces. To sum it up, we can look at three layers that are of importance in our inquiry of digital games as cultural products: the production of games, the game-text, and the acquisition and reception a game generates.

Another advantage of a cultural studies project is that it is dealt with in a multi-disciplinary approach, i.e. theories and methods from other faculties can simply be integrated if they contribute to the epistemological interest. This multi-perspective approach provides the opportunity to analyze games on various levels and gives us a needed flexibility of perspectives. With the help of this toolkit we will ask about the connection of religion and digital games and how historical and social contexts influence a game with its religious motifs and narratives. We will use the already mentioned three-step approach: First we ask about the production of games, then about motifs the games themselves contain, and last about how gamers appropriate the games they play.

Religion covers an immense field of symbols, imageries, narratives, practices etc. We certainly can’t speak about all of those instances but have to focus on a certain topic that illustrates our research. So we take the term ‘god’ as a starting point and we will try to show how this notion, that is in many different circumstances an important part of religious practices, is used in digital games. Of course it is entirely possible to search for a different theme, like religious organizations, architecture, rituals, or something like post-mortality (cf. Ahn 2011), that functions as a marker for religion. But asking about ‘god’ in games already delivers such a huge amount of data that even touching lightly on this topic gives us enough material to begin with. We will start with the special game genre of god games that lets the player assume the powers of a god modelled after certain Christianesque narratives. Afterwards we will explore the notion of ‘god’ more generally by looking at the games *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica 2005) and *Ōkami* (Clover Studios 2006) that both feature gods prominently in their stories asking about how those entities are depicted and how players can possibly relate to those characters.

1.1 Contexts of Production

Because designers are people that (like all of us) reside in their own cultural backgrounds, world views, time, etc. it is necessary to ask about the influences (open and obscured alike) in the creation of games. We see that designers and developers take certain themes and topics and retell them in the form of the game product. But many different circumstances have an influence on the outcome of the product. We can sometimes even go back to the school days of a developer to see what influenced him or her in her work. David Jaffe from SCE Santa Monica for example, developer of *Trojan War* (SCE Santa Monica 2005), a game set in a mythological version of Greece, stated that he was fascinated by Greek mythology and its literature as a school boy but that he also is a fan of Ray Harryhausen's movie *Clash of the Titans* (Davis 1981) (cf. Reed 2005). Jaffe combined his fascinations and finally produced *Trojan War*. Ken Levine, designer of *BioShock* (Irrational Games 2007), said he created his game as the depiction of a possible outcome of novelist Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy (cf. Cowen 2011). Without doubt Levine read Rand's *Fountainhead* (Rand 1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand 1957) and worked through the statements made in those novels transforming the motifs putting them into a new scenario and curving out a new message (cf. Bosman 2013). We can ask about the cultural background of a developer and the practices and ideologies that are often accompanied with it. When somebody is firmly set in e.g. a western context he or she is likely to reproduce or at least somehow treat narratives, symbols, and maybe even strong ideologies etc. from this background. Of course developers with other backgrounds will likely somehow deal with those in the production of games. Atsushi Inaba, producer of *Ōkami*, a game set in mythical Japan, sees himself as being part of the culture which spawned the mythology that is used in the game. He would have liked it if his game would be akin to an ambassador for Japanese culture explaining it to a western audience (cf. Shea 2007). It gets even more interesting when we look at designers who conflate different cultural and/or religious backgrounds. The processes of retelling, remediation, and transformation are something that would be very interesting to describe.

But there are also different other levels of cultural background and practices a researcher would have to pay attention to. There is of course the powerful economical side of production. One often neglected aspect is that when a game is developed and released, economical conditions which are not directly related to the development process may play a significant role – as for example, processes of concentration in an increasingly globalized game industry, commercialization tendencies, as for example the placement of advertisements in games, and the development studios' relationship with the companies responsible for the releases. These basic parameters are decisive factors whether a game will be produced in the end, whether companies monitor player activities, the way games are advertised, and, crucially, which social practices and ideologies influence a game.

One quite evident and also important example for the analysis of production contexts and religion is the yearly Christian Game Developers Conference (CGDC).² Especially contrived to give room for developers that see themselves as devoted Christians this conference shows how religion, design and business are sometimes intertwined. One goal of this conference is to empower Christian developers that feel their convictions and beliefs have rarely space in their work. They talk also about possibilities and difficulties to combine messages of Christian faith with appealing game design (cf. Good 2011).

1.2 Game Text: Ideology, Representation and Rules

These contextual conditions, social practices and ideologies can sometimes be identified in the game itself. There are various approaches to analyze the actual game text, but one prevalent method in cultural studies is ideology criticism (cf. Kellner 1995). The term “ideology“ refers here to a set of convictions, ideas or philosophies claiming to be valid and true and at the same time serving the interests of a social group. Ideology can both influence the level of representation of the game’s characters and society models and the ‘ludic’ structure, i.e. the rules and objectives of a game (on distinguishing representation and ludic structure (cf. Buckingham 2006: 9, 183). The part of criticism would mean that we can discern and name certain ideologies and thoughts found in the game text. Of course it is not the case that we will find strong ideologies in every game we look at. But this sensitivity to ideologies gives us the opportunity to discern other ideology-like patterns that are only found when we try to read beyond the first layer of the game-text. We think e.g. about statements about religion that can be found in a game like *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft 2008). In the beginning sequence of the game we see a statement from the design team emphasizing their multi-ethnic and multi-religious effort making clear that they do not want to criticize any religious movement. But looking deeper into the narrative of this game series one can find various clues that the overall approach of the game towards religion is a quite negative one.³ The story of the series reveals ultimately that motifs on which e.g. the Christian religion is based, like the idea of Eden, are not connected to a higher reality, religious truth, god, etc. but are merely artefacts that stem from a supreme alien civilization that visited the earth and humans long ago.

As an example that lets us discern an ideology quite easily we would like to take the game *Left Behind – Eternal For!es* (Left Behind Games 2006). *Left / ehind* is a game based on a successful Christian fiction book series from Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (2011, c1995). The series describes the final days of earth before the second coming of Christ, and ultimately the battle between the dark forces of Satan and Jesus and his followers. The strategy game adaption lets the

2 Cf. <http://cgdc.org/> [10/11/2013].

3 We would like to thank Gregor Ahn for this remark.

player lead several characters and their followers in their task of converting as many people as possible to Christianity through the use of units like missionaries, healers, or gospel-singing musicians in order to save their souls from evil. The game is built on slowly expanding one's influence and the resource of spiritual power in order to convert neutral or enemy units (like liberal atheists, rock musicians, or soldiers of the Antichrist) by power of faith, spirit, and persuasion. But in the economy of the game violence is also useful to combat units that pursue the player's gospel singers, ministers etc. On the one hand the game penalizes violent behaviour by dropping the player's 'spiritual level'. In fighting against the enemy the player's units lose spiritual power and are more likely to defect to the enemies side. But the player can raise this 'spiritual level' quickly again ordering his units simply to pray, redressing the player's former actions. Here we see that the game rules and the economy of the game differ from its narrative of peaceful conversion to the Christian faith. Observing this disparity we can reveal new layers of meaning that the game contains.

Broadly speaking such a game tries to depict very distinct religious convictions and could be therefore called a 'propaganda game'. But looking at games that seem to have a more neutral stand towards culture and/or religion even there we can sometimes see distinct worldviews. They may be not as obviously religious as the ones in *Left / ehind* but are nevertheless based on specific morals and thoughts that stem from certain ideas or ideologies. As an example we could take *Dragon # e 8* where the game is in itself a more negative display of possible outcomes of a religious conflict gone wrong. Here we see that rules-wise the game slightly favours an approach where the player does not choose to side with one of the religious groups but focuses on the characters that accompany the player on his or her journey (see Bezio 2013). Trying to befriend one's companions and show interest for their personal concerns and not alienating them gives the player the opportunity to use most of them at the end of the game. But even remaining neutral in this religious conflict or trying to de-escalate it can't stop the end of the tensions which always resolve in bloodshed. Here we see the idea that religious conflicts will always escalate and an individual can do nothing against it. Rather one should stick to his friends. This is a statement of an ideological kind invoking a certain behaviour pattern, namely the care for one's friends rather than associating with groups that are in conflict with each other. Here a certain a-political attitude is represented combined with a in some ways fatalistic worldview where the withdrawal out of bigger problems and concentrating on one's immediate sphere is in parts favoured.

Of course those examples are interpretations from a scholarly viewpoint and can hint at other possibilities of (also differing) reception from a player's side. It is not always possible to make conclusions about the integration of game-content and narratives into the daily lives of people who play. The game text might also be only the basis of the acquisition process, but different interpretations and diverse forms of experience or joy remain possible.

1.3 Practices of Appropriation: Experience, Creative Adaptation and Communitisation

The different forms of experiences players have during the acquisition of digital games are a fascinating topic for cultural studies. These experiences are not necessarily triggered by the game text, nor does it have to coincide with the experiences intended by the developer. It fluctuates, depending on the genre and in particular on individual, psychological factors. The type of experience and its intensity might also vary during the game, and obviously a strategy game will be experienced differently than a car racing game. In the end the player's expectations, his or her mood, competence, and taste will be decisive factors for the game experience (cf. amongst others Carr 2006: 52, 177). The evolvment of experience is often initiated by various practices, as the creative adaptation of digital games or the membership in virtual communities, which exceed the actual game process. Players talk in forums about the games they play, how they play, or what they like and dislike about them, or they meet physically or virtually to play together. The stories, characters, settings, etc. that constitute a game are topics of detailed interest for many players that can culminate e.g. in the practice of cosplay, i.e. dressing up as one's favourite character from a game, tv-show, movie etc. interacting with other fans e.g. at conventions or other gatherings (cf. Bonnichsen 2011; Lammerichs 2011). An involvement with games can also be expressed through the practice of 'modding' where players themselves start to use software such as game editors to create new game worlds, objects, characters, scenarios, stories, etc. for their games. This takes the game-text from the constraints of the developers and lets the player, or 'modder', be creative in his or her own way. Even religious symbols can find their way into games in this way. E.g. modders create new objects for *The Sims M* (The Sims Studio 2009) one can download and put into the main game. Among other things people are offering cross necklaces for download that can be worn by the characters in one's game.⁴ Even buildings like churches can be added to the otherwise very 'secular' game.⁵ The practices of 'gaming culture' are of course manifold and do not only encompass territories we would usually consider as sub-culture. People who play and who occupy themselves with different other aspects of games, gaming and everything around it are actually found in the part of our society we like to call 'mainstream culture'. As Shaw argues it is therefore also important to have a 'critical cultural study of games, rather than a study of game culture as such' (Shaw 2010: 404).

Generally speaking the more time players spend with the dissemination of game specific information or the creative adaptation of games, the more probable is it that they are members of virtual computer game communities engaging themselves in individual games, genres or specific aspects of games. These (often temporary) communities range from loose alliances to sophisticated

4 Cf. <http://mysims3blog.blogspot.de/2012/08/cross-necklace-by-irinka.html> [8/12/2013].

5 Cf. <http://www.modthesims.info/d/350589%7C> [8/12/2013].

and well organised fan cultures featuring a fixed set of rules and norms, a common language and history, shared patterns of behaviour and their own institutions (cf. amongst others De Mul 2005: 264). Normally a player will only be accepted in these communities, if he or she can document his or her motivation by the existence of competence and/or knowledge (cf. Newman 2004: 157; Winter 1995; Wiemker 1998). This competence which is usually focused upon the specific social world, serves on the one hand to affirm membership to the scene, on the other hand to define oneself within the ‘game culture’ and to set oneself apart from other members. Depending on the degree of involvement various player types are distinguished. The level of the ‘newbie’ is first and foremost characterized by curiosity; he or she hardly knows the specialized culture and does not spend a lot of time in this culture. If his or her interest increases and he or she engages more intensely in this hobby, he or she will become a ‘tourist’. The status of a ‘freak’⁶ can only be achieved if competence and knowledge are large enough and a lasting stabilization sets in (cf. Winter 1995). Needless to say, these fan activities consume a considerable amount of time; nevertheless membership of these communities is very satisfying for many players, since they can gain social prestige, self-affirmation and a wide range of social contacts there. Besides, most of the virtual cultures provide different kinds of assets. For example, players can benefit from the collective or specialized knowledge of the community (knowledge assets), fall back upon a large, sophisticated network (network assets) and benefit from the solidarity within the community (social assets). In doing so, virtual communities sometimes become so significant to players that they seek and (apparently also) find moral support in them. This goes to show that even though these communities exist merely virtually, ‘real’ social functions are assumed. These new forms of (media) ‘communitisation’ (Weber 1922) refute the widespread claim that the mediatization of contemporary life inevitably leads to atomization and dissolution of social relationships.⁷ Instead, these communities are the prototype of a new form of collectivity, a collectivity organizing itself, supporting socialization, and providing the opportunity of looking deeply into the construction of one’s own identity.⁸ For an in depth discussion of the topic of gamer communities, especially in MMORPGs, we recommend Nick Yee’s Daedalus Project.⁹

We would also like to ask in a more normative way, whether players can learn something ‘positive’ by playing and whether playing supports the acquisition of media literacy. If we as

6 We use ‘newbie’, ‘tourist’, and ‘freak’ as very broad categories that stem partly from the discussed field of gamer culture but don’t have any claim on universality. There exist of course very different terms to describe one’s status in a gaming community depending strongly on the community and the special language its members use.

7 According to Max Weber, the term ‘communitisations’ refers to a social relationship which is based upon its members’ subjective (affectionate or traditional) feeling of belonging together.

8 The vast ongoing popularity of (fantasy) online role playing games like *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999) or *6 orld of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) also seems to suggest an increased interest in virtual communities.

9 Cf. http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway_intro.html [07/12/2013].

scholars try to see through different layers and narratives of games, shouldn't it be desirable for gamers to gain the ability to use media and games in a critical fashion? According to Gee (2006) learning is always a part of the game, as occupation with digital games initiates critical learning processes, which allow the player to experience the world in a new way, to get to know new communities with various social practices and to acquire resources for future learning and problem solving (cf. Gee 2006: 228, 238). 'When people learn to play video games, they are learning a new *literac*.' (Gee 2006: 229). Thus players acquire a new form of media competence which enables them to discern media critically, to use them in a selective way and to produce media products themselves. They acquire the ability to grasp media social processes in an analytical way according to ethical and socially responsible aspects and to use them in a reflexive way for their own actions. In order to do so, they use their knowledge of the correlations in the media system and they learn to use technical equipment for receptive and interactive purposes, as well as for producing innovative and creative media concepts (cf. Mikos 2004). It is the autonomous creation of media products, such as the modification and adaptation of games, which is a first step to the acquisition of media competence.

2 Religion in Digital Games

2.1 The Term 'Religion'

This paper uses a multi-layered understanding of the term 'religion'. At first we want to point out that religion was and sometimes still is often talked about in too normative and too undifferentiated ways. We can see substantialistic and one-dimensional definitions understanding religion and religions for instance solely connected with transcendental powers and faith. Having in mind several decades of critical and differentiated analysis from scholars of the study of religions (cf. Smith 1982) we have to acknowledge that a Christocentric viewpoint on religion, saying that it must have something to do with god and with structures we encounter in Christianity (faith, the transcendental, holy writings etc.), doesn't get us very far in our understanding of religion (cf. Ahn 1997). In this case we would act more as theologians forcing western/Christian concepts onto every kind of religious dynamic we try to describe. Instead we will start with the general observation that 'religion' is a discursive element in culture (cf. Kippenberg 1983, McCutcheon 2007) and can be filled with an overwhelming amount of meaning (cf. Nehring 2005, on the notion of religion and violence) by different actors.

Our basic task of researching digital games therefore should be threefold: First to find clear references of religion in games. When we see that certain symbols and concepts from known religious contexts (Hinduistic, Jewish, Shintō etc.) appear in a game we can discern those references and the objects they refer to. Second we can trace back the lines of reception and point out their place of origin. Religious symbols in games don't appear out of nothing – game designers take them from other sources like literature, cinema, other games, and of course the vast cultural-traditional background every one of us has. In this case we also ask about the processes of transformation or even remediation (cf. Bolter, Grusin 2000) of the source-material. And finally we can ask about the influence such narratives, symbols etc. have on their recipients, the gamers and the society at large.

2.2 Three Modes of Religion Used in Games

Combing through our material of games that feature aspects of religions and religion we can identify at least three ways how religion is used in digital games:

Religious issues can work as a background to heighten the authenticity or to create a special atmosphere of a game, but they have seldom a traceable effect in the gameplay itself or its overall narrative. A good example for this is the game *Resistance 3 Fall of Man* (Insomniac Game 2006), in which the designers chose the Manchester Cathedral as one environment for this first-person shooter with the goal to prevent an alien-like invasion of Britain. The cathedral had the function of delivering an interesting place of combat and exploration and to show the player something that he or she maybe can recognize as a special architectural object that is tied to the history of Britain.¹⁰ This adaption of the historical building stands for the place or the country the player has to defend in the game and for the way of living that the alien creatures try to destroy.¹¹ Such symbols or backgrounds are often left without further contextualization by the game or the developers and function more as placeholders that suggest authenticity and atmosphere.

The second way to use religion is as a relevant game story issue. This is not to say that a player must have specific knowledge of religion or specific religions to play and beat the game but will certainly be confronted with this subject matter while he or she plays. We want to share some

10 Nevertheless there was a big discussion after the publication of the game. Because the Church of England threatened legal action against Sony Computer Entertainment Europe for featuring Manchester Cathedral in the game without permission. 'Officials described the use of the building as "sick" and sacrilegious and stated Sony did not ask for permission to use the cathedral. They have demanded an apology and the removal of the game from shop shelves - otherwise legal action will be considered' (cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resistance:_Fall_of_Man [10/11/2013]). Later Sony issued an unreserved apology to Manchester Cathedral by publishing it in the Manchester Evening News (cf. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/manchester/6276460.stm> [10/11/2013]).

11 *Resistance's* story is built on the premise that not the Nazis but aliens from outer space try to dominate Europe in WWII. The game's narrative relies heavily on the notion of fighting an ultimate evil while defending one's own home country and its values.

quick examples: In *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2008) you are told about the time of the crusades, the power relations in Jerusalem and the different religious groups that are in conflict with each other. In *Dragon Age* (BioWare 2011) a big part of the story and the environment the characters are involved in shows a socio-political conflict between two (fictional) religious groups, the Chantry and the Qunari (cf. Bezio 2013). The player often has to decide how he or she wants to relate to those groups. In *Prince of Persia* (Ubisoft 2008) the player has to revive an oriental-like desert setting with the power of the god Ormazd and fight against dark and polluting shades that are servants of the god Ahriman, both entities being taken from Zoroastrianism. The *God of War* series (SCE Studios Santa Monica 2005) puts the player in the position of Kratos, a rebellious son of Zeus who wants to dethrone his father and take revenge on the gods of Olympus for the loss of his mortal family. *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) uses an evangelical prophet-figure as nemesis for the player and shows different depictions of his prophetic religion that is tied to American Exceptionalism (cf. Bosmann 2013). *Age of Mythology* (Ensemble Studios 2002) delivers a broad range of religious narratives giving the player the opportunity to use the power of Greek, Egyptian, and Nordic gods and send mythological figures into battle. In most of these cases the story relies on religious topics for its congruity. This list could be continued for a surprisingly long time and shows how many religious images are used for stories, characters, and environments in digital games.

The third way of the interplay between religion and games is the dominant description of religious issues with the aim to inform, influence, or convince players about beliefs, doctrines, practices etc. of certain religions and to deliver the possibility for gamers with a certain religious background to find their own beliefs portrayed in a game. These games are produced by developers that are somehow affiliated to religious groups or as commissioned work. The most popular example for the use of a game as a kind of 'propaganda' or as a medium to deliver a specific ideology associated with religion is the game *Left Behind 3: Eternal Forces* that we discussed before. There are also examples of Christian games that teach the bible or show biblical characters like Moses or Noah in a way that can be interpreted as intentionally 'religiously didactic'. Examples would be *Bible Adventures* (Wisdom Tree 1991) or *The Story of Noah's Ark* (Southpeak Games 2010). This type of games is not exclusively made for the purpose of imparting Christian messages. There exist also games developed by teams with e.g. Arab and Muslim backgrounds that use a political and religious language and imaginary to convey certain Muslim contents. One (quite militaristic) example is *Al-Quwwa al-Khasa* (Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau 2003), translated as *Special Force*, where the player fights as a member of Hezbollah during the occupation of Southern Lebanon by Israel (cf. Šisler 2006). Here religion plays an important part in the game's message, which is to depict heroic Muslim resistance against 'Zionist' forces as legitimate in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Most games of this type have explicit messages tied to specific religions, their followers and their practices and worldviews. On one side certain religious

practices are displayed as positive as well as the player's presumed affiliation with them. We see in these instances that rather than creating a game for unknowing people that have to be informed about doctrines, practices, worldviews etc. these games seem to deliver content for people already somehow in touch with parts of the depicted religion. We can think about those games also as a kind of affirmation for players with a certain religious and cultural background.

3 God(s) in Digital Games

Having hypothesized about the more general shapes that religion can take in digital games we want to focus our attention on a more specific example of inquiry: 'god games'. Treating this genre of games can show us the usefulness of a cultural studies approach in action. Having in mind our categorization of religion in games the following questions seem to be important to understand the cultural logic of god games: What component of such games is related to the term 'god' and why are they called 'god games'? How are known religions related to these games and does this kind of games promote special kinds of religious activity? Which (religious) norms, values, beliefs, ideologies and worldviews are suggested and supported in god games? After a short description of this game genre and its roots we will discuss the connection between such games and religion.

3.1 A Short History of God Games

In 1989 small British software entrepreneurship Bullfrog Productions with its lead developer Peter Molyneux published a game called *Populous*. The premise was simple: Hovering over a landmass with hills, lakes, valleys, shores and the like the player can flatten the geography and thus create habitable space for a number of little people dressed in blue clothing. They run around and begin to build tents, huts etc. that automatically develop into bigger buildings as soon more flat space is available for them. After a while mighty dwellings like forts and castles will dot the landscape with an increasing amount of inhabitants. But not all is so peaceful and prosperous in this land. Sooner or later the player and his population stumble upon other people from another 'team' played by the computer and dressed in red. In most cases the player has to start a fight with this enemy in order to succeed on his mission objectives (capture a certain point of the map etc). Using his special powers not only he can level the land and make space for his people, he has also the ability to throw fireballs from the sky, let the water rise, create inhabitable swamps, let volcanoes burst out, summon earthquakes and tornados and let different other plagues lay waste to the land and to his enemies. *Populous* quickly became known as the first installment in the genre of god games.

One interesting part is that Molyneux and his co-workers say they didn't think of their creation as something that had to do with gods or similar otherworldly beings:

'We didn't talk about gods for a second – it really didn't occur to us. We said: let's have a red team, and a blue team, and they're both trying to expand to fill the most territory.'

'Without showing someone, or better still, letting them play *Populous*, we didn't really know how best to explain it. At no point during development did we talk about you being a god, or it being a 'god game' – it just didn't occur to us. The person who suggested that was a journalist called Bob Wade. He was the first games journalist to come and see it.' (Edge Staff 2012: 2).

So it is likely that Wade and British computer magazine ACE in fact were the first instances to call Molyneux's program a god game. In the end it seems that this idea was picked up by the publisher and the game was specifically promoted as having something to do with God, gods or entities the like. The game-box of *Populous* for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) carries following claim:

'You are a Supreme Being. The forces of nature are at your command. The earth rumbles at your fingertips (...). Your faithful worshippers depend on you to provide them with fertile land (...). But evil scours the land while you toil. Move quickly and lead your following to face the heart of darkness' (*Populous* 1990).

Here even a conflict between Good and Evil is invoked to set the stage for the game, the player depicted as representing the forces of light fighting against darkness. The game's successor *Populous II: Trials of the Olympian Gods* (Bullfrog 1991) developed the divine theme further letting the player feature a son of Zeus battling the Homeric pantheon with a very similar game mechanic of land-flattening and spell-hurling.

From there on other games with similar *Populous*-like elements were published and subsequently classified as god games. They have several narrative and gameplay elements in common: The scope of the narration lets the player rule over a tribe or larger group of people that are in need of guidance and protection or which the player lets loose on his enemy. Aesthetic elements like the isometrical perspective from which the player views the game world point also to the scope of the game at the same time portraying somehow a popular Christianesque image of a god (or *the* God) who resides high above in the sky looking down on us humans and guiding our mortal ways. Handling various powers to manipulate the scenery and destroy one's enemies are also important markers for the godly status the player holds. Several examples that have such qualities in common would be *Powermonger* (Bullfrog 1990), *#!tRaiser* (Quintet 1990), *Mega Lo Mania* (1991 Sensible Software) / *la!- & White* (2000 Lionhead), *rom'ust* (Ubisoft 2011) and the upcoming *Godus* (22Cans 2014).

3.2 Pictures of God

If players refer to a game as a god game they have to implicitly formulate what they think a god is and what powers or agency he, she, or it has. Some concepts that the majority of so called god games have in common are of course the mentioning of ‘god’ and other mighty beings as narrative markers, the special bird’s-eye perspective, and the power of influence.

First let us look at the player’s viewing perspective: As we stated earlier the bird’s-eye view refers to a popular conception of God or a god as a mighty being that resides in the sky or heaven and looks down on the world. This idea seems to be influenced by popularized Christian beliefs that paint the Heavenly Father as a being associated with a cloudy realm that is literally above the heads of humans. His role as a guarding instance that influences human life on a more direct or indirect level is presented throughout Christian history in of course often very differing nuances but has become nowadays a popular conception if one speaks of the Christian God. In *Populous* and *From Dust* an additional picture of godly powers is painted: The godlike or god-incorporating player can manipulate the terrain of the game world. This can be tied to conceptions about a world-creating god as he is depicted in the book of Genesis where he handles the raw material of the universe. The player can re-enact this powers in *Populous* and *From Dust* to a certain extend by raising the water, leveling the hills and mountains or creating new ones out of flat fields. The more apocalyptic abilities of a Christian image of God are shown through *Populous*’ other spells like the fireball and summoning of earthquakes and volcanoes, storms and swamps etc. Here the angry face of the Christian God is made available to the player as a feature in gameplay. ‘Armageddon’, the ultimate spell in *Populous*, even refers directly to certain Christian believes. After casting it every single inhabitant of the game world is summoned to a point at the map where the two teams of red and blue fight until only one of them survives.

In *Blade of the Gods* the theme of being an influencing god is also developed. The player has to take care of settlements on the game map full of his worshippers. To convert new villages and its inhabitants into believing in him or her the player can perform certain miraculous actions. He or she can pick up large boulders from the game map and toss them over the heads of people inspiring fear and fascination. This can also be accomplished by sending a mighty creature to the other settlement and let it eat villagers in order to make them subservient. Then again the godly player can give wood or food being a helpful and providing deity to inspire love and admiration in his or hers followers-to-be. Here the Christian-like notion of an angry and punishing, or a benevolent and loving god are present. It is no surprise that such elements from a western Christian cultural background find their way into cultural products such as games and are transformed in the developing process. So also the concept of ‘god’ in those *Populous*-like games is most likely a western/Christian one.

3.3 Inconsistencies in the Usage of the Term

This analysis concerning popular images of a Christian God is true for some god games that are built on the tradition of *Populous* and that make definite statements about gods or feature such elements in the narrative. But looking at other games that are considered examples of this genre one won't find it as easy to link together religious images and gameplay aspects.

We have to consider that games of this genre are often classified as such not only if the theme and narration has something to do with gods and otherworldly beings or the player is even considered a god that resides over his flock, like some of the examples above. Rather games are sometimes referred to as god games if they put the player into a position from where he manages a game system that in everyday circumstances would not be possible to be controlled by one single person. For the purpose of a brief glimpse into this discourse about what is considered a god game we will refer to the Wikipedia page 'Chronology of video god games'.¹² Here we see entries like *Sid Meier's Civilization* (MicroProse 1991) where the player is in full control over an entire nation, or *Startopia* (Mucky Foot Productions 2006) in which one has to manage a space station filled with alien inhabitants. We see also *Dungeon Keeper* (Bullfrog Productions 1997) in which one plays a dark master caring for demons and other usually rather unfriendly creatures battling heroes or other factions of dungeon dwellers.

We stand before the difficulty to make sense of this broad and often seemingly inconsistent definition of god games. The themes and narratives in these shortly presented games differ greatly and often don't feature gods and the like. So it seems that a game can be labeled by players, game critics etc. as a god game if it lets you govern or influence game systems on a more or less large scale. But what are the other characteristics of these so called god games that make players, commentators and other people involved in the discussion categorize them as such? We don't want to dismiss this categorization as merely false. Instead we want to ask what gamers, commentators etc. could have in mind when they say a game is a god game? What does 'god' mean then for those players?

3.4 What Does it Mean to Play (as a) God?

We began analyzing the Christianesque image-worlds of certain god games. There we found images and themes that point towards somehow popular conceptions of a biblical god. But when we see titles like *The Sims* or *Dungeon Keeper* being categorized as god games we have to think further. Those titles do not mention God or gods at all. They lack the imageries we described earlier and do

12 Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronology_of_god_video_games [10/11/2013].

not cause us to link them directly to parts of religious history in which the concept of god would be covered. Why are they sometimes called god games nevertheless? Or even more importantly, what does it imply for the term ‘god’ when such games are called god games?

In occupying ourselves with these games we see some gameplay concepts that we talked about before, namely the big perspective the player gets from the game-world hovering above it and the power to influence certain elements in said world. In *The Sims* the player camera hovers above one’s house and his inhabitants, his Sims. The player is looking from above into his dollhouse of some sorts commanding his Sims to eat, shower, learn, exercise, work, socialize, tend for their children, and all in all lead an everyday western suburban life. So where does ‘god’ come into play here? We can assume that people saying this is a god game see the player’s actions as comparable to those a god or the God would also be able to perform. In this perception a god has a strong or even ultimate power over the lives of people. He commands them in every single daily activity and is a sort of puppet master with almost ultimate control over the ones he is in charge of. The god of *The Sims*, the player, is nearly almighty when it comes to his influence over the characters running around the house.

In *Dungeon Aeeper* we see a different narrative yet in certain ways similar image. There the player has to command little demons to tunnel through a cave-like underground environment building rooms for other demons, chicken farms, torture chambers, hallways with traps that keep intruders away etc. The player has to care for an infrastructure in his dungeon so that enough of his underlings are provided with food and shelter keeping the morale up in order to guard one’s own lair and invade other’s lairs becoming the ultimate lord of the subterranean realm. Nowhere is mentioned you play a god but *Dungeon Aeeper* is being called a god game. The themes of power and influence are pretty clear here even if the player does not have such a fundamental control over nearly every aspect of the non-player characters as in *The Sims*.

For now those two examples have to suffice in order to extract the themes of control, power, influence and the like from so called god games. We think those topics are at the core of the categorization of this genre and point towards a concept of a controlling, manipulating image of god. But this image has also a more playful side when we consider e.g. *The Sims*’ dollhouse qualities. The power bestowed by the game unto the player to control NPCs or whole social structures reminds us of children playing with dolls or in a sandbox, reigning supreme and enforcing their will onto their own creations and worlds. We think that these images being present in god games point at a certain articulation or maybe even transformation of a more general meaning of ‘god’. When somebody says ‘god’ in the context of god games he or she will likely refer to ideas of power, influence, control, all-seeing, expression of one’s own will etc. but also care, nurture, and watching over one’s subjects. These are placed not only in an environment of one individual but often in a bigger picture where these topics have to be applied to a greater structure.

This interpretation will have to be tested and refined by asking gamers what they think god games are and what ‘god’ means in this context and for them personally. Here an interesting field of research opens up in which we could try to discern how nowadays ‘god’ is filled with meaning. What did people mean in the past when they talked about ‘god’ and what do they mean by it now? How are digital games involved in the tradition and transformation of the concept of god? As stated before we can only point at certain potentials of meaning that seem likely and plausible for us. In order to work within a cultural studies approach we will have to consider the viewpoints of social actors, gamers, game commentators, designers, etc. to paint a bigger picture of our inquiry. Our observation and interpretation within and of the game-text can serve as a starting point.

3.5 Other Games that Feature Gods

Looking at the vast gaming material we see the notion of ‘god’ not only in god games. There exists a great deal of games that picture beings that are specifically described as gods in the game and its textual and verbal statements. Then again we can recognise beings or characters in a game as having attributes that remind us of godly beings in the history of religions of known or ‘established’ religions. For instance the name of the Hindu god Shiva appears in several games of the popular Japanese *Final Fantasy* series. There she (rather than ‘he’ like in Hindu traditions) is depicted as a mighty being associated with ice and cold some player characters can summon to cast powerful spells on one’s enemy. This being isn’t called a god in the games (rather ‘Esper’ in *Final Fantasy I*, ‘Guardian Force’ in *Final Fantasy III*, ‘Eidolon’ in *Final Fantasy IV*) but clearly carries the name of the specific Hindu god. Such connections between known religious entities and their usage in games are manifold. We would like to describe two games as examples of this connection.

In the *God of War* series the player has to face different gods from Greek Homeric mythology in a violent story about revenge. The player controls the Spartan warrior Kratos who has to kill Ares the god of war by an order of Athena the goddess of wisdom. After defeating Ares Kratos ascends to the throne of the god of war but is soon betrayed by Zeus who wants to diminish Kratos powers. In a rage Kratos battles through the whole pantheon killing god after god and inciting a rebellion of the Titans to dethrone Zeus. The story focuses on Kratos’ feelings of being only a plaything of the gods and the deception of Ares who tricked Kratos into killing his own family. We see here a known story of the fight between small mortals and mighty gods and the rebellion against powers that control one’s life. The fight between children and their parents is also a prominent theme here. Wishing to use a cultural studies approach we can e.g. ask about the origin of the story, the characters, and images in the game from the developer’s side. David Jaffe, Game Director of SCE Santa Monica, spoke in interviews about his ambition to make a game that is a mixture of Heavy Metal Magazine and the movie *Clash of the Titans* by Ray Harryhausen. But Jaffe also pointed out

that even as a kid he was interested in Greek mythology and was familiar with literature about it (cf. Reed 2013). So we see a first starting point to investigate further on the reception history of motifs in *God of War* – here pop culture merges with established views on history of religions. The second step would be a detailed game analysis and the decryption and naming of motifs from the history of religions, e.g. characters, like the Greek gods, the sceneries, like Athens or the river Styx, the objects, like Pandora's Box or the statues of Athena, and different parts of the whole game story. These findings would be tied to specific points of already known religious (and other) history. Besides that we can also point out specificities in the game material. For instance how the gods in *God of War* are presented and how oneself as a player is connected to them. In this example we see quite the negative image of the term 'god': Kratos' family is taken by a ruse of Ares, Athena promises Kratos that his nightmares of slaughtering his own family would end but in finishing the game it turns out that Kratos (and presumably the player) hoped in vain. The gods are depicted as manipulating and use the mortal Kratos only as a means for their sibling war. Being utterly disappointed and with his hopes crushed the Spartan casts himself from Mount Olympus into the sea. But he is not even allowed to die because Athena 'saves' him and makes him successor of Ares.

Another example would be the Japanese action-adventure game *Ōkami* (Clover Studios 2006) where the player incorporates the sun goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami (cf. Ashkenazi 2003). A whole plethora of characters, symbols, and stories from the old Japanese myth-compilations *Nihonshoki/Nihongi* (translation by Aston 1985) and *Kojiki* (translation by Chamberlain 1986)¹³ were used in constructing *Ōkami*'s narrative landscape. There among plenty other stories the sun goddess is characterized and also the battle told of her brother, the god Susano-wo, with the eight-headed serpent Yamato-no-orochi. But in the game Amaterasu is not depicted as a woman but rather as a white wolf. The story revolves around her who has to cleanse mythical Nippon (Japan) from a demonic taint that came over the inhabitants and the land when an old seal was broken that held the evil dragon Orochi at bay. Ripped of her full godly powers she also has to recover her abilities step by step in order to face the demons polluting the land. When Amaterasu encounters spirits of the forest or other (lesser) gods that hide from the pollution she is often revered as 'mother of all things'. The other divine beings bow to her and praise her doings. But in the eyes of the normal sake (rice-wine) brewer or town guard the goddess appears only as a big white wolf which is sometimes just referred to as 'doggy' or 'puppy'. But wherever she walks and runs flowers blossom in her trail and the animals of the land react joyfully to her offerings of food. Step by step she heals the nature of Nippon that changes colours from gray and white to hues of green and plants grow instantly on the revived spots of earth. Amaterasu is depicted as a powerful but far from almighty

13 The *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* are both myth-compilations that date back as far as to the early 8th century (cf. Isomae 2010). Both feature among other things stories about the creation of Japan, the gods (like e.g. Amaterasu-ōmikami) and other mythical heroes.

deity that is strongly connected with nature and purity. But her representation is not very spectacular or awe inspiring. The normal people of Nippon don't regard the player's character as a heavenly being, only other gods and characters that have a sense for the supernatural (like a certain Buddhist priest that one can encounter in different locations) see through Amaterasu's 'disguise'. But being a wolf she does not behave like one would expect it from a goddess. She growls and barks when danger is ahead and expresses joy in a similar animal-like manner. Even her companion Issun jokingly calls the goddess 'Ammy' or 'furball'. Risking a comparison with "*God of War* we would say that the image of god painted by *Ōkami* is a very positive one. Here gods help to restore peace, they act in unison with nature, they serve the people without asking for much (only for some prayers and faith) and in most situations they don't have the gravitas and seriousness of the gods in *God of War*. Then again we can compare the images of the gods in both games with the image we tried to extract from titles from the god games genre. In contrast to the broader idea of a non-personal and all-seeing god Athena, Ares and Amaterasu are depicted as mighty beings with powers that go beyond those of mortals but are not totally removed from the constraints of a physical world. They are personalized characters that remind us of humans (or at least have characteristics similar to humans like Amaterasu). Here we can of course encounter themes of control and influence too, but they are presented in a different manner, more as elements of the story. Amaterasu for example can't command the people of Nippon to do her biddings. Instead she uses her abilities to heal the land step by step and has only influence on the lives of the people on a very basic level. She is more an unobtrusive helpful entity than a controlling godly empress.

This (of course very short) analysis opens up other interesting questions. We could ask why gods are presented so sympathetically in *Ōkami*, which is a product of Japanese developer studio Clover Studios, and why the Greek gods of "*God of War* are so unlikable and painted as adversaries not only for the player character Kratos but for humankind in general. Has the cultural background of both developer teams something to do with their approach on the notion of god and gods?

Working in a sense of cultural studies we can further ask how players deal with those religious symbols, images, stories etc. and how they appropriate those narratives or how they transform them and carry them on. It is necessary to interview players and e.g. to sift through discussion in forums in order to get a first glimpse of what players think of those religious narratives and whether they would label such motifs religious. Something that in the eye of a scholarly beholder can be conceptualized as having something to do with religion doesn't have to be seen as such by other social actors. Most interesting are the dynamics and changes that occur in the understanding of certain narratives. If we look at the depiction of god and gods in games it is mostly certain that those entities are modelled differently than, let's say, through books or movies in the past. Still being very important for the religious practice of millions of people gods aren't a thing from the past – far from it. They reside firmly in the everyday religious life of many Hindu

devotees, Christian churchgoers, Shinto-shrine visitors, etc. Taking gods and making them characters of digital games could have an impact on how those gods are treated or looked at in general. All those questions hopefully will be discussed more in depth in the future by studies that specifically aim at revealing the connection between gods in games and the players' attitudes towards them.

4 Summary & Outlook

We wanted to show how the lens of cultural studies can be applied to the field of games and religion. We saw that it is necessary to examine digital games not only as artifacts but also look at their contexts of production and their appropriation. Religion is a theme explored in and through various digital games as it has been and is still being explored in various other cultural products like literature, movies, music, everyday objects, etc. Our ambition was to make a first quick survey of the field of religion and digital games and to bring a bit of order into it. We proposed three broad categories or ways in which religion and religious symbols, narratives, and the like are often used in games. Such symbols can appear either as atmospheric placeholders that are mostly devoid of their initial (religious and cultural) meaning. Then again we see instances where religious narratives play more important roles in a game's story and are put into a context in the narrative and world of the game. Often set pieces from known religious systems are used to invoke authenticity. Those set pieces also often undergo a certain transformation in the process of adaption and remediation. In a third way we see religious belief systems, ideologies, and practices depicted by designers who themselves have a certain religious affiliation. In these cases religious statements are either used to promote the worldviews of certain religious actors or to condemn other ones (as we saw in the example of *Al-Quwwa al-Khasa*).

As an example of a religious dynamic we looked at the appearance of the idea of 'god' in games. We saw that gods represent themes in various digital games. You can play as one, battle them, pray to them, talk about them, etc. Some games give you the opportunity to act as a Christianesque godly supervisor looking down from above the game world influencing devotees and smashing your foes with righteous wrath. This biblical image is sometimes used in the genre of so called 'god games'. But interestingly the idea of playing god does not have to be supported by Judeo-Christian markers and symbols in a game in order to be called a 'god game' in the broader gaming discourse. In a list of cases it suffices that a player can have control over a bigger game system, like a nation or a family, in order to invoke associations with the term 'god'. We see that in a certain way the idea of 'god' does not have to be related to classical markers from religious

history. In the described instances the notion of ‘god’ is filled with thoughts about power, influence, playing with one’s environment, etc. Then again other games set the player in the position of a god that is powerful but doesn’t muster the near omnipotent qualities of the idea of the biblical god. The images of gods used in digital games are often taken from sources like (religious) literature, movies, and various other media that preserve tales or bigger narratives of (religious) history. It would be most interesting to see how such depictions of gods in games can shift the overall image people in a society have about the term ‘god’. Digital games play such an important role in the lives of many adolescents and adults. Therefore it would be very interesting to ask how those people will be affected by religion presented in games. How do they react to religion and how will they use it for their own means? What sense do gamers old and young make from religion when they stumble upon it? Actor-oriented studies have to be conducted to delve deeper into this possible religious dynamic.

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The Lord is My Shepard

Confronting Religion in the *Mass Effect* Trilogy

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Abstract

Many science-fiction universes present a “perfected” secular future where technological advances have replaced religion. In this context, characters ascribing to religious beliefs are seen as close-minded and flawed. While the same may be said of the *Mass Effect* video game universe, in this paper we argue that “religion” is actually an abstract character that is always present and active, largely introduced through non-player characters and the structure of the gameplay. Through these narrative devices, the player is subtly immersed in a religious conversation that they are likely not even aware is taking place, guiding them and shaping their perspectives on religion. However, in the trilogy’s controversial ending, players were vocally dissatisfied by the choice they were forced to make, and ultimately, the developers felt compelled to release a new ending for the game. What was it about the original ending that players found so distasteful? We argue that in the *Mass Effect* universe where religion is shown to be culturally and politically divisive and frequently racist, players were jarred that the final “confrontation” required them to make an overtly religious choice. Players were so emotionally affected that they took to the Internet to debate the ending, define themselves by the choice they made, and demand from the developers the ending they “imagined” they deserved. We will show how the *Mass Effect* trilogy, ostensibly a story about the struggle against religious hegemony, ultimately compels the player to confront their own beliefs about religion, and consequently about the nature of religious belief.

Keywords

religion, science fiction, video games, *Mass Effect*

For those people who think they're the center of the universe: now you are^o

– Keith David, voice actor for Admiral David Anderson

1. Introduction

It might be observed that ‘modernity’ has never been particularly kind to religion. Indeed, much of social science over the past hundred and fifty years – and notably in sociology and anthropology – has tended to view religion as something of an unwelcome guest to the party: an inconvenient holdover of humankind’s humble origins, out of place in a time where humankind was coming to an acknowledgement of its future aspirations and potential.

Readers will likely be familiar that Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber – the disciplinary progenitors of the social sciences, as well as being the “usual suspects” in discussions of secularization (Nelson 2012, p. 38) – each famously foretold of the necessary decline of religion and religiosity as a condition of the continued evolution of society. In his early writings, Marx observed that religion was a means of perpetuating social inequalities (the so-called ‘opiate of the people’), and like many of his contemporaries, envisioned a perfected world made free from the yoke of doctrine and belief. Marx would later revisit this idea in observing that ‘commodity fetishism’ (a choice phrasing intended to invoke the specter of religious idolatry) depended on the misrecognition of real human relations which enabled the worker to be exploited and alienated from the product of labor.

Durkheim and Weber similarly recognized that religion was losing traction as modernity took hold of the industrializing world. However, in acknowledging religion’s social utility, both were less sure than Marx of the benefits that society gained from its departure. For Durkheim, the weakening of religious bonds that accompanied the division of labor in an increasingly complex and urbanizing world fed a growing sense of alienation and despair at all levels of society, which he termed *anomie*. Weber, likewise, recognized that capitalist modernity had used religion to ensure its ascendancy. No longer needing to rely on the ideological justification that religion previously provided, the ‘iron cage’ that trapped the world in a capitalist prison could do away with religion entirely, thereby ‘disenchanted’ the world.

While themselves relics of different times and places, the theories of Marx, Durkheim and Weber contribute, often interchangeably, to a familiar narrative of modernity that has influenced social inquiry in somewhat predictable directions. Modernity is almost inextricably implicated in the processes of industrialization and capitalism, and particularly associated with exploration, colonialism, and humanity’s “triumph” over nature. It is a trope of progress, in the sense that

modern society brings technological benefits. But it is also a trope of loss, as modernity symbolizes a rupture from an imagined “traditional” life of the past. Modernity can be optimistic in its neo-liberal ideals of freedom, equality and cooperation, but is very often bleak in its realities of inequality, conflict, alienation and a disorienting sense of homelessness.

In many ways, modernity is a trope permeated and predicated on conflict, struggle, and anxiety. So conceived, modernity implies a Faustian alienation of humanity from nature, as the environment is exploited by industry. It is at first bright and shining, but soon revealed to be grey, dirty, and crowded. However, modernity also brings with it a hope that untouched and unspoiled nature is still “out there” to be discovered. Humanity’s original soul, likewise, must be rediscovered “elsewhere,” as it no longer exists “here.”

Modernity promises to free people from national and ethnic identities and concomitant conflicts by making them “global” and “cosmopolitan.” In reality, however, these freedoms are the purview of a tiny, privileged elite with a vested interest in maintaining unequal relations of power. This power can take many forms: modernity can appear to be unstable, chaotic, and out of control, characterized as a violent maelstrom (Berman 1983) or a runaway juggernaut (Giddens 1990). However, it is by the same token an unswerving homogenizing force, crushing everything in its path and rebuilding the world in its own hegemonic image.

If an aspect of the legacy of Marx, Durkheim and Weber is their contributions to a contemporary discourse about modernity generally, they were also heirs to an older, on-going conversation concerning the role of religion in modern society, much of which coalesced during the Protestant Reformation and the European Enlightenment (Taylor 2011). Under what would be labeled the ‘secularization thesis,’ the presence of religion should indirectly correlate with the progress of modernity: where it did not, its persistence required further explanation. Manifestations of religiosity were often judged to be a mark of cultural and technological backwardness, a relic of a past filled with ignorance, superstition, and irrationality. The “religious” – as well as its attendant terms “belief” and “traditions” – were essentially obstacles that modernity had to overcome in its inevitable forward march towards progress. Religion, where it remained, should be ultimately a private, personal affair: like politics and sexuality, not suitable for polite conversation or public display.

The genre of futurist science fiction is in many ways the logical extension of this narrative of the modern. Science fiction allows for authors to imagine nearly infinite possibilities – new technologies, new discoveries, new encounters, new planets, and new universes – while still staying largely true to the basic premises of modernity. Many science fiction universes present an ideal tomorrow, offering hope that we can escape our present state of dissatisfaction and alienation. It tempts us with exploration – both literal and figurative – so that we may rediscover our true home

and true selves. Science fiction offers us the promise of freedom and choice, so different from the inequalities and determinisms of our everyday lives. In this regard, science fiction can be considered a “fantasy” of the modern: it offers an escape from modernity at the same time that it reifies, replicates, and reinforces its ideological hegemony.

If the modern world has a complicated relationship with religion, how much more so would its future? As Mendelsohn (2003) shows, portrayals of religion in the many futures of science fiction stem directly from modernity’s prejudiced stance toward belief and religiosity. Religiosity does not preclude advances in technology; indeed, religions can spring up around technologies and can use technology productively, and even robots can have religion. However, religious practice and belief in the future is treated as an obstacle to scientific reasoning, “less as a mode of thought and more as a lack of thought” (Mendelsohn 2003, p. 266).

As modernity distances itself from the pre-modern, so too is religion frequently exoticized in science fiction: not something that “we” (advanced, enlightened humans) do, but something that “they” (primitive, superstitious aliens) do. In a future world where the “Other” no longer exists on Earth – due to a benevolent or totalitarian monolithic world government, for example – we must find it elsewhere, in species and cultures that are alien, and by their very definition, Other than human. Science fiction is fascinated with alien religious doctrines and practices, but frequently embarrassed when it finds those same traits in ourselves (265; 271).

In this paper, we will explore how players experience religion and religious ideas through the narrative and gameplay of the *Mass Effect* video game series. We argue that the games use the narrative as a mechanism to subtly engage players in conversations about ideology, faith, and free will, guiding and shaping their perspectives on religion. First, we will show how many players imposed their own views of religion on their hero and the game’s characters, adding a level of personalization beyond the narrative and dialogue options. Second, we will demonstrate how religion maintains an interactive presence in the futuristic science-fiction world of *Mass Effect*, not always immediately obvious, but nevertheless operating as a subtext throughout the gaming experience. Finally, we will suggest that the controversy surrounding the ending of the series may very well have been a consequence of this subtext suddenly coming to the fore, confronting players with an unexpected “moment of truth” that caused them to reconsider what they had been doing all along. In this light, we demonstrate that the *Mass Effect* trilogy, ostensibly an epic story about the struggle against ideological hegemony, ultimately compels the player to confront their own beliefs about religion, and consequently, about the nature of religious belief.

2. Finding One's Place in the *Mass Effect* Universe

First released for the Xbox 360 gaming console in 2007 by Canadian developer BioWare, the *Mass Effect* series quickly became one of the most iconic franchises in the recent history of video games. The *Mass Effect* games¹ are set in the late-22nd Century, thirty-five years after humanity first discovered artifacts left by an ancient civilization on Mars, which unlocked the secrets of faster-than-light travel throughout the galaxy. Humanity uses this new technology to explore outside of our solar system for the first time in its history and discovers not only the existence of extraterrestrial life, but the humbling fact that humans are both culturally and technologically millennia behind the alien species they encounter. Humans soon learn that the galaxy has been governed for nearly three thousand years by a council comprised of various space-faring races who rule from a central administrative and economic hub known as the Citadel. Despite humanity's demands for equal recognition and a voice in the council, humans are treated by the established council races as little more than children: brash, reckless, and quick to resort to violence if they do not get their way. As such, humans are often confronted with condescension and outward discrimination from the more established alien races.

In the *Mass Effect* games, the player is Commander Shepard, an elite marine of the Systems Alliance, the confederation of Earth and its human colonies. The first game opens with the player responding to a distress call from a human colony on the planet Eden Prime, where Shepard uncovers a plot orchestrated by a rogue council agent whose army of robotic soldiers has destroyed the colony. Humanity's ambassador appeals to the council for assistance, but the council remains suspicious of human motives. The council refuses to openly act in humanity's defense, but concedes in naming Shepard as the first human Spectre² agent, granting the freedom to investigate the situation on behalf of the council. In the course of the investigation, Shepard discovers that the rogue agent has been "indoctrinated" by a mysterious super-race known as the Reapers, colossal squid-like machines that are revealed to be the cause of galactic mass extinctions which occur every fifty thousand years.

Throughout the series, Shepard battles the Reapers' growing influence, but like the prophet Cassandra, is unable to convince the galactic council to prepare for the looming threat. The third game begins with Shepard's unheeded warnings coming to humanity's doorstep: Earth and every inhabited planet in the galaxy falls under massive genocidal attack by the Reapers. It falls to Shepard to organize the galaxy's alien races in an against-the-odds fight for survival against the Reapers and extinction.

1 *Mass Effect Trilogy Official Trailer* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfHxkIxMhA4&oref=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DPfHxkIxMhA4&has_verified=1>.

2 An acronym for "Special Tactics and Reconnaissance."

In this journey, the player recruits the assistance of many non-player characters (NPCs) who represent a cross-section of the galaxy's diverse species, with their own backstories and motivations for helping Shepard. These characters each have different talents to assist Shepard during combat missions, and provide ambient conversation throughout the game. Between missions, however, the player is able to interact with these characters, and can learn more about them and potentially form deeper relationships with them.

Gameplay in the *Mass Effect* games is a combination of action, strategy, adventure, and role-playing. As a "squad-based shooter," the game is like many others on the market in which the player uses a variety of futuristic weapons and technology to kill enemies and pursue various combat objectives to complete a series of missions. Rather than being the sole focus of the gameplay, combat is most often employed as a means to progress through one of the games' many environments to reach a narrative moment.

As a genre, role-playing games often have a significant combat element in order to keep the player interested. In its role-playing aspects, the player can explore and engage with a fully-fleshed out universe of NPCs ranging from random passersby to influential characters. In the *Mass Effect* games, the player interacts with these NPCs through a transition to a cinematic camera perspective and the inclusion of a "dialogue wheel" which provides players with conversation options that represent sympathetic, neutral, or aggressive responses. Functioning like a decision tree, different conversation choices will open up (or close off) dialogue options: a sympathetic response from the player might cause a character to adopt a friendlier attitude toward Shepard, but it might also lead the NPC to take advantage of Shepard. In contrast, an aggressive response from the player likely will not win Shepard many friends, but might elicit important information out of a recalcitrant character. Once made, a dialogue option cannot be taken back, and a conversation can potentially have any number of results.

However, the *Mass Effect* series was conceived by BioWare to allow a player's choices and decisions to have significant impact in how the game narrative unfolds. The player's accumulated conversational choices may cost Shepard an ally's loyalty, or turn the attitude of major political factions towards Shepard's cause. At key junctures, the player is forced to make major decisions that dramatically shape the narrative direction of the game. Reflecting the difficult decisions that must be made during conflict, the player's choices are literally game-changers. Choosing one course of action can save a friend's life at the cost of a planet. Promoting humanity's interest at the expense of galactic harmony will potentially create a xenophobic dystopia where humans are seen to be a threat to galactic stability.

Unlike most game franchises, the universe created by the player's choices can be imported into the next game of the series to continue Shepard's story. As a result, seemingly minor choices

made in one game often have major consequences in later games. By BioWare's own estimates, there are seven hundred variables that would follow a character between *Mass Effect* : and 8; between the second and third games, there are over a thousand variables.³ The result is that, for the most part, no two playthroughs of a *Mass Effect* game are the same, and the narrative differs dramatically from one player's game-world to another.

3. Your Personal Savior

Coming to an understanding of *their* Shepard is the first step in the player's unprecedented role in the shaping of their in-game universe. Starting a "New Game" gives you the option of using a default name and appearance Shepard: "John Shepard," whose likeness was based on Dutch fashion model Mark Vanderloo, or "Jane Shepard," a generic female character avatar. However, players have the option of customizing their Shepard's first name, gender, facial appearance, and backstory with a surprising number of variables. Gameplay statistics from BioWare reveal that 80% of players used the character customization options, making the player's version of Shepard overwhelmingly a matter of personal vision, preference, and choice.

This creates an interesting narrative opportunity for the player. Without a "canonical" Shepard, the gameplay of *Mass Effect* establishes from its first moments that, from the perspective of the player, no answer about Shepard can be wrong because whatever the player decides is right. This is in contrast to most video games, where the appearance, background, and motivations for the main character are provided to the player without any of their input: the player simply "picks up" the character's story when the gameplay begins and "puts it down" when the level or game ends. In the *Mass Effect* universe, Shepard *is* who the player decides she or he will be.⁴ After deciding on an appearance, the player is able to select from three options for "pre-service history," and from another three for "psychological profile," for a total of nine possible backstory configurations. Once these biographical decisions have been made, they remain constant throughout the series, with different game events, story missions, and dialogue options becoming available depending on the initial choices the player makes.

3 The official title of the first game in the trilogy is *Mass Effect*. However, to avoid confusion, we refer to this game as *Mass Effect 1*.

4 To avoid having to repeat "she or he" throughout the paper, we have chosen to refer to Shepard as "she," reflecting our own gameplay choices, our belief that Shepard is a strong female character in a medium overwhelmingly dominated by male characters, and our appreciation for the acting talent of Jennifer Hale, who provided the voice for the female Shepard. However, BioWare statistics show that the vast majority of players chose a male Shepard.

However, nowhere in the “creation” of the player’s personal Shepard is the question of religion raised. The game never asks the player to make a choice on what Shepard’s religion may be or if she even has one. Indeed, such a move would be virtually unprecedented in the history of video games. Save for games where the player’s religious identity in a fantasy pantheon serves as a device for offering various gameplay bonuses, we can think of no examples where the player is offered a choice of a “real world” religion in character creation. In this, *Mass Effect* is no exception.

This, of course, did not stop *Mass Effect* players and fans from actively speculating about Shepard’s religion. In researching this article, we found discussions of Shepard’s religion and her stance on religiosity continues to be active⁵ topics on sites dedicated to the discussion of video games, usually appearing at least once, and sometimes across multiple threads on the same site. One 2010 conversation thread (hosted simultaneously by gaming sites GameSpot and GameFAQ) is titled “Does Commander Shepard have a religion?”⁶

Many commenters noted that it is during one of Shepard’s early conversations with NPC Ashley Williams where they could show *their* Shepard to be sympathetic or hostile to religion. Some went so far as to post their own Shepard’s religion, with examples ranging from Christian and Jewish to Hindu or generically “spiritual.” One player filled in biographical blanks in the narrative commenting, “Since she is American, I guess she is Catholic,” giving Shepard a nationality⁷, and with it, incorrectly assuming the predominance of Catholicism in America. Most often, players determined that *their* Shepard mirrored their own religious faith, and understood Shepard from this perspective. For example, one poster wrote, “As I am a Christian, I made my Shep one.” Other players chose to avoid revealing if their Shepard had a religion, with one speculating, “Well clearly Shepard is not Jewish due to his disliking and distrust of many volus⁸.” Others argued that Shepard had a “default” religion, claiming Shepard would be “agnostic.” However, a fairly large number of players felt Shepard would not have any religion. For example, one player insisted that Shepard is “pretty cool,” so she does not need religion, and an anonymous commenter stated that Shepard is “too smart to have a religion,” which led to a heated debate on how intelligent a person had to be before they gave up religion entirely.

This discussion moved on to religion as a whole. Players debated what constituted religion, whether agnosticism and atheism can be considered “religions,” and argued why Shepard and

5 As of September 2013, six years after the first game’s launch and one year after the final game in the trilogy was released.

6 For improved readability, we have corrected any misspellings and grammatical errors that were contained in the original forum postings that would ordinarily be marked with a [sic]. The Internet can sometimes be a very scary place for spelling and grammar.

7 Both English-speaking voice actors for Commander Shepard are, in fact, Canadian.

8 The attribution of Judaism to the alien volus species in this context is highly derogatory, as volus are short, physically unimposing traders and merchants. There is no indication that BioWare intended this connection be made.

science fiction games did not emphasize religion more with comments like, “Wouldn’t having her as Christian be a more logical default, since the vast majority of people and thus players (in the Western world) are? ... Would be interesting to see how Christianity and Islam dealt with the discovery of aliens.” Still another poster wrote that “I think by the time you’re in space and you realize that the majority of alien races have four appendages and stand on two, that the existence of a human god can be confirmed. I don’t understand how Science Fiction fails so bad at this.”

Some players claimed that beyond interactions with NPC Ashley Williams, the player does not have any opportunity to “play” their views on religion, remarking that religion does not “come up anywhere” in *Mass Effect* and “Notice how [BioWare] took care not to ever tell what Shepard may or may not have experienced while she was dead.” One player echoed what so many other players felt when writing: “In all honesty, I really wish they did more with the idea of religious dialogue, I would love to see the [*Mass Effect*] version of a religious debate.”

This discussion thread illustrates how strongly players felt about their unique take on Shepard and *Mass Effect*. For many, Shepard was not just a character in a game, but a reflection of the player, themselves. Whether Shepard was deeply religious, agnostic, or thoroughly atheistic, this added personal detail, though not one of the game’s original backstory options, became a deciding factor in a player’s style of play throughout the games, influencing their understanding of Shepard’s values, in-game conversations, and decisions.

4. Encoding Religion

BioWare’s writers included in the narrative many references easily familiar to the average gamer, such as references to classical mythology, the Old and New Testaments, Asian religions, and a myriad of others. However, it should be stated that we are not arguing that a video game’s inclusion of these elements is enough to make it “religious.” We believe what makes *Mass Effect* unique is its ability to appear to the player as a secular future, with characters who seem firmly rooted in the trappings of modernity, while the aspects of religiosity are cleverly interwoven into the game, subtly immersing the player in a world of religious dogma, moral ambiguity, and crises of faith. As *Mass Effect* game director Casey Hudson explains, “there can be a message in [video games] without making a statement... a player can explore their thoughts on the issue, interactively.”⁹ And it is in the superficial nature of this image of secularism that actually highlights how steeped in religion the games truly are.

9 Interviews From *the Final Hours of Mass Effect 3*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16AHDT4POZc>>.

It is easy to see the very straightforward ways the games handle religion, and how the player may understand the galaxy's many races and characters incorporate religion in their lives. In an interview, Hudson comments that Commander Shepard is, "... the first human Spectre and there is a shepherding of humanity quality to that."¹⁰ However, players did not need Hudson to clarify this point. Beyond BioWare's tribute to Alan Shepard, the first American in space, players were likely aware of the religious implication of calling the hero of this story "Shepard." Early concept designs of the male Shepard in *Mass Effect 2* following his resurrection by the not-so subtly-named Lazarus Project, reveals a man with long hair and beard, to which one player sarcastically commented, "Thank god they didn't go with the obvious Christ-esque world savior design" (Plunkett 2013).

The *Mass Effect* trilogy also lends itself to the image of a religious triptych wherein the player recognizes Shepard as the savior of the galaxy in *Mass Effect 1*, her willing sacrifice and resurrection in *Mass Effect 2*, and her ascension and apotheosis in *Mass Effect 3*. *Mass Effect 3* drives this message home by allowing the player to choose from twelve "apostles" in the form of Shepard's squadmates, whom the player must redeem during the course of the game to ensure their survival in the final mission.

So too in-game dialogue with NPCs shows the player what a perfected world of *Mass Effect* truly means. To the player, the games reveal a future in which humans and alien races live, work, and love together. However, the games also show the player a world that may be less tolerant of the cultures of different species as they intermingle. For example, when first exploring the Citadel during *Mass Effect 1*, the player encounters a situation that gives them a clear idea of how religion is viewed and dealt with in the *Mass Effect* universe. The player overhears two aliens arguing, one a security officer and the other a street preacher. The player has the opportunity to stop and offer assistance to resolve the situation. The officer explains that open proselytizing is illegal on the Citadel, which has defined spaces for proselytization by permit only. He complains that the preacher "refuses to listen to reason," and wants to continue to "spew its nonsense" without purchasing a permit. If the player chooses to press the officer for more information about Citadel regulations, they learn that such permits are required in order to "weed out undesirables" and "keep the area safe," because "the Citadel is too important to become a battleground for a religious war."¹¹ When speaking with the preacher, the player can determine the Citadel should be free of religion by either choosing to appeal to the preacher's logic, using Shepard's own knowledge of its beliefs to convince it to stop illegal proselytization, or choose to accuse the preacher of being a "troublemaking zealot,"¹² although the preacher hints that the officer may be prejudiced. Or, the player can decide the preacher should be able to remain and proselytize. Depending on the choice

10) *asey Hudson Interview – How Mass Effect Began*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi0EvhIDPUQ>>.

11 *Mass Effect Walkthrough - Citadel Presidium Prophet*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSTgBC5r-lc>>.

12 *Mass Effect: Presidium Prophet*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngPGLswpndE>>.

the player makes during this seemingly inconsequential interaction, they can experience a religious-friendly Citadel, or a Citadel without an obvious religious presence. It is nuances such as this incorporated into the game world that almost imperceptibly shape how the player understands *their* galaxy.

Beyond direct interaction with NPCs, the majority of information and intelligence the player gathers about the races and planets of the galaxy come from the in-game “encyclopedia” of the game universe known as the Codex.¹³ These entries contain a wealth of information for the player and provide the cultural, religious, political, and economic histories of all the alien races in *Mass Effect*. In fact, it is from the Codex that the player can see that the game does not ignore religion, it simply does not address human religions or the value religion has for humanity.

The Codex’s descriptions of the different alien races and cultures in *Mass Effect* indicate that most aliens put little emphasis on religion, ostensibly in line with the futuristic worlds of science fiction. Although there are a few alien races with organized religions, the majority of them are described as “spiritual” or actively putting their race’s religion aside as they interact with and experience the different cultures of the galaxy.

Drew Karpyshyn, lead writer for *Mass Effect 2* and co-lead writer for *Mass Effect 3*, pointed out that this abundance of information was intentionally placed in the Codex. In an interview he explained, “We knew we had it if we needed it, we just weren’t sure if fans were going to want it. That’s when we decided, let’s put it in the Codex ... and make sure people can appreciate the depth that we’ve put in there.”¹⁴

In the game narrative, however, religion is so subtly included that the player may not even realize they are involved in what would otherwise be considered significant religious events. For example, in *Mass Effect 3* ancient religious artifacts important to various alien races can be recovered in the course of the player’s exploration of the galaxy. Like Moses, the player brings the holy books and artifacts down “from the heavens” as it were, restoring in turn each race’s faith in their own religion and increasing their willingness to fight for the survival of their culture and the galaxy. The significance of these “religious moments” is telling, but subtly communicated. There are many missions the player can complete to strengthen the Citadel, with each “war asset” adding a boost of no more than ten points. Recovering the religious artifacts, however, are worth four times that amount: in the quest to achieve “galactic readiness,” the power of religion is more important than technological upgrades, or military materiel and supplies. Still, the player has to dig for this

13 Collecting this information, and certainly reading it, is not required of the player, although discovering all entries of the Codex is necessary to achieve full completion of *Mass Effect 1*.

14 *June 9th E3 Round Up and Drew Karpyshyn talks Mass Effect Themes, Characters and Endings!*, <<https://soundcloud.com/am640/vgs-june-9th-e3-round-up-and>>.

information. While the game will not require that the player search for these religious items, it will also not overtly reveal how valuable they are.

It is worth noting that Shepard never discovers any items of religious significance to human religions or, in fact, anything specific to human cultures, in general. The diverse alien races are given their holy texts (and a new messenger) as an impetus to fight for survival; humans must find their inspiration from Shepard alone.

As discussed above, it is with Ashley Williams that the player engages in explicit discussions of religion. In Ashley, the game introduces one of the most openly religious characters in the entire trilogy. Ashley has strong religious beliefs and shares them with Shepard, although she admits to being unsure how the other squadmates would react to the topic. In a revealing conversation, Ashley shares that her father is dead and “with God now,” but asks Shepard, “That’s not a problem with you, is it, that I believe in God?” If the player chooses to support Ashley’s faith, Shepard responds, “You know that old saw, ‘There’s never an atheist in a foxhole?’ I’ve been in a lot of foxholes.” If the player chooses this dialogue option, Ashley appears relieved and replies, “I’ve met a few people who were really weirded out by my faith. Because I work in space, I can’t believe in a higher power? ... How can you look at this galaxy and not believe in something?”¹⁵

At a crucial juncture of *Mass Effect* :, the player is forced to decide whether to sacrifice Ashley or squadmate Kaidan Alenko. For many players, conversations like this one between Ashley and Shepard became influencing factors in their decision. The BioWare forums host a discussion thread asking players “*Bour honest reason for saving Ashley or Kaidan?*” This thread was sparked by the player’s decision and is so contentious that it is still active on the forum today. Player comments about Ashley reveal that many believe her to represent the persistence of religion in the science fiction future, welcome or not. Although many players made comments like, “I find Ash irritating” and “I find Ash can be really rigid,” some flatly stated that Ashley’s emphasis on her faith was enough for them to choose for her to die. Some players admitted, “To me, the most annoying thing about Ash was the religious crap” and “I hated Ashley. I wanted her gone.” Still, others identified with Ashley’s religious nature and believed her to be more complex compared to other characters in the game, divulging that “I really like how she is a little xenophobic and a Christian,”¹⁶ and “I definitely like Ash; I think that her more ‘controversial’ opinions ... make her a fleshed out character, rather than just another ‘chick with a gun’ type that we seem to see everywhere these days.” Overall, when players are required to make the choice between Ashley and Kaidan, Ashley is much more likely to survive, however she ranks as one of the least popular characters in the entire *Mass Effect* trilogy.

15 *Mass Effect: God and Foxholes* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBJG2Ud_0SA>.

16 This player assumes Ashley Williams is Christian, but at no point is the character’s religion specified.

Oddly enough, players did not seem to have a similar reaction to another openly religious character, the alien Thane Krios, an NPC who Shepard meets literally in the act of prayer. Thane prays before each mission and asks forgiveness after each kill, and the player can engage in long conversations with him about his beliefs. In fact, it is during one of Shepard's final moments with Thane that the player is invited to pray with him. Nowhere else in *Mass Effect*, and by no other NPC, is the player offered an opportunity to pray. As opposed to many players' negative reactions to Ashley's faith and their positive reactions to her possible death, Thane was a fan favorite, and his death in *Mass Effect 3* upset so many players that a "Save Thane" social media campaign was started.

Comparing player responses to Ashley and Thane may reveal a stark truth about how the player views the "Other." Although these characters are different in many ways, their assertions that their faith plays a major role in who they are illustrates that on this point they are very much alike. However, in general, players did not react to Thane's character with the broad negativity that they did to Ashley. Perhaps it is because these moments with Thane never prompt the player to consider their (or Shepard's) views about religion. Or, it may, simply, be that Thane is an alien and players saw his religious faith as something alien, without it being a comment on themselves and humans, whereas, Ashley's religiosity may have been seen as a reflection of the player, individually, and humanity as a whole.

5. Shepard the Redeemer

Even if the player resists commiserating with NPCs about their personal ideologies, and chooses not to engage in possible religious dialogue options, the game's narrative is not so flexible. Written into the storyline and missions, the player must consistently confront those who stand against everything for which Shepard defends.

As a Spectre, Shepard is "an ideal, a symbol, the embodiment of courage, determination, and self-reliance, authorized to use any means necessary" to maintain galactic safety. As such, the player also acts as an agent of free will. Shepard is the foil to all those who seek to subjugate free will and impose their will on others. Each of the plot-driving missions in the games presents the player with an opportunity to use Shepard's authority and charisma to destroy any who would choose to oppress others and to liberate those being oppressed. In each of these missions, the player as Shepard is compelled to resist the physical or mental enslavement of others.

One of the main missions the player faces in *Mass Effect 1* brings Shepard against the Thorian, an ancient and mysterious creature which uses its mind-controlling abilities to manipulate

biological life forms. It has been systematically enthralling the planet's inhabitants, forcing them to even work with the player in an attempt to manipulate Shepard towards its own ends. Although the Thorian's ability to enthrall creatures ultimately gives Shepard the key to understanding the Reaper threat, the player does not have the ability to choose to let the creature survive. The creature's death is a scripted event, underscoring the message that Thorian is a threat to free will and too dangerous to be allowed to live.

It is when facing one of Shepard's chief enemies in *Mass Effect* : that the player first hears the term "indoctrination," a powerful form of mental control that is one of the Reapers' key weapons against the species of the galaxy. Indoctrination is not a single event, but rather a slow and subtle conversion that compels the subject to conform to the Reapers' demands as their own, while believing that they are acting out of free will. Those indoctrinated come to "idolize" and "worship" their masters, "becoming a willing tool, eager to serve," ultimately creating a subservient army of worshippers who at first willingly, and later mindlessly, give their lives in the pursuit of their masters' bidding. While the Reapers remain a hidden threat for most of the series, the player regularly confronts the effects of indoctrination throughout the *Mass Effect* trilogy in the form of the countless innocent beings who have had their free will taken from them. More so than the Reapers themselves, it is their power of indoctrination that Shepard must constantly confront and defeat.

It is telling that while Shepard tirelessly battles indoctrinated enemies, she too is becoming a figure worthy of adoration. In *Mass Effect 2*, much of the narrative concerns the Shepard helping her squadmates confront their own personal demons. Unlike other NPCs in the games, each of Shepard's squadmates in the second game is burdened by their own psychological and emotional captivity, which the player must help them overcome. It is only when the player assists their squadmates in confronting the sources of their trauma and redeeming them from their past sins and regrets that they can be wholly loyal to Shepard and willing to unquestionably follow her against the Reaper threat. Driving the point home, these "loyalty missions" are largely Biblical references – for example "The Prodigal," "Eye for an Eye," "Sins of the Father," and "A House Divided." We believe that while making a statement about religion may not have been one of BioWare's obvious goals, adding such labels to missions of redemption is a subtle reinforcement to the player that they are acting as an agent of deliverance for their team and the galaxy.

In their efforts as a redeemer, the player is often given the opportunity to converse with a variety of oppressors, ranging from bullies to petty tyrants to the heads of galactic conspiracies. Common to each of these encounters is the oppressor's attempts to justify their actions: as being necessary for the greater good, or that it was not their fault, as they had to ensure their own survival

in chaotic situations. As one overthrown tyrant rationalizes his actions to Shepard, “Some [people] even seemed happier. Ignorance is bliss ... they were grateful for guidance, like an instinct.”¹⁷

One of the groups the player regularly engages throughout the *Mass Effect* trilogy is the geth, an artificial intelligence. In conversations with geth NPC Legion, the player has the opportunity to learn about the geth, as well as their culture and history. The player discovers that the geth’s war with their creators ultimately flared over the nature of free will and self-determination: as the geth gained sentience and began to question who they were, many of their creators felt the need to suppress and control them. As Legion reveals, a geth questioned its overseer, “Do these units have a soul?,” explaining the geth learned the word “soul” themselves from reading their creators’ religious documents.¹⁸

After the war, a faction of geth split from the main group in order to support the Reapers in their galactic conquest and worship them as gods, believing them to be the pinnacle of their future evolution. The geth named this faction the “heretics” and agreed they could worship as they wish, without interfering in their plans with the Reapers. However, Legion seeks the player’s help after the geth learned the heretics intended to convert the entire species by uploading a virus into the geth collective intelligence, essentially re-writing “non-believers” to follow and worship the Reapers.

Legion gives Shepard a unique choice: to preemptively rewrite the heretics’ programming and force them to reintegrate with the geth collective, turning the tables on them but similarly overriding their free will, or deleting the heretics completely. However, it is during a revealing conversation between Legion and Shepard’s squadmates at the moment the player must make this decision, that the player is confronted with what may be the core message of the *Mass Effect* trilogy. Legion states, “Every sapient has the right to make their own decisions.” A squadmate questions Legion, “If they ‘have the right to make their own decisions,’ how can you suggest brainwashing them to accept your way?” Legion responds, “We stated the option exists. We did not endorse it. It is Shepard-Commander’s decision.”¹⁹

In *Mass Effect 3*, as Shepard’s reputation as a liberator and redeemer grows, requests for the player to provide redemption occurs on a galactic scale, not focusing on individual characters, but on entire planets. Only when the player visits each planet is salvation ensured for it, and the alien races which inhabit it.

The irony throughout *Mass Effect* is that, while Shepard emancipates NPCs, squadmates and alien homeworlds, saving them from themselves, each other, and the Reapers, the player as Shepard is simultaneously enforcing their own will upon the galaxy and those who live in it. Shepard

17 *Mass Effect 2: Ja!ob’s Father* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSBx59BWQbY>>.

18 *Mass Effect 2: Legion on the Soul* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGwuhtGIQOg>>.

19 *Mass Effect 2 – Rewrite or Geno! ide (Legion’s Loyalty)* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydzOjpQ1Lxw>>.

opposes all forms of ideological authoritarianism, with its potential to create brainwashed, blind followers. But through the player's mission to inspire the galaxy to support Shepard and eradicate imposed order, in favor of unpredictable free will, they actually replicate what they seek to destroy. Like the oppressors she has overthrown, Shepard uses her almost-supernatural charisma (and a gun) to create a loyal band of followers who are dependent on her for advice and assistance and unquestioningly follow her into danger. In one instance, Shepard actually lectures an NPC, "Your superiors are sending you to certain death for no good reason. You have a right to disobey." A squadmate will sarcastically remark on Shepard's own proclivity for putting her team's lives in jeopardy, to which Shepard responds, "Most of the time, I'm not being stupid about it."²⁰

It is clear from these examples that BioWare is making a comment on charismatic leadership: namely that dogmatic or ideological acceptance of authority is Shepard's natural enemy. The player is given the message that unquestioning obedience is dangerous and, whenever encountered, must be destroyed. However, what the game ultimately demands of the player is to accept the paradox that, as Shepard, they must compel others to do the same.

In the *Mass +ffect* series, BioWare creates situations in which the player is given repeated examples of how powerful sources of authority can manipulate and exploit blind faith, and they are given missions to stop these abuses of power. Yet, in so doing, the player is subtly encouraged to replicate the authoritarian behavior they seek to overthrow. Through Shepard's influence and magnetism, NPCs, squadmates, and alien races band together in an attempt to save the galaxy, not because they face their own extinction, but because the redeemer has called upon them, and they will follow her, because they must. This generates a climactic confrontation that pits Shepard and her flock against the Reapers and their indoctrinated masses: two gods and their factions, battling for galactic supremacy.

6. Ascension, Apotheosis...or Indoctrination?

Assuming that a player began with the first *Mass +ffect* game and played through the series, by the time the player reaches the finale of *Mass Effect 3*, they will likely have invested more than a hundred hours into the franchise, and potentially much more if they purchased optional downloadable content or completed multiple playthroughs. Long-time fans of the series have an emotional stake not only in the fate of their personal Shepard and the worlds their choices created,

20 *Mass Effect 2 – You telling me we can question Suicide Or ers?* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LmsWqERHkg>>.

but also in the culmination of the many hours spent in the *Mass Effect* universe. Before the final game in the trilogy was released, fans throughout the world wondered: how would it all end?

For approximately the last hour of *Mass Effect 3*, Shepard leads a final desperate resistance against the Reapers on Earth through what has become the urban wasteland of London. To have any chance of winning against the Reapers, Shepard and her squad must reach a heavily guarded transport beam leading to a station orbiting above the planet. After suffering heavy casualties and moments before reaching the objective, Shepard's squad is forced to abandon their transport vehicle and run on foot through open and exposed terrain towards the beam. As the surviving resistance forces run, the soldiers alongside Shepard are systematically vaporized with every blast of the Reaper's energy weapon. As the player gets tantalizingly close to the beam, the Reaper slowly focuses its aim on Shepard. No matter what the player does, Shepard is hit and the screen goes white.

Shepard regains consciousness to find that she has been critically wounded. Far from the familiar gameplay mechanics to which the player is accustomed, the interface after this point has an ethereal, otherworldly feel. Visually, the screen has become blurry, while the game speed has reduced dramatically. In a similar fashion, the audio is muffled with ringing, a familiar effect used in movies to simulate a close-call with artillery. The difference, however, is the howling sounds that surround the player, less the sound of wind than the sound of the damned.²¹

Shepard slowly limps to the beam and is transported to the station, where she hopes to rendezvous with any surviving members of the strike team. Reaching a control room, Shepard is forced into the middle of a tense standoff between her mentor and her patron, resulting in all three being mortally wounded. Shepard loses consciousness again, presumably dying from her wounds. The platform Shepard collapses on begins to rise on a beam of light, and the screen goes white again.

Shepard awakes on the surface of the station, as a ghostly child approaches her and tells her to "wake up."²² The child explains that the Reaper's cycle of extinction is actually a strategy to preserve life: the Reapers were created to harvest advanced species before those species sow their own destruction by creating artificial intelligences that will inevitably rebel against their creators. However, the child explains that Shepard's efforts to unite the galaxy and resist the Reapers prove that this strategy will no longer work: Shepard must choose a "new solution" from options the child offers.

21 *Mass Effect 3: Running to the Beam*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R35CMVQP0I4>>.

22 *Mass Effect 3: Full Catalyst Conversation*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6kZuSHpWwo>>.

The options that Shepard will be given is determined by how the player has played the game: players that rushed through to the ending will be given only one option, while players who have invested many hours into the series are given up to three.

At all levels of preparation, players are given the option to destroy the Reapers (colored red), at the cost of all the advanced technology the galaxy relies upon: all communication relays, all means of transportation, and all machines will be destroyed, leaving the galaxy alive, but no longer living in a technological “future.” More prepared players are offered the option to control the Reapers (colored blue): here, Shepard loses her corporeal body to become the collective intelligence of the Reapers, able to command their overwhelming power to shape the future of the galaxy as she sees fit. The most prepared players are offered a third option: the ability to synthesize biological life with machine technology (colored green), and creating a harmonious galaxy where all life becomes a fusion of biology and technology without further need for evolution.

Once the player makes their decision, it is irrevocable. In the ending cinematic, a beam of energy of the color corresponding to the player’s choice bursts forth from the satellite. The effects of the choice are immediately visible on Earth, but the energy rapidly spreads throughout the galaxy, destroying the transportation hubs that the galaxy relies on for interstellar travel. Shepard’s ship and crew desperately try to outrun the beam and make it to safety, but the beam overtakes them and forces the ship to crash land on a forested planet. The game ends with Shepard’s crew emerging from the wreckage into the sunlight of an idyllic alien world upon which they are now marooned.

The fanbase’s vocal reaction against the series’ ending began mere days after *Mass Effect Ms* release, growing louder as more and more players finished the game. Players noted that, except for a twenty-second scene showing the effects of the player’s choice on the battle in London, the ending cinematic sequences of the game were virtually identical, with only the color of the energy beam differing between the three. None of the previous choices that the player made throughout the series were represented. In fact, there was little indication that the player’s choice at the end made any difference at all to the fate of the universe.

Thousands of angry fans posted scathing reviews of *Mass +ffect Mon* retail sites such as Amazon.com, warning potential buyers about the ending, and calling for a boycott of BioWare and Electronic Arts, the game’s publisher. BioWare’s own forums exploded in rage, with players demanding that the company design and publish a new ending that met fan expectations.

This was only the beginning. Over the next several weeks, over a hundred thousand players joined together through various social media sites to launch an international “Retake *Mass Effect M*” campaign, using language inspired by the American Tea Party and the Occupy political movement. The group organized petition, letter, and e-mail campaigns, urging fans to “hold the line” in their mission to “demand a better ending.” The most visible stunt by this group was to deliver to

BioWare employees over four hundred vanilla cupcakes, decorated with red, blue, and green frosting. The stunt was intended to mock the ending of the game, and the delivery included messages from fans such as “no matter what color you choose, they all taste the same.” One inconsolable player even filed a formal fraud complaint with the US Federal Trade Commission, claiming the game’s ending did not meet BioWare’s advertising and marketing promises, and urged other players to do the same.

As the initial furor died down (not the least because BioWare announced that they would consider revising the ending), fans’ forum signatures began to reveal a deepening understanding of the ending. While many fans still identified themselves with a “demand a better ending” tag, other fans began to use color-coded signatures to ideologically identify themselves with their preferred ending: a red tag might read “I chose Destroy,” while a green tag would read “I chose Synthesis.” Turning away from their anger at the game’s designers, fans began to debate amongst themselves as to the philosophical reasons why their Shepard made the particular choice she did.

Perhaps the most significant attempt to reevaluate the ending became known as the “Indoctrination Theory.” The idea began in fits and starts, but as players forensically reevaluated the ending in light of the voluminous data contained in the three games, a startling possible scenario began to emerge: was the entire ending actually the player “playing out” Shepard’s indoctrination at the hands of the Reapers? Rather than providing a generic ending, did BioWare succeed in pulling off one of the most brilliant narrative coups of all time?

An exhaustive four hour YouTube video documentary on the Indoctrination Theory posted by gaming site CleverNoob laid out the case for Shepard’s indoctrination in painstaking detail.²³ According to the theory, everything that the player witnessed following Shepard being struck by the Reaper’s blast was taking place in Shepard’s mind: there was no trip to the orbiting station, no confrontation or gunfight, and no ethereal child. The player, instead, was seeing the world through Shepard’s weakened and vulnerable mental state; the players themselves were experiencing indoctrination.

Rather than being a “vanilla” ending, this could arguably be the moment to which the entire series – an epic struggle between maintaining one’s free will and self-determination, or being coerced into accepting the ideology and demands of a dominating authority – had been leading. The evidence for the Indoctrination Theory required the player to piece together the subtle narrative points about the dangers of charismatic authority, dogmatic thinking, and religious fervor that had always been present in the series, as well as visual and gameplay nuances being used to communicate to the player that something was “amiss” during the ending.

23 *‘The Indoctrination Theory – # Documentar’*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CKHLDgz2zE>>.

According to the Indoctrination Theory, two out of the three choices presented to Shepard by the ghostly child led to outcomes where the player actually allowed the Reapers to win. To choose to either Control or Synthesize with the Reapers meant that the player had been seduced by their promises of power or harmony: in the first instance, Shepard's control of the Reapers gives her absolute power over the fate of the galaxy, to use as she pleases, either as a benevolent protector, or an angry avenger. In the second instance, synthesizing with the Reapers would impose their own version of harmony, a world free from the conflicts caused by free will or disorder caused by biological evolution.²⁴ Like the testing of Jesus in the desert, Shepard is being tempted with the idea that imposing her will on the trillions of beings in the galaxy would be a suitable replacement for the Reapers doing the same.

The only correct option, according to this theory, is to destroy the Reapers. This choice was presented to the player first but unlike the others, is presented in a wholly negative light by the child. In explaining the option to destroy the Reapers, the ghostly child threatens that not only will the galaxy suffer even more through the loss of their advanced technology and the immediate extinction of artificial intelligences, but Shepard herself – brought back to life through the extensive use of cybernetics – will likely die as well. If our personal experiences are any indication – and evidence from the many game forums suggest that we are not alone – our emotional response to this choice was to think of the relationships that our Shepards had formed with the characters whose survival relied on this technology. For us, “Destroy” was not an option.

However, the Indoctrination Theory points out that there is no evidence ever presented to the player that anything that the child is saying is true. In order to make the correct decision to destroy the Reapers, the player must actively and purposefully *reject* their instinct to blindly accept the truth of what the child is saying. To choose either of the other options means that the player – and by extension, Shepard – has succumbed to indoctrination. Their thoughts, their beliefs, and even their ability to influence the world they themselves have created are no longer their own.

It should be noted that, BioWare eventually gave in to their fans' demands for a “better ending.” In June 2012, BioWare released an Extended Cut of the ending that provided more detail

24 The “Synthesis” option offered to Shepard in many ways resembles the futurist paradigm of ‘transhumanism’ (also known as ‘posthumanism’), in which technology evolves to a point in which humans become functionally “hybrid” biological and technological organisms. Examples of transhumanism range from the prosthetic (for example, a mechanical heart) to the cybernetic (implants which augment hearing or sight) to the “postbiological” (a human consciousness uploaded into a computer mainframe to achieve immortality).

While transhumanism is a fertile topic for discussions of religion generally, it also provides an interesting tangent to our discussion here. As Thacker (2003, 76) demonstrates, a key criticism of transhumanism lies in its difficulty to explain how an ontological existence which is entirely dependent upon on technology can still be called “human.” From a humanist perspective, for Shepard to choose “Synthesis” would be to arguably wipe out all “life” in the galaxy. Whatever hybrid existence takes its place would not be life as we know it, but something else entirely.

showing the player how their decisions affected the galaxy following Shepard's final confrontation. These new endings did not confirm the Indoctrination Theory, but neither did they disprove it: BioWare has remained silent on this matter, choosing to allow their passionate fan base to speculate freely and come to their own understandings of the worlds they have created.

It very well could be that the Indoctrination Theory revealed BioWare's "true" ending to the series. If the theorists are correct (and by now the evidence in support of the theory is nothing short of encyclopedic), then BioWare made good on their forcing the player to actively confront their own perspectives on the importance of choice, belief, charisma, and religion in their own lives. If the player gives in to the temptations of the ghostly child to impose their own order on the galaxy, they must reconcile for themselves the fact that all of their efforts and actions have led to the player identifying with the very thing they have hoped to destroy: as has occurred on a larger stage throughout history, the revolutionary has become the tyrant, the redeemer has become the oppressor.

If the Indoctrination Theory is false, however, then BioWare may be making an even more thought-provoking comment about the idea and experience of human free will and self-determination: that despite the appearance of actions and choices "mattering" in one's life, a single human life is a mere blip in the unfathomable scale of the universe. This is a depressing conclusion for certain, but a recognition that sometimes humans cannot change the outcome of history, no matter how much of a bang or a whimper they make in their lifetime. In this perspective, the fans who vocally protested their choices "not mattering" in the end were simply echoing the existential crisis of humanity at large, the Sartrean struggle of finding meaning in the face of overwhelming nothingness.

From an ethnographic perspective, one has to wonder how many players truly wanted a story with a deeper message. While the elements of the religious as we have described them here were certainly a part of the game, the very fact of the matter is that not many video games have dealt with such heavy philosophical issues, and *Mass Effect's* ending may have come as an unwelcome surprise to more recreational gamers who just wanted a good time with a good story.

Some players actively resented that BioWare denied them a "Hollywood happy ending" to instead give them an ending fraught with ambiguity and interpretive possibilities. Even after BioWare released the Extended Cut, a group of industrious PC gamers programmed an unofficial modification of the game to rewrite the ending. The result, the "*Mass Effect* Happy Ending Mod," completely overwrote the game's original ending, skipping over the confrontation with the ethereal child, and instead giving Shepard a reunion with her crew and her love interest – a "happily ever after" worthy of their hero.

Still others took the ending in stride, and watched with amusement at the anger that the game's ending provoked. As many commenters noted at the height of the public outcry against the ending, "some people need to lighten up - it's just a game!"

7. An End, Once and For All

In a retrospective interview about the *Mass Effect* series, former lead writer Drew Karpysyn explained that the game designers conceived of *Mass Effect* as "a way for [players] to explore deeper issues of good and evil – do the ends justify the means? – segregation versus integration, how we would react to different species, different threats. It was a very interesting direction it took, and looking at the forums, it's always fun to see people's comments, reactions to the game and to the various situations that came up." Over six years after the release of the first game of the trilogy, it is clear that what set the *Mass Effect* series apart from many other games of its kind is more than the emphasis on choice in allowing the player to personalize their gameplay experience. The series evokes powerful emotional responses in its fan base, which in turn has inspired years of exciting commentary and discussion. This alone is a significant accomplishment for a work in any medium.

As we have shown throughout this paper, *Mass Effect's* subtle use of religion as a narrative device pushed players to confront their feelings about the persistence of religion and religiosity in a future world largely of their own making. Ultimately, the game's controversial ending motivated players to discuss, analyze, compare, and evaluate their visions and worlds of *Mass Effect* in an attempt to understand what they had experienced.

As works of fiction, the *Mass Effect* series lends itself to any number of viable interpretations, all (or none) of which may be acknowledged by the player. As an extension of familiar narratives about "the modern," the *Mass Effect* series provides a venue for players to comment on – and perhaps critique – the extent and reach of "modernity" into the future. A player who believes that religion has no place in a technological future can make such a world; conversely, a player who places their own religious identity on their in-game character can use Shepard's considerable charisma to 'reenchant' the world (in the Weberian sense) through their in-game choices. In a similar vein, Shepard's struggle against the Reapers might be seen to represent the struggle of humanity against the powerful normalizing forces that shape life in the modern world. Shepard's resistance – or acquiescence – to these forces can similarly reveal a player's perspective on their own experiences of modernity.

Seen in this light, we believe that video games – and particularly the genre of role-playing games – provide an important medium for allowing a player to explore and interact with ideas,

practices, beliefs, and behaviors that are properly called “religious.” As a form of interactive storytelling, the relationship between author and consumer is blurred, and allow for a more dialectic relationship between the two than static media such as books or film may allow. BioWare did not simply create a work of fiction; without “canon,” and with so many options for customization, the players were in many senses collaborators in the creation of the *Mass +ffect* universe. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to think of other examples where media consumers were able to demand of the author a new ending for the author’s work.

We continue to be interested in how discussions of religion can be productively explored in the genre of video games. Future possibilities include examining how the implicit inclusion of religion in *Mass Effect* compares to other science fiction games in which religion is more overtly portrayed – for example, the *Halo* series, in which humanity fights against the not-so-subtly named “Covenant,” whose ranks are filled with “prophets” and “zealots.” We also continue to consider ways in which “real world” religions and religious practices might be encountered in video games in a manner that makes productive use of the medium’s ability to tackle complex issues through its unique combination of narrative and interactivity. As a maturing medium, we are excited about future developments and discussions.

For the moment, the *Mass +ffect* universe remains as both a landmark entry in the relatively brief history of video games, as well as a lucrative topic for speculation, discussion, and analysis. As a work of science fiction, the *Mass Effect* universe is more than a vision of humanity’s potential future, but also about the nature and dynamics of modern society. Through the choices of Commander Shepard, a player has the godlike ability to actively shape the game world to create *their* perfect future. Whether the player is empowered to ask these questions and make these choices in their own world is only a matter of perspective.

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Religion(s) in Videogames

Historical and Anthropological Observations¹

Alessandro Testa

Abstract

This study is an attempt to address the issue of how the religious representations used and reproduced in fantasy and historical videogames can be useful to understand “gaming” as a social practice but also to understand whether they can constitute a form of historical knowledge, as it has recently been claimed. There is overwhelming evidence regarding the social relevance of “gaming” and its impact on the shaping of popular and global imaginaries, especially for young generations. Current research in social sciences seems to validate this conclusion, although the scientific interest for videogames is relatively recent, as its object of interest, and there is still an on-going debate about research methods. As a consequence, there is a rapidly growing literature focusing on these and similar questions. Several examples of well-known and best-selling computer games will be treated as evidences to be interrogated and interpreted in order to discern the representations and poetics which are at the basis of the use and appeal of religions and religious features in videogames.

Keywords

religion; new religious movements; videogames; popular culture; fantasy

1. Introduction

As the title openly indicates, this article has no ambition of thoroughness. Instead, its main aim is to contribute to the flourishing debate about the role and the forms of religion(s) in what has been called “digital culture” (Miller 2011) through a series of rhapsodic – and sometimes provocative –

¹ This article has been written in the framework of the project “Enhancement of R&D Pools of Excellence at the University of Pardubice” (CZ.1.07/2.3.00/30.0021), financially supported by the European Social Fund and the Czech Ministry of Education.

critical considerations concerning electronic games (more particularly fantasy and historical computer games) and the socio-cultural networks of which they are a part.

Scholarly literature about videogames is young but already abundant, uneven in quality and dispersed in a variety of media (academic journals, books, specialized magazines, newspapers, blogs and internet sites, etc.).¹ I will focus only on a relatively small part of this *corpus*, since this article has been conceived as a discussion on religious representations in videogames not from the perspective of digital studies, but from that of religious and anthropological studies. In other words, the reader will be offered considerations resulting not from the intellectual work of an expert of videogames, but from an anthropologist with a historian's historical background.

At this point, it is necessary to be precise that currently I am not a “video gamer” anymore, although, like many children of my generation, I have been such in the past, roughly until my twenties (with a few later incursions). This essay is therefore not based exclusively on the elaboration of personal experiences but is rather the result of a heterogeneous set of concerns, interests and reflections related to a) my memories of gaming and games I played, b) unsystematic observations and collection of data related to the current practice of gaming,² c) the study of the literature about post-modern religious forms, practices and representations.

A few other preliminary clarifications are necessary, before entering the realm of virtual religions.

First: I will not embark on a discussion about faith or faith-oriented themes, which seem to be much more appealing for American scholars. I will instead concentrate on the problems of representations, perceptions and practices of religions in videogames. I will also argue about the “regime of historicity” carried or determined by the socio-cultural aspects involved in the processes of production, dissemination and consumption of videogame religions.

Second: before deciding to write this contribution, I had the clear feeling that the topics of religiosity and religious representations in videogames had been neglected and stood underrepresented in the scholarly literature. Thus, when the call for papers for the issue in which this article appears was published, I considered its topic well-chosen and laudable – and all the more so if we consider that a monograph on the matter does not exist yet³. More generally, the study

1 The most important scholarly works about videogames – all of them published since 2000 – are quoted in Antley 2012 (footnote n. 1). Methods and disciplines involved in the study of videogames are multiple: IT, sociology, psychology, pedagogy, cultural and media studies, history, anthropology.

2 I have not carried out a long-term ethnography, but I have nevertheless collected a relevant amount of evidences for my arguments. These evidences are of a diverse nature and have been produced in different ways, which can be briefly enumerated as follows: reviews and other writings written by gamers, gamers' comments and “posts” on the Internet, interviews and informal talks, data from secondary sources.

3 Recently there have been several attempts to develop a general discourse about the role of religions in videogames, often from the explicit assumption that “the majority of scholars in game studies have ignored the religious implications of game design” (Geraci 2012: 101). However, these attempts show an almost exclusive concern for

of videogames is growing as a relevant field of social research as long as gaming is a huge, widespread, transnational, transcultural, and mass social phenomenon which deserves as much attention as more “classical” fields of study. Furthermore, it is a very popular (in all the senses of the word) phenomenon, nowadays comparable to cinema, also in terms of economic impact: “one cannot help but be impressed by the popularity of history computer games. [...] Civilization IV sold over six million copies in the six months that followed its September 2005 release” (Bachynski, Kee 2009: 1), and even: “video games make more money than Hollywood annually” (Perrault 2012: 2).

Third: my case studies and examples will be drawn from two categories of products: “fantasy” games (in the first half of the article) and “historical” games (in the second half), and mainly from two genres: strategy games and so-called RPGs (role playing games)⁴. These categories and genres are those where usually religious features are more common. All the games will be chosen amongst the most successful, those which have had a relevant impact on the market and that have been played by millions of people, affecting their imagination and their perception of “actual” or “imagined” religiosity.

Fourth: I will often switch from the analysis of the contents of videogames to that of their forms, meanings, representations or social functions. In other words, I will follow a perspective for which considering the practice of gaming as a very relevant social fact implies to be as attentive and sensible as possible to all its symbolic, emotional and interactional dimensions.

2. God, Shamans and Magic

In order to exemplify and introduce the reader to the promised realm, in this short section I will just point out, in a rather epitomizing and descriptive manner, how computer games have dealt with three religious topics particularly well-established in the scientific study of religion: polytheism, shamanism and magic.

Certain games are configured to let the player choose his/her role in a clash between different civilizations characterized and represented by the most famous and worshipped entities in the history of religions: gods, who are the ultimate protagonists of these games narrative. *Age of*

faith and morality implications, a concern that, moreover, is often presented and elaborated in a rather non-critical fashion. Furthermore, and in spite of their academic layout, these attempts are characterized by a rather simplistic, descriptive approach that results in no real interpretative insight (this is particularly evident in works such as Corliss 2011, Geraci 2012 and Perreault 2012).

4 Fantasy videogames are those set in imagined, fantastic and magical worlds, usually crafted after European Early Middle Ages. I will return on this topic. For a definition of role playing games, see Perreault 2012 and, with more emphasis on both paper and digital versions and their differences and similarities, Tychsens 2006.

Mythologies (Ensemble Studios 2002) is certainly one of the most famous of this typology⁵. Its cover shows Zeus, Thor and Anubis in an epic posture, each representing one of the three “civilizations” the player can choose to play with: Greeks, Norse and Egyptians, who stand in fierce combat against each other for military and religious hegemony. In the game, religion is the true cultural marker, the aspect that really differentiates and separates the peoples. Military and other features of the game are secondary or, better, depend on each cultural “style”, which is determined by the *antheon*. Polytheism is therefore used to differentiate “ethnically” the “civilizations” in the game. Obviously any historical veracity is completely abdicated in favor of the iconicity of the virtual societies and their virtual gods interacting with the player in a virtual world.

Other games offer the player the opportunity to play the part of one or more gods. In this case, the religious feature is not only formal and functional but also participative and immediate (the player does not control the people but the god itself). *Populus: ~he / eginning* (Bullfrog Production 1998) is probably the most well-known of this kind. In this game, the player is an almost almighty demiurge whose aim is to provide the virtual globe inhabitants with happiness, longevity and prosperity.

Dungeon Aeeper (Bullfrog Production 1997), another best-seller, is more controversial and, one might say, “morally incorrect”: the player personifies a chthonic evil god ruling a horde of monsters with the purpose of producing the most sufferance and dismay to humankind. The box cover – soon become a classic in the community of gamers – presents the grinning face of a red horned devil and a motto, “evil is good”. This gothic game is entirely located in gloomy dungeons and is set in a typically fantasy imagined époque: dark and magical medieval times.

Other games like *Demigod* (Gas Powered Games 2009) and *Bla!- D 6 hite* (Lionhead Studio 2001) have exploited the same principle, with the same commercial success, but using different ludic strategies. I will quote now some exemplary lines about *Bla!- D 6 hite* from an enthusiast player:

“The whole *Bla!- and 6 hite* series revolves around a religion. Who's the god? YOU! WOW, this even feels more awesome when time magazine chose you as the person of the year in 2006, isn't it?

Yes, you are a god with all the powers and responsibilities. You can train a holy creature, you can expand your cities, you can work miracles, you can decide what people should do for a living [...].

The main objective is this: there are rival gods. You should conquer their followers by winning their faith, and this is done by proving you're either lovelier or more terrifying

5 The presentation on the game box states that, by playing the game, “History becomes Mythology”.

than their present god [...]. So there you are: an entire game is a cool religion revolving around you". (Nazifpour 2010)

Shamans (but also wizards and sorcerers) are another popular kind of religious operator in videogames, especially in RPGs. In particular, they enjoy a significant popularity in the most played on-line game in the world, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) (12 million worldwide paying players officially declared in 2010⁶). Shamans are a "class" (developers' term) of characters using magical powers. They are associated with the "Horde", one of the two reciprocally hostile groups in the game (the other being the "Alliance"), for instance that are composed of primitive, monstrous and belligerent races such as goblins, orcs, trolls and other aberrations mostly taken from Nordic European folklore and J. R. R. Tolkien's literature. The virtual world of *World of Warcraft* is extremely articulated and complex, but also extremely fascinating, up to the point that apparently a significant amount of players (in the number of millions) spend more time in the virtual than in the "real" reality.⁷

In the official site of the game we find a description of the shamans – which are a "class" playable by role-players – in *World of Warcraft*:

"Shamans are spiritual guides and practitioners, not of the divine, but of the very elements. Unlike some other mystics, shamans commune with forces that are not strictly benevolent. The elements are chaotic, and left to their own devices, they rage against one another in unending primal fury. It is the call of the shaman to bring balance to this chaos. Acting as moderators among earth, fire, water, and air, shamans summon totems that focus the elements to support the shaman's allies or punish those who threaten them".⁸

As we see, several terms borrowed from the academic study of religions ("mystic", "totem", "shaman" itself) are used to define the nature of the virtual characters and their powers and abilities in the game. The expression "shamans commune with forces" clearly echoes the more or less conventional definition of a shaman as a "medicine man" who was born with or develops a special and exclusive relationship with spiritual entities.⁹ The fact that the category of shamanism as well as

6 <http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/press/pressreleases.html?id=2847886>, consulted on 1 September 2013. These kinds of games are usually labeled as "MMORPG", an acronym for "massively multiplayer online role-playing game".

7 According to recent studies, *World of Warcraft* has been crafted so effectively by its developing and writing teams to the point of provoking often a "Video game addiction", a psycho-behavioral pathology which is nowadays also related, with the emergence of the on-line massive gaming, to the "Internet addiction disorder" (Young 1999); in the relative Wikipedia page we also read that "Orzack, a clinical psychologist at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts, claims that 40 percent of World of Warcraft players are addicted" [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_addiction_disorder, consulted on 7 October 2013].

8 <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/game/class/shaman>, consulted on 6 October 2013.

9 The historical and anthropological literature about shamans and shamanism is immense and this is not the place to explore it. The reader will find a brief and useful introduction to the anthropology of shamanism and shamanic practices in Bowie 2006: 174-199. It is worth noting that the link of shamans with "chaos" and natural elements

the factual religious operators labeled as shamans have been the object of an intense scientific debate in the last decades clearly does not pose any problem for the game developers.¹⁰ Nor does it seem to bother the players. We can therefore observe as a controversial academic notion has been borrowed and manipulated by the developers and then poured in players imagination despite – or probably even because of – its debated and controversial status. It is not by chance, after all, that it has been noticed that shamanism is a “handy a term, which can mean almost whatever you want it to mean” (Bowie 2006: 179), and that it “has achieved a broad currency in popular literature and in popular imagination” (ibid). An entire, huge, transnational “imagined community” (Anderson 2006), that of *6 orl of 6 arcraft* players, who interact through the game and otherwise (through blogs, publications, meetings, etc.), construct a part of its representations on the commercial reuse of a controversial category built by historians and anthropologists of religion, in an inextricable “bricolage” of constructed and reconstructed representations. Needless to say, we are very far from Siberian Tungus’ religious practices.¹¹

Magic is another very popular feature in videogames and is practically omnipresent in fantasy computer games. It would therefore be superfluous to mention here particular examples. Many videogames, in fact, make it possible for the players to transcend, inside the structure of the game, (the virtual representation of) natural reality and its rules, to which we are all normally subordinated. In these games, the interface allows the player to perform actions like casting spells, riding dragons and be reborn after a sudden death by means of magic (which very often depends, like in the popular *Diablo* RPG series¹², on the use of *mana*, a substance which is nothing else then the popularized version of the Melanesian emic category well-known in anthropological literature).¹³

evoked in the quoted passage is not casual. In *6 orld of Warcraft* imaginary, the monstrous races of the “Horde” seem to be associated with old-anthropological *Laturvölker*: while humans, elves and dwarfs are represented as a set of civilized “medieval” (European) peoples, the Horde is a mixture of races exotically dressed and armed, which live in huts, have tribal bonds and perform rituals that are comparable to those of the “primitives”. This “Orientalized” dichotomy clearly carries a vision of the world where the “Westerns” are associated with the Alliance, whereas the Horde corresponds to non-Western and non-civilized people (I borrow the notion of “orientalization” from Edward Said well-known study about Western collective construction of Oriental otherness [Said 1978; this essay, however, should be read keeping in mind the fundamental critical observations by J. Clifford {Clifford 1988}]).

10 For the intellectual history of the category of “shaman” and the notion of “shamanism” and their uses and misuses in the academic literature, see Botta 2010.

11 In the next section I will explore some of the implications of this eminently post-modern way of making and living imaginaries. I will also come back, more analytically, on the notions of “imagined community” and “bricolage”.

12 The first *Diablo* (Blizzard 1996) is considered a reference game by the whole gaming community.

13 More particularly, *mana* in fantasy videogames seems to refer to the old-anthropological conception of it as a supernatural power or energy determining the effectiveness of magical performances; a power or energy named differently but still universally present in all populations actually practicing one form or another of magic. This theory was developed by French anthropologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss in one of the first systematic theory of magic: Mauss 1950 (1902-1903), and has since then been often criticized (see, for instance, Eliade 1967: 135).

Already Malinowski noticed the almost obsessive interest in magic that Westerns have developed in modern times (Malinowski 1992: 69-70). This interest, in diverse and uneven forms, is even stronger today and flourishes particularly on the Internet. People involved in it are often completely unaware of the anthropological and historical debate about what magic is, how we can construct such a notion by means of comparison, how to distinguish different types of magic and magic operators and similar matters. In fact, magic in popular computer games like *Heroes of Might and Magic*, *Sacred*, *Age of Wonders* or *The Elder Scrolls*¹⁴ represents probably the last stage in the popularization of a notion that, at the end of the process, has nothing to do with magic as scholars (historians, folklorists and anthropologists mainly) intend it¹⁵ (and although the degree of verisimilitude can vary a lot amongst the titles mentioned and hundreds of others similar). Magic is a constitutional part of the broader religious imaginary that underlies most of the cultural mass products I have presented so far.

In this second section I have chosen some cases taken from the vast domain of fantasy-oriented products. This choice was made in order to approach more smoothly the topics of the third section, which will start precisely with a brief assessment of fantasy popular culture.

3. Fantasy Imaginaries, Imagined Communities and Real Commodification

Many games evoke an imagined time pervaded by magic, sacredness and epicness. In this regard, all the titles mentioned in the last section are pretty indicative, and many more could be very easily added to the representative list (a few more amongst the most popular ones: *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009), *Myth: the Fallen Lords* (Bungie 1997), *Heretic: Shadow of the Serpent Riders* (Raven Software 1994), *Dark Age of Camelot* [Mythic Entertainment 2001]). It is the imagined time of so called-fantasy fiction. In short, fantasy can be conceived as a side-product of late Romanticism and a very popular manifestation of what has been called the Western (and eminently European) “taste for the Middle Ages”, which has been, in turn, one of the main cultural outcome of Romanticism (Amalvi 1996).¹⁶ The cultural products labeled as “fantasy” are usually set in imagined pseudo-medieval times, when different populations and/or races (dwarves, elves, goblins,

14 All the titles quoted are very successful commercial products, generating numerous sequels played by dozens of millions of players throughout the world. Here I mention only the most recent (and successful) ones: *Heroes of Might and Magic VI* (Black Hole Entertainment 2011), *Sacred II (Fallen Angel)* (Ascaron 2009), *Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic* (Triumph Studios 2003) or *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011).

15 For an introduction to anthropological theories of magic, see Testa 2010 and Bowie 2006: *assim*.

16 There are several essays in the history of fantasy fiction (see, for instance, Waggoner 1978), but, as far as I know, no systematic anthropological study.

etc.) and different gods combat for power and supremacy.¹⁷ Magic and fantastic beasts usually drawn from European folklore (dragons, leprechauns, unicorns, etc.) are common characters. A strong moral demarcation – if not a manichaeism *tout !ourt* – is also frequently present: both in literature and videogames the forces of Good and Evil are always easily recognizable and engaged in perpetual fight. Contemporary fantasy fiction can therefore be regarded to as a post-modern product of the modern romantic fascination for the Middle Ages, folklore, sacredness and primitiveness, in a constant interaction with numerous other more or less directly related cultural tendencies and fashions like ecology, new age, spiritualism, neo-paganism and certain youth-subcultures (Wicca, hippies, folk music, black metal and others).¹⁸ In spite of their often radically different political, philosophical and religious views, European Romanticism constitutes one – if not the only – of their common cultural matrices.¹⁹

Romantic representations of mysterious esotericism, fairy medieval times, eerie archaism and gothic atmospheres are nowadays produced, reproduced and carried primarily by mass cultural products of very diverse typologies. Several could be mentioned: music genres like folk, progressive rock and metal; fantasy literature and comics; toys, carnival costumes and masks representing dragons, princesses, knights and monsters; cinematographic productions populated by witches, wizards and fairy-tales characters (from Walt Disney’s movies for children²⁰ to *Shrek* [DreamWorks Pictures 2001]) or epic cycles about famed fictional or historical characters (Robin Hood and King Arthur²¹, *the Lord of the Rings*²², *the Game of Thrones*²³, etc.). The representations generated and carried by these heterogenic products have a strong capability of circulation and penetration, especially thanks to omnipresent mass media like televisions and, even more importantly, the Internet, the latter being the macro-context in which they nowadays flow freely, relentlessly and unstoppably.

17 Fantasy imagined societies, which are manifestly shaped after European medieval times and which can be, like in the case of Tolkien’s literature, pretty articulated and sophisticated, are commonly polytheistic. Ironically enough, no other time in European history has been so hegemonically monotheistic as Middle Ages.

18 Medieval fantasy is particularly popular especially in Europe: it has been rightly argued that, for European folks, the Middle Ages “are an époque of mass popularity because it is at once other and exotic but also familiar and so to say domestic” (Clemente 2005: 261).

19 On the religious aspects of some these cultural tendencies or fashions, see Cerri, Mapelli, Visca 2008, Eliade 1976 and Testa 2009. The literature about so-called “NRMs” (New Religious Movements) is very rich. For an introduction, see Barker, Warburg 1998 and, briefer, Eller: 2007 160-172.

20 See, for instance, *Snow White* (Disney 1937) and *The Sleeping Beauty* (Disney 1959). Referring to a romantic view of Nordic medieval times, K. M. Hjemdahl openly evokes a “disneyfication of the past” (2003: 106).

21 Robin Hood and King Arthur have been the objects of innumerable cinematographic productions.

22 I refer to the last, worldwide popular adaptation, directed by Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema 2001-2003).

23 *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-), a fantasy TV series adapted after George R. R. Martin’s novels, is one of the most expensive, critically acclaimed and popular TV series ever made (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game_of_Thrones, consulted on 22 September 2013).

But how and why are these cultural products made and spread out and how and why are they so appreciated by social agents so diverse and numerous? In order to answer the former question, I evoke a well-known anthropological notion, that of *bricolage*. These products are in fact made by means of collection, juxtaposition, invention and reinvention of historical and fictional features, in a way that has little or nothing to do with realism and/or historical correctness,²⁴ in other words, by operations of cultural *bricolage*. I use the critical notion of bricolage to signify a precise cultural option and operation: the construction of imaginaries, taxonomies or more or less coherent set of representations on the basis of elements and features taken from culturally and socially available symbolic sources.²⁵ These elements and features, especially in our post-modern, globally interrelated world, often circulate widely and transcend cultural, social, geographical and economic boundaries, making the recognition of potentially interesting products possible for social agents (consumers). Of course these elements and features can be and actually are borrowed and reproduced by cultural crafters (like writers, video-games designers and cinematographers, etc.) for their artistic and/or commercial purposes.

Bricolage is one of the most evident characteristics of fantasy videogames, which largely and freely manipulate, as I have already shown, the “imaginary sources” of ancient (especially “pagan”) and native religions, ancient and current monotheisms, esoteric and oriental traditions, and new religious movements. Videogames’ religious features constitute the implementation of cultural bricolage at its ultimate, one might say. This is especially evident in very recent and popular products: “World of Warcraft, for example, borrows extensively from mythology, literature, and pop

24 Realism is not in the agenda of fantasy imaginaries, although plausible historical features are often at the basis of the understanding and interest in fantasy mass products. This effect of historical verisimilitude is often implemented by authors in order to make people believe in what they are seeing or playing with (this is particularly evident in pseudo-historical films and games, for examples in those based on King Arthur’s cycle: many people, I have personally verified, believe in Arthur’s real existence not despite but because of movies and videogames). In fact, as it has already been noticed, some examples of “so-called fantasy fiction always keeps a loose condition of verisimilitude: it invents myths” (Flahaut 2001: 863). Historicity can also be found in futuristic, completely fantastic fiction: “there is a longstanding association with the *Star Wars* ‘Jedi’ and the history and culture of medieval Japan, made even more implicit in the *Star Wars Galaxies* series [a popular MMORPG: LucasArts 2003], and historicised tropes such as the medieval period or the Vikings dominate many fantasy games. These historical signifiers need not be very specific, but they rely on a player’s base understanding of how past mythologies or races might have lived. They are not, it is important to stress, either particularly detailed or particularly accurate, but rely on popular representations of history to sustain them” (MacCallum-Stewart, Parsler 2007: 203).

25 This brief definition owes to that of F. Bowie, who writes that “The term *bricolage* has been widely adopted within anthropology to refer to the creation of symbolic structures from a variety of culturally available symbols” (Bowie 2006: 70). Nevertheless, my use of – and reflection on – the notion depends firstly on C. Lévi-Strauss’s theorization about native classificatory systems (Lévi-Strauss 1962) but also on the observations about the theoretical and methodological utility of this notion recently proposed by P. Burke (in his turn also on the basis of Lévi-Strauss’s speculation: Burke 2008: 100-101). Recourses and applications of the paradigm of bricolage to interpret social and historical realities, and especially phenomena of cultural circulation, appropriation and invention, can be found in Hobsbawm 1983, Wolf 2001: 354 and Sahlins 1994.

culture and references pen and paper role-playing traditions, especially ‘D’ [*Dungeons and Dragons*]” (Geraci 2012: 106).

The imaginaries shaped in and by fantasy fiction in general and fantasy videogames in particular have three interrelated and interdependent dimensions: a) emotional, b) social and c) commercial, which I will now briefly explore in this order, with a particular emphasis on the religious (actual or potential) side of them.

It has been argued that a passion for fantasy fiction (and therefore the use – and abuse – of fantasy videogames) be related to a form of dissatisfaction with the real world.²⁶ As a hypothetical track, I suggest that, being both fantasy fiction and new religious movements (especially those appealing to Paganism) built on common cultural and imaginary basis, which are those of European romanticism, as I have argued above, they might have the same psychological basis, to be found, indeed, in a form of existential impatience or dissatisfaction. This general existential and/or psychological condition was considered crucial also by one of the first scholars to study new religious movements: Mircea Eliade.²⁷ His intuition about the relation between an “escapist” attitude and the (post-)modern luxuriance of esoteric and alternative religious movements is useful for my argument: new religious movements prosper, as an anthropologist has recently put, “as responses, accommodations, or protests to new and unsatisfactory social circumstances” (Eller 2007: 167).²⁸ Just like fantasy fiction, addictive use of Internet and compulsive video gaming, I would add.

It is well known nowadays that the abuse of videogames and psychological fragility do not constitute a good combination. Nevertheless, if on the one hand the “escapist sentiments” discussed so far produce or can produce forms of isolation or even pathologic behavior – as I have personally witnessed in many cases –, on the other they determine also a sense of “community” (often very strong) amongst people practicing video gaming, and especially fantasy (and historical) computer games. This is particularly true in our time, when networking amongst people sharing the same passions is made very easy thanks to the Internet. And this is exactly what has happened with many gamers of the games mentioned in the previous pages: veritable electronic communities (sometimes gathering also in the “real world”) have amalgamated around some of them, whose consumers share a strong sense of attachment, identity and even belonging, as it results clear from an

26 It is the classical and nowadays widely accepted “escapist theory”, discussed, amongst others, in an academic paper by one of the very father of contemporary fantasy fiction: J. R. R. Tolkien (who was professor of Germanic philology at Oxford): Tolkien 1983 [1947].

27 See the essays included in Eliade 1976.

28 Hence, it is probably not by chance if one of the most diffused and growing form of new religious movements is the so-called “Internet – or cyber – religion” (for a brief definition and discussion on the category of “Internet religion”, see Visca 2011; on the more or less homologous “cyber religion”, see Karaflogka 2002; for a wider and more articulated discussion on the topic, cfr. the contributions in Krüger 2005).

ethnographically oriented interaction with them. Forms of mutual recognition have been established especially around the magic, religious or “esoteric” features of the games, often regarded as “more symbolic” (like one of my informants had once explicitly claimed). So-called “forum”, which is an “online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages”,²⁹ is for gamers, much more than blogs, an arena in which sociality and a sense of community are created.³⁰ Videogames forums are transnational, post-modern tools of a new form of social engineering leading to the shaping and emergence of new groups, which in the last years have been the objects of ethnographic interest and therefore of anthropological theorization and literature.³¹

Not seldom involved in esoteric, ecological or new religious movements (especially new age and neo-paganism), consumers of fantasy videogames recognize themselves on the basis of shared symbols and representations. These, although not completely “collective” in the traditional, Durkheimian sense (Durkheim 2003), are nevertheless such to a given extent: they are collective amongst the collectivities of those more or less formalized communities of players who gather into the virtual – or even outside in the real – world. These communities are, furthermore, transnational and transcultural – although the videogames we have been talking about are popular especially in the ultra-industrialized world (U.S.A., EU, Japan, South Chorea and China) and in the Western world in particular – because the imaginaries on which they are founded are not “traditional”, ethnic and localized but syncretic, multiethnic and globalized. On their turn, the representations, symbols and commercial products that contribute to shape these imaginaries flow in continuous, uneven, interconnected cultural “streams” produced and reproduced by the media (especially by and in the Internet): to define these streams and the way they operate, we might use the category of “mediascapes” theorized by A. Appadurai (1996).

After the emotional and the social dimensions, it is time to evoke the third one: the commercial, which is somewhat intrinsic, since the imaginaries, representations and symbols we have been talking about so far are mainly carried by commercial products (books, comics, movies and videogames of course). Fantasy videogames produce an aesthetic or intellectual interest which eventually results in a commodification by being transformed into a commercial one and as such exploited for economic purposes. Appadurai’s global “mediascapes” turn out to be also “marketscapes”.³² And as long as religious features have an important role in the success and

29 I draw the definition from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_forum, consulted on 29 September 2013.

30 A friend and informant of mine has once confessed to spend more time playing and “chatting” in the forums of *6 orld of Warcraft* (and other forums as well) than with family and friends.

31 See the rhapsodic article Coate 1998 (1993), not an anthropological study but a pioneering reflection on “virtual communities”. R. Kozinets coined a term for the ethnography of online communities: “netnography” (Kozinets 1998). See also and especially the programmatic essay “The Anthropology of Online Communities” (Peterson, Wilson 2002).

32 This process is inherently related to a broader recent phenomenon brilliantly studied by geographer, economist and

circulation of these products (and “scapes”), they can be regarded as one of the key-element for a successful commodification, circulation and consumption.³³ Game developers and producers seem to have long come to this conclusion, too, as it has already been noticed: “by integrating mythical and religious elements [...] game designers can enhance player immersion and maximize their games’ appeal” (Geraci 2012: 102). No surprise: as I have already argued, another parallel between fantasy video gaming (usually filled with religious or pseudo-religious features) and new religious movements is that they are both formed by a vast global public of consumers who are constantly and voraciously looking for representations and sentiments of mystery, exoticism, esotericism and possibly magic. Since the categories of fantasy consumers, video gamers and followers of new religious movements often overlap, it is not surprising to see a common pattern characterizing them all: above all, an always stronger tendency towards an apparently paradoxical but nevertheless indubitable “religious desacralization”.³⁴ According to D. Visca, expert of new religious movements, collective forms of “new religiosity” are often characterized by a loss of spirituality and dimension of transcendence in favor of more mundane and easily approachable (“click-available”, I would say) ways of thinking and practicing religion. Several evident examples of this pattern could be mentioned: UFO cults, LaVeyan satanism, Transhumanism and “Pastafarianism” (or Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster³⁵). Amongst the causes of this phenomenon that echoes, *mutatis et utandis*, Max Weber’s well-known theory of the disenchantment of the modern world (Weber 2001), Visca explicitly mentions commodification and internetization.

sociologist D. Harvey, who rightly speaks of a current widespread form of “commodification of culture” which is a sub-process of a wider “commodification of everything”, both ideologically justified by neo-liberal moral economy and actually implemented by neo-liberal global policies (Harvey 2002 and 2005: 165-167).

33 In the previous section I have presented the case-study of shamanic representations in the computer game *6 orld of 6 ar! raft*. According to what I am claiming in the text, it is not surprising to find a parallel between pseudo-shamanism within the frame of that commercial product and neo-shamanism “marketability”: F. Bowie has noticed how far the commodification of shamanism (what she calls “the current marketability of shamanism” [Bowie 2006: 191]) has gone: “one can buy shamanic drums and other associated paraphernalia [...] on the Internet” (ibid). The similitudes between these two forms of shamanisms lie in escapist religious sentiments, post-modern imagination and commodification.

34 The expression is used in Visca 2011.

35 Pastafarianism adherents “maintain publicly that Pastafarianism is a genuine religion” (I quote from the Wikipedia page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Spaghetti_Monster, consulted on the 1st of October 2013). During its first year of life (2005), the movement’s website “garnered tens of millions of hits”. The supporters of the movements are thousands around the world and it has already triggered the academic machine, with several articles and conferences devoted to this “new religion” – including a conference paper called “Holy Pasta and Authentic Sauce: The Flying Spaghetti Monster's Messy Implications for Theorizing Religion” (all data and quotations from Wikipedia).

4. Histor(iography), Power, and Religion in *Sid Meier's Civilization*

In this fourth and last section the focus and the nature of my observations will change considerably and concentrate only on one, well circumscribed, system of planets in the videogames galaxy: *Sid Meier's Civilization* series, one of the most beloved and awarded in the history of computer games. The game, originally published in 1991 (*Sid Meier's Civilization*³⁶) has come to its fifth edition (*Civilization 0* [Firaxis 2010]) and has sold millions of copies. Let it be presented in its publisher's words:

“Created by legendary game designer Sid Meier, Civilization is a turn-based strategy game series in which you attempt to build an empire to stand the test of time. Become Ruler of the World by establishing and leading a civilization from the dawn of man into the space age. Wage war, conduct diplomacy, discover new technologies, go head-to-head with some of history's greatest leaders, and build the most powerful empire the world has ever known”.³⁷

In the nineties *Civilization* was considered “the deepest, most rewarding PC game of all time”.³⁸ Few years later, when the third game was published, it was welcomed by *Ti e* magazine as “the greatest game of all time”.³⁹ In 2005, I bought and played with the fourth game of the series, *Civilization IV* (Firaxis 2005). The game was exceptionally engaging, clever and well-done.

Being conceived as a computer game with historical settings (although this historicity is far from being self-evident, as I argue below), in the last years the *Civilization* series has been the object of scholarly literature concerning its potentiality as a possible instrument for teaching history in schools in a captivating fashion or even, as it has been recently claimed, as a possible means of historiography, which is, as a means not only to present and make circulate but also to *roduce* historical knowledge. In the first, following part of this last section I will introduce and comment the literature of this debate, also exposing my point of view, before concluding this essay with the two last issues of power and religion in *Civilization*.

Sid Meier's masterpiece series is a very articulated and difficult game which sets the player in an invented world in which “civilizations” struggle for total hegemony. These “civilizations” are depicted after well-known – and more or less homogenous – ones, described in historical and anthropological literature (there are 43 civilizations in *Civilization 0*, each with its own characteristics and representative leader; for example: the Romans [leader: Caesar], the [North]

36 Also known as *Civilization* (MicroProse 1991). All the other games are also named after the series creator, Sid Meier, but they are usually referred to without mentioning “*Sid Meier's*”. From now on I will do the same.

37 <http://www.civilization.com/>, consulted on 11 October 2013.

38 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization_%28series%29#Reception, consulted on 12 October 2013.

39 *Ti e* magazine article quoted in Poblócki 2002: 271.

Americans [Washington], the Celts [Boudicca], the Iroquois [Hiawatha], the Arabs [Harun al-Rashid], etc.). The game logic and structure depend on a wide set of sophisticated options to control the diverse aspects of the game and manage the player's empire needs and characteristics (politics, commerce, finance and economics, science and technology, religion, warfare, diplomacy, and others). Although the civilizations' development mechanisms are more or less historically-based, the world map of the game where the player can actually build and implement his or her virtual empire and make it expand and prosper is invented (randomly produced by the game mechanism), with few or no realistic representational features of earth geography. Despite this and other manifest non-historical (or pseudo-historical) and non-realistic elements, there are several scholars who have claimed and claim, *mutatis et utandis*, for *Civilization* usefulness in the classroom in order to raise students' interest in – and comprehension of – history or even as a general means for studying and understanding history (also at University level) (Chapman 2012, 2013, Bachynski, Kee 2009, Squire 2004 and Taylor 2003).

I will not enter in a debate that has to do mainly with pedagogical issues and that therefore transcends my fields of expertise – even though I cannot but express my skepticism for this kind of approach to the study and the learning of history. Instead, I will focus on one question recently raised, developed and presented in two articles by A. Chapman, and especially in the most recent one, named “Is Sid Meier's *Civilization* history?”, published in the journal *Rethinking History* (Chapman 2013).

Chapman has thoroughly investigated the forms and the contents of so-called historical videogames, rightly claiming that “historical videogames must be understood on their own terms” (Chapman 2012: 2). Games logic is different from other narratives logics, but this, he argues, should not be regarded as a limit for producing historical knowledge. Rather, videogames may establish a different kind of historical knowledge, as useful and trustworthy as more “classical” kinds. In other words, Chapman's attempt is to evaporate the aura of historical unreliability and *invraisemblance* that surrounds historical games and, in so doing, give theoretical depths to the consequential assertion that not only videogames themselves but the very process of gaming (especially in relation to *Civilization*) may be one legitimate type of historical narrative amongst others. Chapman sustains his position by borrowing tools and arguments from several post-modern theoreticians and historians who have worked about historiographical methodology. For him “[videogames] developers [make] similar choices to those historians who write ‘proper’ history” (Chapman 2013: 316). Also, videogames' historical “flaws” cannot be brought back to videogame design only, as they are inherent to any kind of historical narrative: both historical books and historical videogames cannot be flawless and give perfect representations (or “simulations”, as Chapman writes) of past

realities.⁴⁰ The logical consequence is that professional historians cannot demand for the monopoly of the production of “proper” history, as cinema and videogames may also advocate not only for the status of historical representations but also for that of *historiographical* narratives, what involves the capability of presenting and narrating “past-as-history” (author’s emphasis).

Chapman’s position is interesting and well discussed and has the virtue of being critically postulated. Nevertheless, I think that Chapman’s opinions and conclusions about history and historiography in videogames and especially *Civilization* (*er se* and also as the most eminent representative of historical videogames) cannot be accepted, and that because of several reasons that I will now introduce under the form of problematic points:

- *Civilization* cannot produce proper historical knowledge because it is constructed on isolated “compartments” (“civilizations”, religions, sciences, spans of time, virtual spaces) that are not always coherently – and even less often realistically – correlated. This is quite obvious inasmuch as videogames’ depictions and mechanisms cannot be as inextricably interrelated, fluid and multifaceted as real life features. Nevertheless, this consideration affects the general problem of the historical representativeness of historical videogames (*Civilization* for instance) for, conversely, in the last decades “paper” historiography, especially after the linguistic, anthropological and constructivist turns, has been trying to develop critical and holistic visions of the past.⁴¹ Unlike recent historiography, videogames produce and make circulate visions of the past which are partial, fragmented and, in the end, essentialized. Essentialization is manifest: *Civilization* gives non-historical, monolithic, stereotypical representations of past civilizations, in a way that strongly reminds XIX historiography.⁴² Thus, while recent trends in historiography (and anthropology) are oriented at trying to de-essentialize and criticize reified historical and social representations, videogames – as we have also seen in the previous sections of this essay – go in the very opposite direction.

40 This is one of the core-arguments of Chapman’s discussion. It underlines its entire speculation (“In actuality most of the flaws are not in the particular forms we use to explore ideas about the past but in the epistemological understanding of ‘history’ itself” [Chapman 2013: 318]: “[...] this intrinsic flaw in representation is not inherent to the digital simulation alone but to all simulation” [320]).

41 Holism orientates not only world history, but also historiographies of smaller-scale contexts; like micro-history for example, whose aim is to re-integrate small-scale, very circumscribed (and often localized) histories into wider sets of historical and socio-cultural patterns (the methodological literature about micro-history is abundant; Revel 1996 is probably the best introductory essay to the topic).

42 The anthropological literature about the de-essentialization of cultures and societies both past and contemporary regarded as social and historical monades is huge, and it would be inappropriate to summarize it here (but see, for instance as an early example, Clifford, Marcus 1986). Instead, I will mention a significant and precautionous example taken from XX. century historiography: more than half a century ago the French eminent historian F. Braudel had already criticized the criteria, often quite arbitrary, with which certain renowned historians (namely O. Spengler and A. Toynbee) had represented (and therefore re-constructed) past civilizations (Braudel 1969c [1959]). On the same problem, with regards to the reproduction of stereotyped civilizations in *Civilization*, see Poblócki 2002: 169-171 and 173. We will come back to this issue farther on.

- *Civilization* cannot produce proper historical knowledge because of the process and the reason of its making. In fact, writing history and developing videogames are two rather different jobs (in other words, videogames are made by game developers, historiography is made by historians).⁴³ Their methods are completely different in procedures and purposes. A historian, for instance, is never “unconscious” about his/her epistemological, theoretical and methodological choices in writing history – like often are game developers, according to Chapman himself.⁴⁴ Nor these two categories of professionals work with the same materials, despite what Chapman writes: “videogames are already capable of producing competing narratives, as developers/historians utilise the same basic sources” (Chapman 2013: 319). This statement is at least incorrect, if not completely untrue. In fact, it can be easily ascertained that no game developer has ever declared his or her sources or critically theorized and discussed with historians – in historical terms of course – about his or her way of interpreting primary sources in the process of developing a videogame. Nor historical videogames themselves (*Civilization* as well as others) cite any primary or secondary sources. And sources are at the basis of whichever kind of historiography.

What precedes must not be considered a weakness of game developing: again, developers do their job as well as historians do theirs.⁴⁵ And this is never an “unconscious” process. On the contrary, it is so conscious that the creators of the two most important and best sold historical computer games have openly admitted they were not doing historiography (thus disavowing Chapman’s claims): Sid Meier, creator of *Civilization*, has once said that “We are not trying to duplicate history” (quoted in Bachynski, Kee 2009: 1), whereas Bruce Shelley, creator of the *Age of Empires* series,⁴⁶ has quoted John Ford to express that, in game developing as well as in cinema, “It is more important to film the legend than the truth” (ibid). No surprise: after all, historiography and

43 This apparently obvious difference is refused by Chapman, who often, in his article, uses the compounded expression “developers/historians” (quotation farther in the text).

44 “When a developer makes the decision that their historical game will feature what I term a ‘realist simulation’ (i.e. the physics, audio-visual design, and rules will show a high degree of fidelity to the world we know), they are, simultaneously, often probably unconsciously, making the first epistemological decision about the approach that the game will take to the evidence of and its eventual claims to the past” (Chapman 2013: 319).

45 I believe that one of the main contributions of French historiographical theory of the last century has been its emphasis in considering – and theorizing about – making history as a *profession*, with all its knowhow, expertise, tricks and, above all, a necessary, specific methodological *aprentissage* (see Bloch 1993 and the important preface by J. Le Goff [1993]). And this, in order to avoid the risks of misunderstandings, incorrect revisionisms or even “memory assassination” like negationism (of which the most striking case has been described, criticized and refused in Vidal-Naquet 1987). The professional aspect of making historiography – and the relative literature – is not discussed by Chapman, which might be the reason for his audacious, reiterate parallels between game developers and historians.

46 *Age of Empires* is another very popular series of computer games with historical settings. *Ages of Empires II: The Age of Kings* (Ensemble Studios 1999), for instance, is still considered a milestone in the field of historical strategic games. Although several features clearly remind *Civilization* (for example, the player can choose amongst different civilizations and must develop prudent and forward-looking strategies in managing his/her empire), in others *Age of Empires* differs significantly (for example, the game modality is “real time” and not turn-based and it is far more oriented towards military strategy and warfare).

videogames have different aim and function. This rather obvious aspect is unfortunately neglected by Chapman, who, in his ardor to prove, with arguments often very sophisticated, that “paper” historiography and historical videogames share more or less the same amount of flaws, weaknesses and strengths (but in different forms and amounts), overlooks the fact that, in the end, the basic aim (the *raison d’être*) of a historical essay is to say something (approximately) true about the past, whereas the basic aim of a videogame is to sell as many copies as possible. Of course there is a commercial aspect in the production and circulation of historical knowledge and of course there is an intellectual aspect in the production and circulation of videogames, but these reciprocal aspects are secondary.⁴⁷ Function depends on the aim: the function of a videogame is to entertain, whereas the function of historiography is to improve our knowledge of the past (although, in this case also, no component belongs exclusively to either of them). Historiography (the essay) is a critical narrative that has a will for truth, historical videogame (*Civilization*) is a fictional narrative that has a will for entertainment.

Civilization cannot produce proper historical knowledge also (and probably especially) because its design, structure and logic produce counterfactual representations of geographical and historical (and more generically cultural) facts. In other words, the outcomes of a gamer’s strategies are not constrained by the need of reproducing actual facts of history. The main consequence is a playful production of counterfactual – which is, false – historical narratives. This serious defect subsists in every historical videogame. Two examples amongst many that could be mentioned:

In *Civilization* the player can choose the Iroquois and lead this “civilization” to build the Colosseum and defeat the Ancient Egyptians and the English Empire in order to attain the complete hegemony over a two continents planet and, eventually, set off to outer space.⁴⁸

is D #llies (TimeGate Studios 2004) is one of several games in which the player can play as Germany during Second World War and lead the Nazis to the victory. The game is very realistic in the reconstruction of settings, troops, weapons and other warfare features – like usually are videogames set during Second World War.

The gaming outcomes above mentioned are obviously counterfactual (i.e. historical untrue) and do not improve our knowledge of world history (nor, it goes without saying, do they produce new historical knowledge). Sometimes Chapman seems to be wholly aware of the profound anti-historical consequences of *Civilization*’s and other games’ counter-factuality. Other times not, like when he concludes, using R. Rosenstone’s words and in accord with him, that “the familiar, solid

47 This has already been noticed in an article named “Lessons Learned from Developing a ‘History Game’”:

“marketplace is demanding. The academy’s standards [and purposes, I would add] are different from those of the workplace” (Bachynski, Kee 2009: 10).

48 It is not only a question of players’ choices. The narratives of *ivilization* result, as Chapman cleverly demonstrates, from the interaction between players’ choices, developers’ and the programmers’ implemented vision of the history and the possibilities and limitations of the game logics, dynamics, and structures.

world of history on the page and the equally familiar but more ephemeral world history on the screen are similar in at least two ways: they refer to actual events, moments and movements from the past, and at the same time they partake of the unreal and the fictional” (quoted in Chapman 2013: 320). While the latter “way” is questionable but passable, the former one is hardly sustainable and even less provable: the Colosseum being built by the Iroquois can hardly be considered an “actual event”.⁴⁹

It has been written that, in historical videogames, “Historical contingency [is] determined by the formal rule system, which has been created by the computer programming” (Bachynski, Kee: 3). I would add that, even though the “contingency” is determined by computer mechanisms, it is, after all, implemented and experienced by the player. The point here is that neither the computer programming nor player’s choices are based on a critical and theoretically founded historiographical attitude (so much the less, if the historical knowledge of the player is shaped in the process of gaming...⁵⁰). Therefore, it remains audacious to define what results from this process as a form of reliable “historical narrative”, and it is possible to conclude that videogaming allows the player to “invent” the past (or something perceived as “the past”), whereas in “classical” forms of historiography the past is always a “given” that must be interpreted and cannot be invented.

- The programmatic essay by Chapman borrows extensively from post-modern epistemology and its uses of categories such as narrative, discourse, production of meaning and “past-as-history”. This is obviously no place to start a discussion about post-modernism and its categories, but I can declare that I do not deny the critical efficacy and usefulness of these categories. On the contrary, I also make (a prudent) use of them in this essay as well as, more in general, in my research. However, at the end of my critical reading of Chapman’s essay, I could not avoid the sensation that the author had somewhat overused them and enlarged too much their interpretative range and efficacy. For example, Chapman repeatedly states that “the production of historical (i.e. about the past) meanings” (Chapman 2013: 315) is at the basis of the presentation and perception of “past-as-history”: “the production of a videogame-based history (like any history) is a creative process, as meaning is produced even whilst a duty of care is given to the referential nature of the evidence” (319), and: “games developers/historians seek to arrange these pieces of referential data (with supporting explanation) to produce meaning: the beginnings of narrative construction” (ibid). The

49 Counter-factuality has also been seen as very problematic – and accordingly discussed – by E. MacCallum-Stewart and J. Parsler, for whom, in computer games “counterfactual history takes our own world and in some way changes it through the alteration of an event in our known past” (2007: 205). And also: “historical games are often blamed for their lack of accuracy and linear depictions of historical events. At the same time, they often involve recreations of history which may alter events, or encourage players to pursue multiple paths through a game which potentially follows different routes through history or offers alternative endings. Both of these issues are seen as problematic. One ignores history, the other changes it” (204).

50 I can only hope that Chapman is wrong when he writes that historical videogames produce representations “that their users recognize as history” (Chapman 2013: 327).

sylogism that underlines the conceptualization that can be inferred from these and many others' statements in Chapman's essay goes as follow: a videogame is a narrative that constructs meaning; history is a narrative that constructs meaning; *ergo*, videogame is history. It is clearly a false syllogism. (It becomes even clearer by simply exchanging the subject of the first term [and therefore the second term of the third proposition] with any other kind of "narrative", like myth, fairytale, Star Wars saga, etc.). Such a syllogism presupposes a part of Chapman's arguments and constitutes an epistemological aporia.

The products of historiography are subjected to the open, public discussion of professional historians who critically evaluate their contents, along with the theories and methods that sustain them. Videogames are not subject to the same evaluating procedures and therefore escape from a scientific approach. Or better, they do not escape it: they simply do not pursue it.

A profound gap divides my conception of history and historiography from that of Chapman. Unlike him and other radical post-modern thinkers that more or less consciously and critically pursue the task of "abrogating the borderline between historical narratives and fiction" (Iggers 2005: 149)⁵¹, I think that historiography *is* a science, subjected to the rules of criticism, non-contradiction, coherency, methodological and theoretical update, mutual control and assessment, and accumulation of knowledge. History is not only a "narrative about the past", as frequently stated in Chapman; nor it is, in my opinion, only one way amongst many others to imagine "past-as-history". History is (still and above all, for me), an attempt to say something *true* about the past.

Sid Meier's *Civilization* has also been studied as a very peculiar means of expressing and empowering a vision of the world and a socio-cultural theory deeply involved with power in its double anthropological and more common sense.⁵² The game is in fact so evidently related with this dimension of human experience that it is easily deducible also from the few introductory lines quoted at the beginning of this fourth section and taken from the presentation of the game on the Internet: the main aims of the game are to "build the most powerful empire the world has ever known" and consequently become "The Ruler of the World". Hence what follows rises not only epistemological, theoretical and methodological questions, but also ethical

In reality, this imperialistic attitude had been developed by Sid Meier also in another computer game characterized by a rather indicative title: *Colonization* (MicroProse 1994). E. MacCallum-Stewart and J. Parsler, in a section of their essay "Historicizing the Computer Game" significantly named "Altered History", have summarized the game plot as follows:

51 This is an excellent intellectual history of XX century historiography, with acute insights about the "post-modern turn".

52 Literature about theories of power in social sciences is huge. I have epitomized some of the most influential of these theories (namely those developed by Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault) in Testa 2014 (forthcoming).

“Sid Meier’s *Colonisation* (1994) was a management game which involved the exploration and subsequent colonization of the American continent. The player could take the role of either English, Spanish, French or Dutch seafarers. Colonisers had to establish successful settlements by setting up small towns and balancing their resources, harvesting the land and negotiating with the local natives for trade and land space. These latter relations involved trade and balancing the relationship between settlements and indigenous tribes already living in the area. Key decisions involved encroaching on locals’ land, and making the choice to supply the Indians first with horses, and then with guns. The final objective of the game was to fight off an invading army from the country of origin, and achieve Independence.” (MacCallum-Stewart, Parsler 2007: 207)

No surprise that “The colonisers’ most frequent option was to go to war with the natives, destroying them in the process” (ibid). In their article, MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler go on with expressing several interesting arguments about history and counter-factuality in the game, but we will not follow them on this path. I quoted *Colonization* just to show how the political and ideological basis that underlies the vision of history and power of the mature offspring of Sid Meier, the *Colonization* series, are by no means casual or unique.

Several other authors have noticed and discussed this side of one of the most popular and best-selling computer game. J. Bachynski and K. Kee, for example, have noticed that “Civilization has been criticized for perpetuating American myths of benevolent capitalism and frontier expansion” (Bachynski, Kee 2009: 2). However, there is one essay in particular that has thoroughly and convincingly explored the power dimension inherent in *Civilization*, coming to rather drastic conclusions that, sharable or not, raise many questions. This essay is in Foucauldian style named “Becoming State: The Bio-cultural Imperialism of Sid Meier’s *Civilization*” (Pobłocki 2002).

For K. Pobłocki, “*Civilization* is the first bold attempt to simulate the whole human history in computer software. Ambitious as it sounds, the game nevertheless does not go beyond reproducing models of social change well known, and extensively criticized, in twentieth-century social science” (164). The author shows how in the first three episodes of the series, those which, as we have seen, contributed to build up the fame of *Civilization* as “the greatest game of all time”, the best path leading to victory is to try to reproduce not the general history of “civilizations”, whatever one mean by this expression, but to reproduce the history of “*our*” “civilization”: in Pobłocki’s words, “the history of the West” or better the history of the United State, “the ultimate inheritor of all the human advancement and elevated to the position of the most perfect and most ‘civilized’ state of all” (166). The author’s conclusions are severe: for him, Sid Meier’s philosophy of history is characterized by a “crude determinism, and very much in the Hegelian vein [...]. The *telos* is well known. In the case of Hegel it was the Prussian state [...], the fetish-object of Meier’s fantasies is

the ‘ultimate empire’, the state that resembles most the end product of all human advancement, namely the United States of America” (167).⁵³

“By embracing nineteenth century models of social change and by brutal [sic] projection of the Western history onto contingent grounds of randomly generated maps, random civilization names, random starting positions, random distribution of resources and the like, he [Sid Meier] essentializes the story of the Western success, suggesting that their causes lie in personal abilities, rationality, high administrative skills and other qualities of the Westerners, reducing culture to an imperialist check list (one either has it or not), and suggesting that starting conditions (both ecological and cultural) do not matter in the absorbing of a new advancement since there is no difference between developed and imported advances. Liberal democracy is the best political system, developed by the most cunning ones, and can be swallowed *en bloc* by all those who wish to live peacefully surrounded by thriving economic, cultural and scientific life, just as the Americans do today”. (171)⁵⁴

Power in *Civilization* is related to both the game dynamics and the interpretation of historical and social features given by its creator, Sid Meier. In the end, the conceptualization of power in these terms sustains the crafting of a vision of world history which empowers and legitimates the hegemony of the West, and particularly the imperialistic claims of the United States of America.

Having experienced *Civilization* myself, I think that the conclusions expressed by the authors quoted so far, especially Pobłocki’s, are convincing, although, in the last case, expressed probably in a way too severe. After all, one might say, *Civilization* is a cultural product whose main aim is to entertain, not an imperialistic manifesto. True. However, these very same conclusions should be meditated by those who claim for this game’s utility and efficacy as a vehicle (or even a producer) of historical knowledge. Sid Meier’ vision of the world and philosophy of history as outlined so far are very problematic and controversial and would surely not represent a suitable resource for learning history.

The last portion of this essay will focus on the topic of religion in *Civilization*.⁵⁵

53 If this interpretation is correct, Sid Meier’s would be sustained by the “modernization theory” (based on the “three worlds model”) which has been a hegemonic cultural (social, political and economic) theory widespread in the West and especially in the U.S.A. during Cold War years (as it has been convincingly re-affirmed, recently, in Chary, Verdery 2009: 19). Very briefly, “modernization theory” advocated that the best world possible was the democratic, liberal and technologically advanced “first world” – especially in its north-American declension –, opposed to the non-democratic, illiberal and technologically underdeveloped “second” (socialist) and “third” (southern) worlds.

54 “Civilization proves that the history of the West is the only logical development of the humankind that would have happened anywhere and anytime, regardless of the initial conditions and players’ strategies. [...]” (168).

55 The topic is also discussed, very weakly indeed, in Geraci 2012: 104-105 and Owens 2012.

Religion has a rather important – although not primary – role in the dynamics of the game. First of all, following the principle of a global mass commercial product, the “religious side” is treated in a quite “politically correct” way. The long (224 pages!) *Civilization 10* manual has a whole section devoted to religion (*Civilization 10* manual, pp. 77-82), a section which begins with a box named “Religion in This Game” containing a statement which deserves to be cited here:

“We know that people have extremely strong opinions about religions – in fact, many a war has arisen when these beliefs collide. We at Firaxis have no desire to offend anyone. However, given the importance that religions have had in human development, we didn’t want to just leave them out of the game altogether; instead we have tried to handle them in as respectful, fair and even-handed manner as possible. (All religions in the game have the same effects, the only difference being their technological requirements.) There are seven religions in *Civilization IV* (testing having determined that seven is the optimal number for gameplay). When determining which seven to include, we picked those religions that we thought would be most familiar to our audience. We do not mean to imply that these religions are more important, better or worse than any other religions. We offer no value judgments on religion; we mean no disrespect to anyone’s beliefs. We’re game designers, not theologians.” (77)

First remark: over the thousands of religions individuated in world’s history by historians and anthropologists, only seven have been “picked”: the “most familiar”, namely the most statistically relevant in terms of believers. In the manual they are reported in alphabetical order: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Taoism (81-82). It is evident how “ethnic” or “indigenous” religions have been carefully avoided, and understandably: the game’s imperialistic logic can only fit with a universalistic, expansive (and even aggressively so) religious attitude, an attitude well represented by some of the religions above quoted.⁵⁶ Moreover, those religions are amongst the oldest, those which have proved to be more flexible and adaptable to historical changes. Another reason for the choice, linked to that of their “popularity”, is their “marketability”.

Second remark: the above mentioned religions are represented in an extremely static way. Their models completely lack inner diversity, dynamism, local or temporal variations. Thus, the mechanical automatism of *Civilization* game, combined with the developers’ choice to make “the same effects” happen with any religion, flattens the historical reality, which is, the differences in the ways in which whatever of those religions has historically developed. *Civilization* religions are monolithic, static, reified entities which offer no insights about real religions and actually mislead the player about them.

56 I make a simplification for the sake of brevity. Actually the category of “ethnic – or indigenous – religion” is rather problematic, as it has been recently argued (Tajord 2013). The category of “world – or universalistic – religion” is, conversely, relatively less problematic (see Eller 2007: 188-217).

Third remark, related to the previous one: religions have probably been amongst the most influential factors in world history, deeply affecting social, economic, material, political, artistic and generally cultural features of societies. Therefore, the fact that “all religions in the game have the same effects” results in a highly counterfactual depiction. This can be explained by appealing to two elements that characterize developers’ standpoint: a strong concern for politically correctness and a lack of methodological awareness and interest for historiography and anthropology.

Fourth remark: the last sentence quoted, “We’re game designers, not theologians!!!”, could be used as an argument for those who wish to see *Civilization* used in history classes. The choice of the word “theologians” instead of “historians” is already questionable, and significant for an assessment of the impact of the scientific study of religion over non-academic sectors of American society. The point, however, is that this statement is an evident (and slightly craven) way to easily sort the issue out, an admission of helplessness which sounds like “ok, we wanted and actually had to integrate religions in the game but had no clue how to do it in a realistic way and without cutting out the markets of non-Westerns and non-Christians; so, this is the result”.

With regards to the actual functioning of religions in *Civilization*, they basically function as other technologies in the game “tech-tree”, an apparatus that allows the empire to develop – in a rather evolutionary manner – according to the gamer’s strategic choices. Religions can be “discovered” at some conditions, which is, after the discovery of some other material and immaterial technologies. For example, in *Civilization 10* the technology “Theology” enables the technology “Christianity”, “Meditation” enables “Buddhism”, “Polytheism” enables “Hinduism”, etc. As material and immaterial technologies are interrelated, the paths leading to each religion are not completely linear: for example, “Monotheism”, which enables “Judaism”, requires both the technologies “Polytheism” and “Masonry”. This evolutionary, functionalist and interconnected system reminds, *mutatis et utandis*, that theorized by XX century historian of religions A. Brelich, for whom recognizable stages of human development were determined by the interdependent influences of several factors historically ascertainable and more or less reproducible in different historical and geographical contexts. For instance, this paradigm was applied by the author to the study of polytheism as a specific and well-defined religious form (Brelich 2010 [1960]), and it might be of some interest to notice a convergence between Brelich’s speculation and the game logic: in *Civilization 10* the technology “Polytheism” leads to “Priesthood”, “Monotheism” and, along with another technology (“Alphabet”), to “Literature”. In his work about polytheism, Brelich showed how writing (therefore literature) and the birth of polytheism were correlated; he also argued that polytheism led to the creation of “ritual specialists” (priests) and that, after a long development, it also determined the conditions for the diffusion and success of monotheism.

It is quite unlikely that Sid Meier or other developers ever read Brelich’s works (Brelich has never been translated into English and is not very well known outside the Italian academic milieu),

but this convergence is nevertheless significant in the sense that it shows how, in spite of what we have seen so far, videogames' logic and structures (and more generally virtual representations of religions) can sometimes produce or trigger a conceptualization of religious dynamics that rejoins the scientific one, even being this conceptualization completely unconscious for – and unwilling to – their producers. The lesson we can draw from this last example is that religious representations can be meaningful and thought-provoking regardless of the means they are expressed by and even in spite of the purposes for which they are conceived, realized and reproduced (in other words, the distinction between emic and etic interpretations and the importance of this demarcation applies also to videogames religions) (Harris 1976).

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Socialization of Teenagers Playing The Sims®

The Paradoxical Use of Video Games to Re-enchant Life

Pascaline Lorentz, PhD

Abstract

In order to scrutinize what video games can bring more into individuals' life; a doctoral research had been undertaken on the teenage audience of *The Sims*®, a game simulating life. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods drove to design what I called the journey of self-discovery of the gamer and development of the video-ludological socialization concept (Lorentz, 2013).

Adopting an overall angle, this paper apprehends video games as the manifestation of the re-enchantment of the world. To begin with the recall of the rationalization process presented by Max Weber (2001/1905), whose explained the recoil of religious institutions in our societies at his time by saying that science had replaced religion for explaining life and the world, called the disenchantment. To a certain extend I claim here that video games are the perfect product of this rationalization movement (Caillois, 1967/1958). Paradoxically, video games allow their enthusiasts to live fantastic lives and dreamed situations. Individuals find eventually a way to believe again in the so-called impossible and therefore re-enchant their rationalized world.

Keywords

video gaming, *The Sims*®, socialization, re-enchantment, religious institutions

1. Introduction

When my social media network received information about Andy Robertson's¹ speech² on video games as the next big religion on the first of August 2013, I thought that my paper abstract could

1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9u1zMCos8w>

1 Andy Robertson is a journalist expert on video games working for the magazine *Wire* in the UK.

2 <http://kotaku.com/video-games-are-the-next-big-religion-991525452>

not have been so popular so quickly. In fact, we both developed the same argument at the same time as he delivered his speech on TED Talk in April 2012³ when I was finishing writing my doctoral dissertation. This coincidence demonstrates how contexts impact on the emergence of ideas. Evidently our two speeches start from the same point without coexisting on the long term. Indeed we shared the same belief, at least at the beginning.

As Emile Durkheim stated: “religions are unified systems of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called church, all those who adhere to them” in his last work (Durkheim, [1915] 1965, p.62).

This paper aims to demonstrate how video games respond to this definition of religions. In addition, we postulate that beliefs are products of social experience, here video gaming.

For narrowing the scope, this article concentrates on western societies of today. Based mainly on western and mostly European history and facts, I aim to suggest paths to explain reasons why video games took up so largely in the last few years. Thus, how do video games can be sociologically assimilated to religions? And if they do, what are social functions they fulfill?

Using data collected during the doctoral research on teenagers playing *The Sims*® (EA, 2000-2009)⁴, this article provides arguments supporting the amalgamation of video games and religions by presenting how video gaming worlds coalesce with Durkheim’s definition of religions. The principle of *The Sims*® is to reproduce life of an individual⁵, a *Sim*, to whom the gamer must find a job to get money on his/her bank account as to buy food and furniture. At first sight, this video game seemed very simplistic, and “it’s not fun to simulate life problems”, as some specialists from industry claimed (Ichbiah, 2004/1998). This claim is done without looking at the game in a deeper fashion, and especially without giving voice to gamers and paying attention to their experiences of the game.

In this paper, practices of gamers scrutinized along with other gaming activities support the idea that video gaming is a meaningful activity that fosters beliefs. Then, as a result, the attention will be dedicated to the share of these beliefs and practices by gamers forming a community. Their devotion and dedication to this activity drive the argumentation to the explanation of the sacralised functionality of video gaming.

Video gaming had been a controversial activity and its way to be legitimized among other leisure was a long and tiresome journey (Bogost&Mauco, 2008; Donnat, 2009; Lorentz, 2012b). The first part of this paper deals with aspects of video gaming that makes it meaningful and also

3 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTJUrJ44kew>

4 Trailers from the first to the fourth : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1N2h3M6uj4>

5 Trailer of The Sims 1 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxRBqD-85Es>

controversial on some points. Presenting the system of beliefs and practices that the game forms besides showing how online communities of gamers serve social functions will lead us to understand why video gaming can be called a sacred activity.

In the second part of this paper adopting a perspective to look at the bigger picture will allow us to scrutinize this practice with a different angle. The recoil of religious explanations of the world accompanied by the increasing importance of science drive us to the production of video games and what they allow individuals to believe in. All these conditions gathered leads to the emergence of video games as a paradoxical tool and its consequences for social functions.

2. Methodology

The doctoral research carried out on the teenage audience of *The Sims*® is composed of two parts. First, 180 students of French schools located in Strasbourg, Moscow and Abu Dhabi, aged from 12 to 16 years old, answered to a series of 67 questions about their play activity and its nature when playing *The Sims*® (EA, 2000-2009). This video game is one of the most popular games, and even if the first opus was released in 2000, its success is still paramount.

Second, 18 focused interviews enabled us to go deeper in quantitative findings by asking more developed explanations to players. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods drove to design the journey of self-discovery of the gamer (Lorentz, 2013). Analysing these data required to adopt a larger point of view in order to understand the role of video gaming in individual's life today, which is when a paradox emerged.

3. Meaningful and Controversial Practice

A system of beliefs and practices

Video games attract individuals who want to dream when doing. Loaded with beliefs, gamers go to the game with ideas about what they can do and cannot. There, they test out, consciously or not, these ideas and beliefs. All gaming practices constitute the experience of gaming and take part of the construction of gamers' identity (Craib, 1994, p.1).

The video game *The Sims*® (EA, 2000-2009) had been under many critics for its so-like capitalistic gameplay. This misunderstanding of the game led to several papers claiming that the game encouraged a capitalistic ideology (Frasca, 2001; Flanagan, 2003; Lignon, 2007). As I

experienced the game myself, I could not adhere to such a point of view and felt the need to look further. Put asides these critics, I gave voice to gamers so as to reach a better understanding of the game play as other game scholars do too (McGonigal, 2011; Taylor, 2006/2009).

The game environment of *The Sims*® had been thought and designed by game designers, Will Wright at the beginning in 2000. The reality of gameplay experience has changed over the years due to game designers and production managers' strategies to drive gaming activity and emphasis on some parts of the game. For instance, the second opus of the game gives more important focus on money than on social life in climbing the social ladder, whereas the third version requires being very efficient in life-planning strategy. These parameters can be changed according to gamer wishes though. Yet, the game proffers a frame for experimentation that gamers confess largely enjoying.

In this matter, the richness of the game is huge as its gameplay allows gamers to reproduce manifold social interactions and situations. Teenagers interrogated for this research affirmed that they created their dreamed life in the game as much as they could. Testing their ideas about adult life and family life is the main activity of teenagers playing *The Sims*® (EA, 2000-2009). Hence, they can put ideas into action in the game. In fact, they formulated clear ideas about the definition of a happy life related to the potential success in the game. According to the narrative of the game, the happier the Sim is, the easier it is to make him fulfilling his/her commitments. Starting with their own ideas about adult life and how enjoyable it would be to be free of parental control, they experienced the adulthood through their Sims.

From an outsider point of view, the main objective of the game seems to be making the more money you can (Schadler, 2007). However, the gamer quickly realises while playing that the main objective is, at least at the beginning, to stay alive. Managing and coping with different challenges generate stressful situations for the gamer. For instance, death can occur and then appears as a failure. In fact, failure plays a huge role in gaming experience driving gamers to self-reflect on their actions and capacities (Juul, 2013). The chock accompanying this event in the game channels an awareness of survival skills needed for the next try. Believing in a life full of enjoyment with no regards to basic needs had driven the gamer to failure.

The system of beliefs and practices that teenager-gamers test when playing the offline game *The Sims*® evolves and changes during the social experience of simulating life. Teenagers reshape thereby their beliefs about adulthood and go back to the game for another testing session.

According to gamer speeches, playing *The Sims*® is composed of two different steps. First, the creation of the Sim and his/her family keeps the gamer busy for a long time. The level of precision of creation in the game is very high, and teenager-gamers reveal appreciating this aspect extensively.

The Sims® is a sort of a sandbox game as gamers can produce a wide range of behaviours even extreme such as torture and murder. Moral norms are defined in a specific way that a gamer needs to figure out when playing. Teenagers admitted loving experimenting in the game what they cannot do out of the game to see what happens to their avatar. This try out process is very enjoyable, and the limits of the game allow teenagers to largely experiment. When they present a case of torture or even murder of their Sim, laughing was very helpful to keep the unbearable aspect of their acts at distance and be able to talk freely about it (Michon, 2010) just like surgeons operating (Goffman, 2002/3). Teenagers loved adding to the situation by making things up, but I did play the game extensively and know very well what is possible or not. Pushing back the frontiers, doing the forbidden just for checking what could happen, testing the system without being harmed compose teenager-gamers experience in *The Sims*®.

Nevertheless, their main interest is, as they acknowledged, concentrated on relationships and their management. The social life of their Sim is the most appealing aspect of the game for teenagers. This is how I could understand that the point of the game for these teenager-gamers is not getting as many things as they can. They concretely love exploring flirting relationships and then couple and family life. Nonetheless, their ideal view on family was shaken up when their couple got babies and therefore their avatars had to look after them. Suddenly, teenager-gamers discourses changed emphasizing on the non-enjoyable experience of parenthood. Reflecting on their previous beliefs about family, they genuinely confessed that adult life is more difficult than child life. A real disillusion took place in teenager-gamers speeches when bringing the topic of babies. When sharing their experiences in group, teenagers avowed their findings regarding life and its intricacies while keeping the topic at distance with an extensive use of jokes and laughter.

This specific sharing of beliefs and practices around the game is strongly related to the game experience and could thus only last when playing. As a result, the sense of community emanating from playing experience can be, therefore, contested here. In that matter, Internet connection and its improvement brought constant occasion of sharing beliefs and practices for video gamers and then fostering a stronger sense of community.

A Community of enthusiasts

Internet drove a real revolution in daily individual's practices and gaming did not make an exception to the rule. Indeed, a complete category of video games exploded on the Internet creating consequently groups of gamers meeting online to enjoy the same game altogether (Taylor, 2002; Pearce, 2009).

Basically, gamers enjoy living the same experience in groups. During focus group interviews, we noticed this. Even in an offline gaming context, gamers savoured the opportunity to talk about the game with others and to share their feelings and impressions. The first death, as a common

experience gamers shared, is pretty choking. Witnessing the death by burn of your first avatar due to a lack of cooking skills is a moving experience leading the gamer on the way of consciousness of consequences of choices he/she made. They confessed being touched by the death of their avatar they had spent so much time creating and designing.

This sharing of experiences goes beyond the game frame, and cosplay is certainly one of its utmost manifestations. Cosplaying, short for costume play is briefly defined as dressing-up like a favourite character, here from a game. This behaviour interests us as it partakes creation of a specific culture. When enthusiasts of cosplay gather, they give the impression that they try to stay in their gaming world. In fact, this behaviour is a physical display of inclination for gaming worlds out of the gaming world. The sense of community experienced in the game is then publicly presented and claimed. Game culture started to be studied recently. Scholars often use findings from fan culture scholarship (Hellekson & Busse, 2006).

Evidently, experiences from the game spill over the world of experiences out of the game. Interaction goes beyond the avatar-gamer relationship as the gamer also interacts with the game environment, and his/her avatar engages with other avatars. Ways of behaving adopted by gamers rely on an ideological frame amalgamated by the individual playing according to the rule system of the game he/she is taking part of. Like any games, *The Sims*® is shaped with a group of rules (Caillois, 1967) which are quite open as a wide range of options is available. *The Sims*® is well-known for the large number of cheating codes available for its enthusiasts (Consalvo, 2008). Sometimes, game designers expect gamers to cheat (Consalvo, 2009). However, here, the proliferation of cheating codes was unexpected. As a result, for the second opus, game designers encouraged gamers to create content and codes that were very appreciated by the gaming community (Wirman, 2011). Among our sample of teenagers, I naturally asked if they used cheating codes or not and if yes in which circumstances. They repeatedly said using cheating code for generating big income at the beginning of the game in order to create a comfy house full of fancy items otherwise it would not have been fun playing with the bare minimum. This use of cheating code later in the game was condemned by teenager-gamers as it would pervert the rules of the game they said. Hence, the common norms such as the statement that cheating for more than getting money at the beginning when building the house is unacceptable has emerged.

Two Finnish researchers (Sihvonen, 2009; Wirman, 2011) studied “modding” in the game and showed that gamers like creating personal and national items, making them available to other gamers, and embedding them in the game (Wirman, 2011). By creating artefacts and making them available to other players on Internet, they generate a culture around this gaming experience.

At the beginning of online gaming MUDs⁶ and then MMOs⁷ orchestrated the life of online gamers, sometimes leading already to some excess. The exciting opportunity that online games represented, and still do, lies in the constant connection of other potential gamers with whom a gamer can interact (Lorentz, 2012a). Gathering around a common goal objective, groups of gamers find lasting enjoyment in these team gaming activities thanks to their strong social aspect. Knowledge and skills developed around this activity reinforced their belonging feeling to a specific group of Internet users. These behaviours bolster gamer's attachment to their world and gaming culture. Consequently, social cohesion formed around gaming culture gets tighter and tighter.

Then, like any offline social community, online gamers felt more and more obliged toward their group, called guild in some cases like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). This feeling of obligation had been seen as a withdrawal from social life of the flesh world by non-gamers up to a point when non-gamers clearly looked down on social commitment of gamers toward their community. Being labelled as deviants escaping one world to go to another, online gamers had to unite to face this external aggression and therefore stiffened their bounds. Shortly afterwards new comers to online gaming communities had been bullied, and sometimes harshly, strengthening the inclusive feeling of these communities to outsiders.

Video gaming as a practice set apart and forbidden

From an external point of view gamers gathering in groups for spending important amount of time fighting fictional enemies and monsters instead of interacting with family members and maintaining a close relationship appears to be very unusual. Non gamers reporting discourses about their own observation of this specific behaviour supported the apparent abnormality of their relatives' attitudes. However, the definition of pathological behaviours is hardly made with a simple observation without any further understanding of the reasons motivating this attitude (Bachelard, 2000/1937). As Emile Durkheim underscored in his time (Durkheim, 2007/1893), normality as well as pathology is a constructed concept namely encompassing a noticeable subjective part.

As a result of these surfacing fears, political action was required. Regulation institutions were thus composed, and established in different countries to watch closely these unknown and suspect behaviours. In fact, in the United States, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) was created in 1994. The same year, in Oceania, two countries took up this topic very seriously as well, Australia with the Classification Board started applying rating to video games in 1994, and New-Zealand with the Office for Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) founded in 1994, replacing former institutions of censorship. Later in Europe, the PEGI classification rating adapted to video games was established in 2003 by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE).

6 Multi User Dungeon

7 Massively Multiplayer Online Games

Besides these institutions, much research had been undertaken on video gaming online and its related pathologies. Addiction due to video gaming abundantly fed media discourse about video gaming. Consequently, many research institutions launched scientific project for studying and scrutinizing addiction to video gaming. All these actions led to the definition of a certain amount of hours played online that would be over a so-called normal use, framing thus the entrance to a pathological use. Then, gaming time had to be limited and controlled (Anderson, 2007; Millie, 2008). This watching regulation of online gaming channelled the definition of societal pathology. Time spent playing is socially accepted for kids and teenagers as they enjoy large span of time free of school or other commitments. On the opposite, time spent gaming is much less tolerate for adults as it means they do not devote their time to more valuable activities such as working or taking part of life of the society. Thereby a social norm emerged helping people to point out the ones who give too much of their time to gaming and, as a result, adopt pathological attitudes. Authorities relied not only on legal actions but also on families to watch potential addicts (Ipsos, 2009; Ulicsak & Cranmer, 2010; Steinberg, 2012). Monitoring and controlling online gamers became a massive concern in many societies. Recurrently, mass killing were connected to gaming for unproved reasons supporting the common idea that video games teach players to kill. In regard to the amount of people playing games and the very few amount of massive killing, even if there are highly regretful and shameful acts, this assumption would equal to claim that learning to drive is learning to kill with a car. Briefly mention that the main goal of first person shooter games is not killing others but staying alive. This makes a tremendous difference as staying alive requires to protect yourself from hostile enemy fire, and that is how you are about to fire on the opponent. Despite all actions led and organized to watch online video gamers in the past decade, their ranks kept on growing to reach breathtaking numbers (Defosse O'Donnell, 2008). Knowing that they are under threat to be envisioned as excluded from the society for social misconduct, online video gamers did not stop playing, gathering and enjoying their time in synthetic worlds they like so much. Dedicating a noticeable part of their time, online adult gamers were pointed out to be deviants. They were labelled as individuals adopting pathological attitudes and behaving in a way that hurts social life of others. From that moment on, online video gaming was recognized like the snake seducing weak individuals when offering a too juicy apple to bite.

On one hand, online video gamers started to feel offended and threatened as a result of being labelled as deviants. On the other hand, more and more gamers tried to enrol to these online gaming groups. In order to regulate the access to their community, a sort of initiation, sometimes called hazing, took place. Then, new comers, or “newbies”, have been treated as the weakest link calling for a destruction up to a point to insults and harassing words were thrown to newbies ears giving birth to cyberbullying. It is not so much the behaviour itself that is questionable than the context of its emergence. In this respect, these harsh and inexcusable attitudes arise in response to the constant

watching under which online video gamers had been for years. Going beyond these attacks resonate as being accepted by the community. These behaviours along with cheating are condemned by the majority of gamers and thus gamers' community can be called a moral community. Practically these behaviours reinforced the bad perception of non-gamers toward these online video gaming communities. Henceforth proofs of condemnable and evil attitudes have been provided by online video gamers themselves. Then this activity was accused to mystify people and therefore set apart from society and even forbidden to some extent. This paradox is classically related to the labelling theory.

According to the labelling theory of sociological trend - Symbolic Interactionism - the labelling process is composed of three different steps (Becker, 1985/1963). First, there is a social norm recognized by the majority of the population, such as here "adult free time can't be devoted to a childish activity that is to say video gaming". Second, individuals have to transgress this social norm; here when online video gamers sparkly increased their group. Last, these individuals have to be recognized by others as deviant, to be labeled. This is the work accomplished by institutions in charge of watching people playing online games and delivering recommendations and advices to handle this behaviour envisioned as abnormal or pathological.

These conditions and events clothe practice of online video gaming as set apart, uniting individuals in one special community in which they share beliefs and practices and therefore adhere to this group. Back to Durkheim definition of religions, it is found out that online video gaming can be regarded as a "sacred thing" (Brent Plate, 2010, pp.217-218). As a matter of fact, Johan Huizinga (1951/1938) himself already claimed that games are sacred in his classical book about gaming, *Homo ludens*. Here, this claim is extended to online video gaming. This is the point this section examined by first presenting that video gamers have been labeled and therefore taken apart from the society for a while. Consequently video gaming had been presented to people as a harmful activity for manifold reasons.

At this point, we acknowledge that video gaming is a "system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community", exactly how Durkheim (1965/1915, p.62) defined religions.

So, it is still unclear why so many people are eager to invest their time on video gaming although they are more and more aware of its so-called dangers.

4. Video Games: A Paradoxical Tool

Video games allow individuals to believe in the unbelievable

Video gamers look in gaming worlds what they cannot find in the flesh world (Rigby and Ryan, 2011). Blessed with technological improvements, video games become enriched at many levels and then embellish gaming experience. Environments created appear to come out of a dream sometimes. This could be a manifestation of divine presence as Patrick Sherry brought it in his paper when he underlined that for Gerard Manley Hopkins beauty would even give a sacramental meaning (Sherry, 2009, p.379). Then, anything become possible in video gaming worlds thanks to an incredible weaponry of technical tools enabling the gamer to experience a wide range of actions through his relationship with his/her avatar. For instance, a man can be a woman and vice versa, a good person can behave badly, disabled people can do actions they usually cannot. In this way, players ‘sacralize their self’ (Sherry, 2009, p.375).

Gamers interrogated relate that they do appreciate being someone they cannot be in the flesh world. These features allow gamers to live manifold experiences which support their quest as people are “meaning-seeking animals” (Lee, 2010, p.190). Gamers love embodying a character in charge of an important mission, and they feel empowered by the narrative and the role they play in it (Lorentz, 2012a). These characteristics make possible in-game actions to be meaningful for the player. In effect, gamers create a universe of meaning and video games convey the transcendence of their biological nature. This is how video gaming comes close to religion as Luckmann presented religion in *The Invisible Religion* (1967, p.49).

Gamers can practice magical acts when it seems the rational thing to do as magic takes form pragmatically (Lee, 2010, p.187). Analyse of interviews showed that individuals gaming project their expectations to their avatar (Klevjer, 2006; Yee, 2007) and benefit from their avatar achievement in the game (McGonigal, 2011). This interaction is extremely rich and evolves through time. In an offline environment, the relationship between the player and its avatar is not less valuable. In this respect, the doctoral research demonstrated that individual gaming go on a journey through various identities (Lorentz, 2013). This awareness of no boundaries to what is imaginably possible channels the powerful expression of imagination of identity. The player can become anyone anytime, even God in some games (Brent Plate, 2010). This widely opens the possibilities offered to the individual for social experiences. Not only the gamer interacts with others but he establishes a dialogue with him/herself, as well. Above all, the fact that this is only about a game, that is to say nothing ‘serious’, unlocks the extent of experimentations that individuals do in the game and with the game.

Besides this wide range of actions and situations available in gaming worlds, the relationship toward rules and norms is pushed back by gamers. Cheating commonly causes the end of the game (Caillois, 1967/1958), but this is not the case in video games. Sometimes cheating is even expected by game designers (Consalvo, 2008) as said earlier. Impacting the game with gamer's actions and creations is called modding (Sihvonen, 2009; Wirman, 2011) and can take different shapes. Among our gamers interviewed, many of them confessed enjoying creating their own artefacts and items and then making them available for the entire community of enthusiasts. Sharing their creation allows them to feel more embedded in the community as they contribute. Their action is thus valued and recognized among the members of the community thanking the gamer for his/her work and input. This exchange fosters a sense of social cohesion (Durkheim, 2008/1893; Brent Plate, 2010, p.217; Graeme, 2013, p.144) emphasizing on self-esteem of gamers as they feel more useful (Seligman, 2011) and become more committed.

Like religions, video gaming worlds provide a window to look at the world (Brent Plate, 2010, pp.220-221). This world view is, according to Luckmann: “an encompassing system of meaning in which socially relevant categories of time, space, causality and purpose are superordinated to more specific schemes in which reality is segmented and the segments are related to one another” (1967, p.53).

Enjoyable and fun this window does attract many people that can stay glued to it. When giving a priority in their life to this window, gamers are rapidly accused to withdraw themselves from the material world. In this regard, their eagerness for spending time in these worlds had been named as escapism. Gordon Calleja (2011) astutely argued in his book, *In-Game*, that there is no escapism in the like for being embodied in synthetical world for two reasons. First, when a gamer is dedicating his time to playing online games, he remains in the same world, that is to say he does not cross any boundary or frontier and in consequence cannot escape from some place to go to another. The synthetic world is, in fact, part of the material world (Brent Plate, 2010, p.228). Second, Calleja underscores that experiences lived in gaming worlds have an impact on gamers' life in the non-gaming world. This impact is concrete when gamers relate to the knowledge acquired in the game. Then, they reuse this knowledge in the material world (Brent Plate, 2010, p.227). This knowledge is mostly composed of social skills. This is exactly where we jump to the point saying that gamers re-enchant their life with video gaming. Indeed, they bring the input and outcome of their gaming experience into their out of the game life. Plus, all our research confirmed this fact and this is one aspect of gaming shared by most, if it is not the entire, community of game researchers. Feeling empowered by a gaming experience, gamers are subsequently more about to take actions in the material world that is to say go outside meeting people, go back to a difficult working environment, try to face difficulties instead of avoiding them. A research on extreme cases of gamers living threatening situations or living on the edge between life and death confessing how a game or a

gaming experience tremendously helped them to overcome their fear and move to the point when thinking genuinely about changing their situation. Suddenly things fall into place; the gamer takes action to improve his/her situation (Lorentz, in progress). Video games are responsible for embellishing people life and by doing so, they re-enchanted individuals' life. Just like religions provide a juxtaposed world (Brent Plate, 2010, p.220), video games remain part of our daily life. Hence remains the question about re-enchancement on a theoretical aspect interrogating a back and forth process from enchantment, disenchantment to re-enchancement. Explanation of this process and its evolution will attract our present attention.

Rationalization and the recoil of religious institutions

History is composed of a cycle of events repeating themselves on a regular basis and technical revolutions had rhymed people life. Revolutions happen to follow crisis (Kuhn, 1996/1962). In the 19th century, the Western world had seen a technical revolution called the Industrial Revolution that turned ways of working upside down moving population from the country to city impacting urban life dramatically. The second Industrial Revolution happened later in the century bringing its technical breakthrough and evolutions in ways of working. Placing science as a channel for explaining the world and its intricacies had began as an idea in the 18th century with the philosophical movement called Enlightenment mainly led by European thinkers. This scientific oculus to look at reality searching for truth had replaced time after time the religious interpretation that had in a hegemonic way provided interpretations for centuries. This shift implemented conflicts and contests among layers of societies as views to look at reality competed.

Briefly, the spread of principles of Enlightenment emphasizing on rationality as an ideology led to extension and empowerment of the capitalistic economy. Without retracing the very complex historical process but extremely fascinating too, I wish first to linger on the supremacy of one way of envisioning the world and the reality attended to on. Second, the absence of meaning of the action resulting from the disappearance of belief in magic reinforces the need to re-enchanted the world (Lee, 2010, p.186).

The German sociologist, Max Weber, proposed his view on changes on the society consequent of this philosophical and economic shift that occurred progressively from the 18th till the 20th century. Basically and briefly, Weber (2001/1905) explained that the taking off of capitalism is due to the spread of Lutheran religion over space. Many critics attacked quite harshly sometimes Weber's theory raising counter argument fuelling the point saying that catholic places had been also very prolific and flourished with capitalistic ways of doing even earlier so to quote Genes in the 15th century (Braudel, 1995/1962). However, the point made by Weber that attracts our attention here is more the movement in beliefs from religion to science. In fact, Weber underlined the recoil of religious institutions in people's life replaced by scientific institutions.

Concretely, credit had moved from one kind of social institutions to another, from religions to sciences. Setting the context, even grossly and briefly, helps to join the movement of influences that are the cornerstone of argumentation deployed here. Weber explained that the loss of magic, the loss of an illusion plus the loss of sense were consequences of the disenchantment process. He pointed out that the capitalist economy and bureaucratization were guilty in that case. He offered art as a rescuer from the previously cited devils (Sherry, 2009, p.370). In this respect, video games have become cultural products as a result of a legitimation process (Lorentz, 2012b) including being topic of displays in museums such as Le Grand Palais⁸ in Paris in 2011, Smithsonian⁹ museum in Washington, MOMA¹⁰ in New York in 2012, The Computerspielemuseum¹¹ in Berlin in 2011, Musee de la civilisation¹² in Quebec, in 2013 and so forth.

Besides the emergence of this capitalistic view of the world, another ideological system put up on weight at the beginning of the 20th century and later on widely spread due to consequences of decisions made in Yalta conference in 1945. Soviet system spread from Russia through Eastern Europe, with more or less freedom, settling in most of the central Europe countries, in the Balkans and Baltic countries too. This is more the collapse of the Soviet Union that focuses our attention here than the existence of this ideological influence, imposed by one winner of the Second World War. The death of the Soviet Union and subsequently soviet influence generated the death of an ideological alternative to capitalism as an ideology dictating ways of living. These fashions of telling the reality and the truth are particularities of the postmodernism (Sherry, 2009, p.377). Indeed, main storylines have been deposed leaving then a vacuum ready to be fulfilled.

By providing another way to look at the world, video gaming worlds offer an alternative to the main and predominant model of living our current societies. In these worlds, gamers find what they think/feel not finding in the flesh world. Variety of individualities struggle to echo their beliefs in their daily actions. Feeling stocked in their desires and more importantly, in their aspirations to be, individuals seek for shelters wherein they could unfold their wings to take off (Lorentz, in progress). Video gaming worlds do answer to their prayers, and as soon as gamers are aware of this, they cannot stop expressing their taste for being in these worlds, whatever happens around.

In the actual dominant paradigm science occupies the entire space as a window to look at the world and life. Questions are answered thanks to good services of science and its army of experts. Emphasized by the Enlightenment, Science as a way to explain life extend to such a point that none explainable thing or concept is simply rejected out of the scope. As a result, religions do not fulfil

8 <http://www.grandpalais.fr/fr/evenement/game-story>

9 <http://www.si.edu/Exhibitions/Details/The-Art-of-Video-Games-840>

10 http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/

11 <http://www.fastcompany.com/1721468/worlds-largest-video-game-exhibition-opens-berlin>

12 <http://www.mcq.org/en/mcq/expositions.php?idEx=w3760>

this social function anymore, at least on the surface. Consequently, some research investigated young people in order to scrutinize if they have a religious culture and how they put it up. In real, teenagers do have a religious culture resulting from manifold sources of information (Michon, 2011). Video games are part of their source of information that they rely on as video games are the common medium they use frequently (Octobre, 2009). The point here is that individuals utilize a current channel of information to seek for an explanation. Before religious institutions were the communication channel, then it has been scientific institutions, and now it is informational institutions among them video gaming worlds. Moreover, video gaming worlds not only provide information to gamers but also a field for experimentation. Putting ideas into actions with low risk is largely enabled by video gaming worlds. Characterized by a meritocratic philosophy (McGonigal, 2011), video games channel the main idea supporting that the more you train, the better you get. Rewarding system of games is intrinsic and highly used by educational experts (Gee, 2003) but also therapeutical scientists (McGonigal, *Superbetter*, 2012). In addition, disenchantment is marked by the lack of moral principles and meaningless actions in the world (Sherry, 2009, p.374) that are two significant inputs particular to video gaming worlds.

As video games are replacing scientific and religious institutions as information providers, we wonder how this product reached this point.

Where the paradox lies: video games are a product of capitalism

Only few decades old video games are a recent product. According to research on games, video games are simply a result of the technological evolution (Flanagan, 2007; Lorentz, 2011). With the increase of technical performances games and toys have changed and evolved for becoming electronic and computer games. For instance, many basic card or board games had been duplicated into video games. Solitaire is one of the favourite games of players (Brand 2013). Then games such *Mah-Jong* or *Poker* are also very popular among online gamers (Brand, 2013). Very classic games, *Scrabble*, *Monopoly*, *~rivial Pursuit*, are available in video games version too. Even puzzles are now displayed into a digital version¹³. Different historical paths had been taken in many countries in order to create video games.

In Japan, electronic and video games were created by expert from the toy industry as a natural evolution of the range of products offered to the consumer (Gorges, 2008). In contrast to the United States wherein computer engineers designed games to have fun and enjoy their free time (Donovan, 2010). In France, first video games were invented by artists desiring to express their creativity with the latest tool available (Ichbiah, 2008). Video games emerged from this techno culture within technology is predominant. Video games paradoxically propose a fantasy and unreal

13 http://www.amazon.com/Ravensburger-Puzzles-PC/dp/B004S3ZHQ2/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1381325173&sr=8-3&keywords=Ravensburger+Puzzles+-+PC

environment to people. The story around *Tetris*, the most popular game of all times, is a sharp example of the subtleties surrounding the emergence of video games. In fact, *Tetris* was created by Alexei Pajitnov at the Academy of Science in Moscow on his free time in 1984. When he showed the game to his colleagues, they were all very enthusiastic and started playing. The frenzy resulting from the game played in every department of the Academy generated a noticeable change in its employees' work quality. This is how superior in the Party realized that something was going on. The vivid interest of employees did not find any echo in the head of the soviet party, and anything had been done with it. Russians even sold rights of the game for nearly nothing to Americans asking. It was nothing; it was just a game. This illustrates how games came out of different environments just because some people felt the need and crave to create them.

Here lies the paradox of the emergence of video games and their impact on our societies. In fact, video games are a pure product of mathematics as they are created by the assistance of computer whose language is maths. Technological era is characterized by the wish to control nature and every of its aspects. This leads to lose touch with humanity (Lee, 2010, p.183). However, video games brought unbelievable and unnatural to a world wherein science is the only activity recognized for bringing true explanations. Not only video games re-enchant the world, but there are also meaning providers although there should be 'just games'.

This is about the product as a cultural item, but video games go beyond as they also provide a world in which gamers can take action. In real, through this paper we notice that what gamers can do and do in the game matters for them. In addition, we realize that the meaning behind actions taken in the game is leading gamers to experience manifold social experiences. This is how video gaming worlds supply meaning to gamers' life.

As Lee argued recalling Weber's work (2010, p.185), charisma is one of the irrational characteristic still recognized as a force in our societies. Nonetheless, charisma is a subjective quality hardly comprehended. In online games, guilds are led by charismatic avatars whose actions are supposed to be directed by the good. Charisma can be taken on any gamer in the gaming worlds; it is an opportunity to grasp. Embodying a charismatic avatar in the game enables players to act accordingly with their beliefs when actions of the avatar rely on genuine charisma.

To this end, this paper claims that video gaming worlds thanks to what they provide can supplement other classical social institutions and take part of the socialization process (Lorentz, 2013) besides family, school and church. Of course, the recoil of religious institutions in daily life of individuals lets a vacuum that video gaming worlds can unwittingly fill in. The reality of the disenchantment process is questioned, admittedly, but video games could nevertheless compose one of the aesthetic responses people have found (Sherry, 2009, p.384). Exactly as Luckmann (1967) pointed out in his work, *the Invisible religion*, and the scope of sociology of religion goes beyond

church. Questions asked to that matter can be answered in other arenas of the society such as mass communications, and leisure. In addition, Luckmann stressed that religious aspects are first satisfied in the private sphere. Based on Simmel (2013/1908) idea of overlapping of social worlds of individuals, we argue that the self of the gamer is constructed through experiences lived in many social situations and even more importantly during overlapping time of social spheres. For instance, the video gamer has to justify his wish to play video games instead of watching TV with his family. Frictions resulting from these overlapping moments convey the affirmation of gamers taking part of their socialization.

The video-ludological socialization has been described somewhere else (Lorentz, 2013) pointing out that gamers design, define, and express their self as a result of their experiences lived in gaming worlds. The variety of experiences lived in different worlds and social institutions improve social skills of individuals (Cooley, 2011/1902). Muriel Darmon (2011/2006) brought the idea of the occasion for socialization to take place. This is where video gaming worlds bring something into the table not only for teenagers but also for adults as the socialization process is a life-long process (Berger, Luckmann, 1966). The diagram presents the overlap between different social institutions in young time and video games are now part of it as a leisure activity. It remains that the individual is at the kernel of all these institutions without whom they would not exist. The more diverse and varied the experiences lived by individuals are the wider and larger their social skills are. And social skills drive to a common understanding and mutual respect (Cooley, 2011/1902) for a harmonious life.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we claimed that video gaming worlds present occasion for socialization to take place. By providing environments in which gamers feel secure and like joining and committing, video gaming worlds partake to the overall process of socialization of individuals in today's societies. Retractors of Weber argued that religions may not have disappeared, on the opposite they take another form (Seguy quoted by Sherry, 2009, p.373), which could be video games. In effect, individuals need to create meaning around actions they take whether it is in the material world or the synthetical world. Thereupon Lee insisted on the relationship between enchantment and meaningfulness saying: "meaningfulness may be considered equivalent to the idea of enchantment in which the interdependence of nature and humanity formed the cornerstone of self-authenticity." (2010, p.183).

Notwithstanding, this meaningfulness of actions taken in-game is not smoothly acknowledged as being related to religious matters. The topic of religions and video games is not easy to tackle down as they represent two different paradigms per se. Unlike the mainstream belief that the two topics can be intertwined, actual researchers on video games start to be interested in question the place or sometimes absence of religions in games. For example, production team of Penny Arcade led by James Portnow decided to dedicate an episode to religions in games¹⁴. They had to face several comments harshly questioning their scientific bases¹⁵. As soon as the topic of religion had been brought up, gamers flew away and grumbled. However, these two works clearly claimed and demonstrated scientifically that faith is required for doing science too and in consequence that faith is not disconnected from scientific work.

It may be a chance that video gamers are not always aware of the self-reflexive work they are doing when playing. Otherwise they would give up on playing, and thus, they would cut themselves from the implicit socialization process at stakes in video gaming. As long as video games are “just” a game, their huge importance is allowed by tenants of scientific truth as they do not compete for providing explanations of the world. However, the world may not be that disenchanting as Sherry argued saying that fashions of looking orient ways of seeing (Sherry, 2009, p.369).

Animosity from one community toward another reveals underlying fear, anger and jealousy. Yet there is no need to point out one world to another or one group – non-gamers to another – gamers. It is more about a misunderstanding of common interests related to the use of a tool, video games, than anything else. Not everyone has to play video games in order to accept video gaming, but everyone must be open-minded and respectful to live harmoniously on the same planet whatever their religion and beliefs are.

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Biography

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Fátima Postmortem

Luís Lucas Pereira, Licínio Roque

Abstract

In this paper we report on the game design and evaluation process of a religious themed videogame: *Fátima*, available at <http://playfatima.net>. *Fátima* is a videogame that places the sightings of Our Lady of Fátima (Portugal, 1917) in a playful context. The overarching aim was to enable a play experience around the Fátima phenomenon by confronting players with a dilemma between a materialistic dimension (herding sheep) and a spiritual one (praying to the Virgin Mary). The player takes the role of a young shepherdess (Sister Lúcia) represented by an avatar that moves around discreetly in the game world, represented by a green meadow. At the start of the game there are six sheep in the meadow; they move randomly and may leave the game scenario altogether. By moving the avatar, the player is able to influence the movement of the sheep, herding them within the game scenario. In line with the original accounts of the phenomenon, there are a total of six sightings throughout the game. These sightings come up approximately every minute. In each appearance it is possible to pray to the Virgin Mary for 10 seconds. In addition to the reporting of the game design process, we describe the evaluation of the gameplay experience. This evaluation is based on gameplay metrics and allows us to analyse how players acted facing the meaningful possibilities existing in the videogame.

1 Introduction

Sensemaking is an essential aspect of the experience of playing a videogame. It would be challenging to think about a gameplay activity that does not involve some kind of construction of meaning. One of the key features of the videogame medium is the fact that gameplay activity require the participation of players due to their participatory nature (Arseth 1997, Raessens 2005, Roque 2005). Videogames may be viewed as power structures that mediate the participation of players (Sicart 2005) giving them predetermined free spaces for action. This feature of participative nature of the medium videogame distinguishes it from all other and naturally this has impact on how meaning is encoded and decoded in this medium.

Over the last years the videogame medium has been subject to a process of legitimization as a means of expression that goes beyond the scope of mere entertainment and fun (Tavinor 2009). Actually, therein lies our motivation to design and develop the Fátima videogame (Pereira et al 2010): to cross two fields which at first may seem antagonistic - to represent a religious phenomenon through a medium often associated with mere entertainment and escapism, exploiting the significant function of play (Huizinga 1970). Fátima is a videogame that places the sightings of Our Lady of Fátima (Portugal, 1917) in a playful context.

In the next section we present a model for a game design and evaluation we have been developing (Pereira & Roque 2013a) that will help us to analyze the design and evaluation of the Fátima videogame. Then we present the game design case including the description of the design and the evaluation of player participation based on gameplay metrics.

2 Participation-Centered Gameplay Experience Model

In this section we summarize the model used to guide the activity of game design (Pereira & Roque 2013a). The model was instrumental in our attempt to address the question of: how to reframe the design of a videogame from the perspective of players' participation? This model is intended to have a guiding role, assisting the designer in considering how the player takes part in the game. To achieve that we consider six perspectives on participation:

Playfulness: The videogame as a context of free, informal, and unstructured participation.

Challenge: The videogame as a context of structured participation, of a proposed challenge, or according to a formal goal.

Embodiment: The videogame as a context of physical participation, both virtual and actual.

Sociability: The videogame as a context of social participation, of establishing relationships between players.

Sensemaking: The videogame as a context of significant participation, of creation of meaning.

Sensoriality: The videogame as a context of multisensory involvement.

These dimensions seek to assist the designer in thinking, in a comprehensive manner, about the range of possibilities at her disposal to define or give a certain character to a game. The perspectives considered result from the synthesis of the literature on the nature of play activity, the conceptualization of the gameplay experience and the motivation of the players.

The number of perspectives considered comes from the criteria used in the conceptualization of the model. This number was reduced to a minimum to ease the model appropriation and rationalization that still allowed us to approach the design of the medium and the gameplay experience in a wide and inclusive way. In turn, we expect these six forms of participation can also be used to characterize gameplay activities, so as to confront actual player participation with the intention originally set. These lenses are mostly complementary and when successfully integrated they should provide a holistic perspective. Moreover, it can be quite complex to establish a rigid boundary between these views of interaction as, often, different forms of participation share common aspects when realized in a game artifact.

With the purpose of using the referred model thus presented in the context of design activities, we identified three operative focus: defining design intentions, characterizing game artifacts and mapping and analyzing player participation. Those three focuses derive directly from the conceptual base that supports the proposition of the model centered in the concept of participation: bearing in mind that the videogame, as an artifact, mediates the players' participation from which the potentially intended playing experience emerges. In the following subsections we will describe the three focuses along the six participation perspectives. In Table 1 we map the three analyses focuses and the six perspectives synthesized in the model.

The first operational level concerns Intention: What is the participation ideal that the videogame is suggesting? It is often from a design intent that the conception of a gameplay experience emerges. As already noted, we assume that a design exercise departs from a proposed experience ideal, by configuring certain forms of participation. At the intent level of operation we generate and organize the proposed forms of participation and, implicitly, the kind of experiences to be enabled. This focus analyses and rationalizes the character or style of the proposed or idealized game, meaning, the essence or value of the game activity.

The second operational level concerns the Artifact: How does the artifact supports the idealized forms of participation? At this level we envision an object as medium that enables an interaction context calling for the intended forms of participation. In other words, we aim to align the features of the artifact with a model of player interaction supportive of the intended player participation. This focus analyses and rationalizes the artifact videogame as network of mediators that support the participation, helping us to think about the nature of the mediators used in the artifact.

Finally, the third operational level concerns Participation: What characteristics of the actual player activity are consistent with or revealing of the participation idealized? This level of operation is meant to focus observation, analysis and evaluation of actual player participation, in particular, to examine if the game activity meets the design intent, and to point towards the indicators and metrics

we can define that would be revealing of progress towards that intent. This focus allows characterizing player participation, measuring the level of alignment between the real appropriation of the game by the player and the idealized.

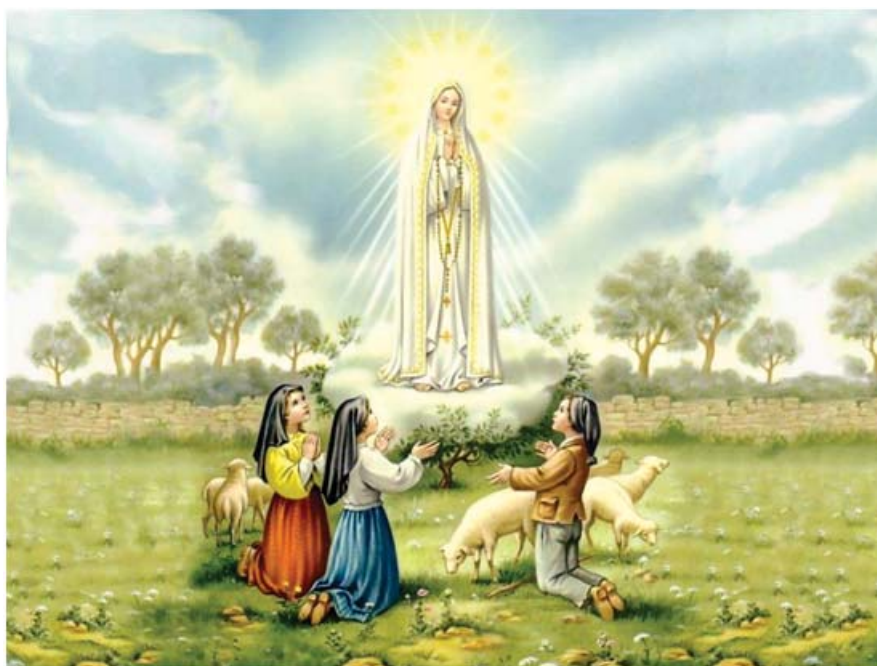
	Intention	Artifact	Participation
Playfulness	exploring, discovering, recreating, customizing	the nature of a player’s agency, the variety of interactive elements of the game (objects, characters, actions, etc.)	degree, variety and tendency of exploration
Challenge	overcoming a challenge, creating a strategy, defeating an opponent, mastering a skill	nature of challenges proposed, type of penalties and rewards, intensity and organization of challenges	control, pace, progress, efficiency in performing tasks
Embodiment	physical involvement, physical performance	representation of the physical game world, player's representation on the game world, interpretation of player's movement	control and rhythm of movement, aesthetics of the movement
Sensemaking	interpretation of a role, fantasy, self-expression	theme and underlying narratives, models and representations of phenomena, roles and motives, significant actions	alignment between actions and roles, understanding and or critique of the represented phenomenon
Sensoriality	contemplation, wonder	style, nature of the stimuli, visual and sonic compositions, synesthetic explorations	degree of exposure and responsiveness to stimuli, interaction or engagement with sources
Sociability	competition, cooperation, friendship, identification, recognition	diversity and nature of social interactions and relationships, models of social structures (team, hierarchy, etc)	the intensity and types of interactions between players, effectiveness bonds

Table 1: Characterizing players’ participation along the three foci of analysis.

3 The Fátima Game Design process

The idea of designing a game about the phenomenon of the ‘Our Lady of Fatima’ apparitions had interested us for almost as long as had research and exploration of the videogame medium. Our interest mainly lied in exploring a subject matter - religious phenomena - that has proved marginal to what is traditionally represented in videogame territory, thus allowing it to reflect on the very nature of the medium, thinking about its borders in terms of expressive power and fruition. Apart from questions intrinsic to the medium itself, we were attracted to the potential of exploring such a theme because it remains a phenomenon that is culturally rooted in contemporary Portuguese society, and hence symbolically very rich.

For quite some time we came to consider different perspectives on how to tackle this religious subject matter. Initially we pondered addressing pilgrimage and oath keeping (two aspects very closely related to Fatima), and in so treating Fatima as a direct way of questioning faith and religious beliefs. However, such explorations never lead us to practicable game concepts that were worthy of developing based on these ideas.



We ended up following an agenda that came to us inspired by popular visual representations of the Miracle of Fatima – containing Our Lady and the three little shepherds (see fig.1).

Fig. 1 – Image representative of popular Fatima phenomenon depictions.

In a way, we were interested in the iconic power of this image, and how it became so significantly popular and a symbol of the phenomenon itself. So in a first instance, our design served as a transmediation of this image, gathering all its symbolic figures into the videogame medium. Following that line of thought, the theme of the game evolved naturally to the contrasting dilemma between the material and the spiritual, where one of the little shepherds was confronted with the possibility of either praying to the Virgin Mary or tending to his flock. In so doing, we proposed to explore sensemaking around a dichotomist reflection on the valorization of a contemplative attitude (solemn praying to a divine spirit), as opposed to a pragmatic, earthly nature (tending to possessions).

Once the basic concept was established, it was followed by a strategy for its concretization. One fundamental aspect of this project was that it was motivated solely by intrinsic desires, having no ulterior purpose. Therefore, it was made resorting to a small circle of friends, from which a workgroup with different skills and competences was established. It was composed of Joana Sobral, Mafalda Maia, Mafalda Nobre, Pedro Santa, Tiago Alves and Luís Pereira; once the team was gathered, preparation phase ensued. Even though all members of the team had some relation to the phenomenon, at the very least, due to its cultural ubiquity and weight, we opted to carry out some bibliographical research. It was not so much in our interest to find more or less scientific arguments on events' veracity or lack of, rather to investigate on crucial aspects of how a narrative was constructed based on the experience of the phenomenon. Towards that end, it was essential to read the book "Memórias da Irmã Lúcia" (Kondon 2007) ("Memories of Sister Lucia", the youngest of the three shepherds), and that came about to become the basis of some of the details in the game; for example: the textual discourse was based on actual speech that is attributed to sister Lucy and the Virgin Mary, and some scenic element, such as the ray of lightning that precedes each of the 6 apparitions.



Fig 2. Cover of the book “Memorias da Irmã Lúcia” (Kondon 2007)

This being a pet project, a minimalist approach was carried out in terms of development, trying to focus all the effort in prototyping. Considering the simplicity of the chosen dualist concept, the gameplay was made equally simple: The player takes the role of a young shepherdess (after Sister Lúcia) represented by an avatar that moves around discreetly in the game's world, represented by a green meadow. At the start of the game there are six sheep in the meadow; they move randomly and may leave the game scenario altogether. By moving the avatar, the player is able to influence the movement of the sheep, herding them within the game scenario. In the playing field there is a holly oak tree representing the site where the Virgin Mary sightings took place. In line with the original accounts of the phenomenon, there are a total of six sightings throughout the game. These sightings come up approximately every minute. In each appearance it is possible to pray to the Virgin Mary for 10 seconds; to do so the avatar must be moved to a marked location, near Virgin Mary's image. While the avatar is praying, a progress bar comes up on top of it indicating the praying time up to that point. While praying there is a possibility that some sheep will exit the playing field - here lies the game's dilemma which opposes praying to the idea of caring for the flock of sheep.

One of the questions that was initially discussed was what role to give to the player, and consequentially how to establish his identification with the game and its characters. We considered giving him the means to choose which of the little shepherds he wished to personify. This possibility seemed interesting on a symbolic level, since according to reports of the aforementioned

book, each of the shepherds had his own distinct relationship with the Virgin Mary as the apparitions occurred. However, an issue of effort rationalization eventually led us to opt to only represent Lucia, given her pivotal role in the events.

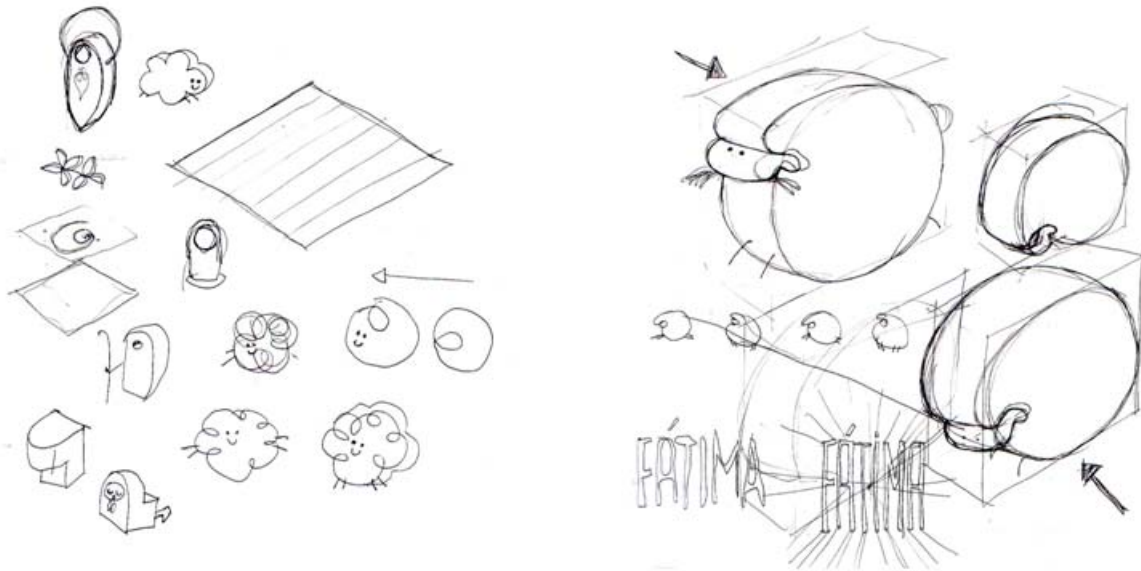


Fig 3. Initial sketches of concept art

Representation would become one of the most interesting challenges in this project. The initial motto was to create an environment with a minimalist and cartoony aesthetic. This choice was backed by the intention of referencing the very videogame medium, so as to formalize the crossing of these two different territories: videogames and religion. The significant game elements then were the Virgin Mary and the holly oak, the little shepherd and the sheep she tended to. The scenario also included some rocks that served as obstacles for the generation of different spatial movement dynamics. Images above show some of the sketches that trace the graphical evolution of the elements.

Following criteria of technological familiarity and for its adequacy for web distribution, we opted to implement the game in Flash, employing an isometric background perspective and vector graphics.



Fig 4. Final game design characters

In regards to sound, we risked interpreting and recording our very own soundtrack. One of our team members (Tiago Alves) had musical skills, which gave us confidence to adapt the themes that were selected for the game. So, it was possible to synchronize with precision the dynamics of gameplay with all sound elements. The music compositions' low fidelity 8 bit aesthetic was once again, a reference to 80's videogame tropes.

One of the aspects that was more seriously reflected and discussed during development, and the one which took more time before a decision was made, was how to incorporate formal game elements ('ludus') (Caillois 2001) that characterize videogames, namely: the objective, the nature of the challenge and conflict, winning and losing conditions, etc. At design time it was important for us that these features were part of the object we were designing (further development of this topic is in the reflection section). In order to enhance the conflict between these two dimensions, the group determined that the winning condition would be to get to the end of the game (after the six sightings) with at least one sheep. Despite this requirement, the player is afforded the flexibility in choosing whether to care for the flock or pray. We chose not to explicitly communicate to the player what to do, to allow for greater interpretative flexibility of the object.

To create a privileged context for publicizing the game, the group aligned the release and media communications with key dates of the phenomenon, namely, dates of the apparitions – the thirteenth of each month from May to October. Hence, on the 13th of May we launched a teaser to announce it; on the 13th of June, we launched the game and in the same day of July we updated it with a method for posting scores on Facebook, so as to provide a social dimension to the

experience. Score tallies consisted of a communication of the number of kept sheep and the total time spent praying.



Fig 5. A Fátima videogame screenshot

In the following section we analyze player participation in the game in response to the design solution that we described in this section.

4 Characterizing Players' Participation

After presenting the game's aim, as well as examining its main features, in this section we analyze participation in this videogame (Pereira & Roque 2013b). Bearing in mind the nature of the videogame Fátima, we have defined the goals of our analysis to be the characterization along the following perspectives – “Sensemaking” and “Challenge” - as these were considered the most pronounced forms of participation in this particular case. In order to characterize the participation along the perspectives outlined, we have defined guiding questions such as: Do the players try to look out for the sheep? Do the players try to pray? Do the players pray in a persistent way? Do the players try to keep all of the sheep? How many games are won, lost or incomplete? How can we characterize the games against the results (sheep vs. praying time)? What is the duration of the games which are lost?

4.1 Collected data

In order to characterize participation on the videogame Fátima we have logged the player's most significant actions. The data presented in this section refers to game playing instances that took place between May 2010 and May 2011. During this period, 23933 games were logged for analysis. Next we describe the main findings according to the metrics previously defined. Out of the 23933 games played, 9316 were incomplete, 13964 were lost and 653 were won.

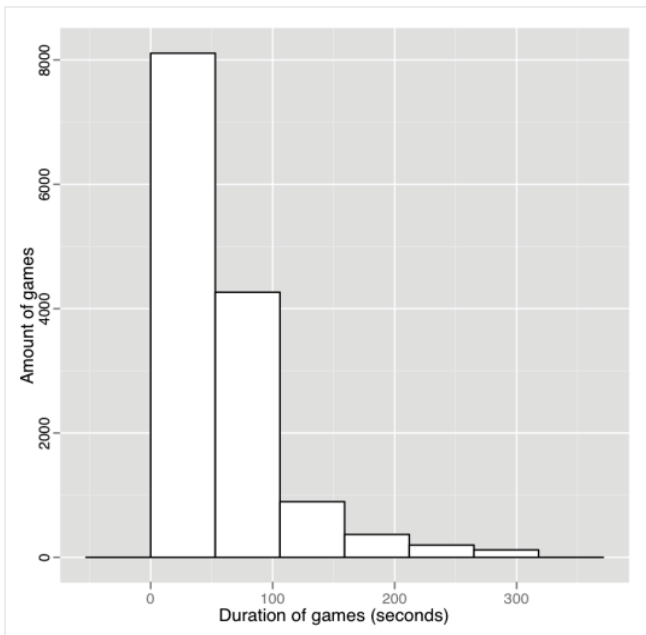


Figure 6. Duration of lost games

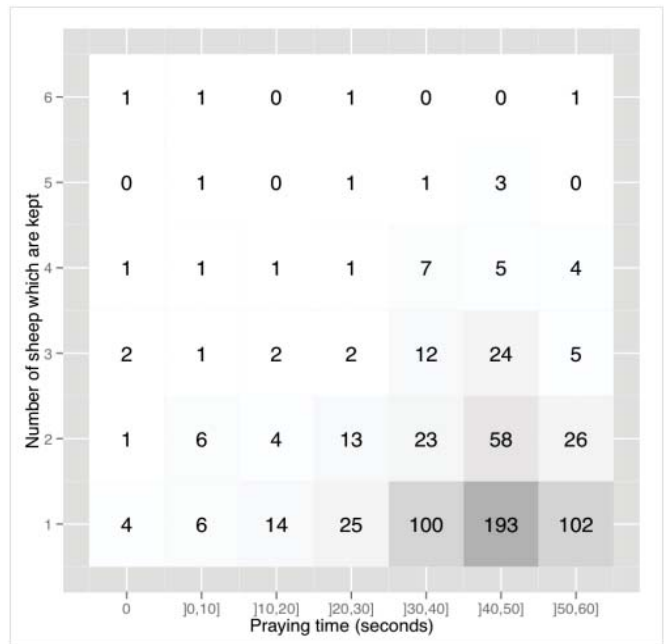


Figure 7. Number of games according to result (amount of sheep which are kept vs. praying time)

Figure 6 illustrates the number of lost games according to the game's duration. We can see that most of the lost games are over in the first two minutes. Figure 8 illustrates games won according to the outcome. There was 1 instance where no praying was done and the six sheep were kept, while in 102 other games praying was done for more than 50 seconds and only one sheep was kept. We can see here that for the majority of games that were won one sheep was kept and praying time was maximized.

Figures 8 and 9 show the players' involvement in the praying action. In figure 8 is shown the distribution of the number of games according praying time. We can see that for the majority of the games there is an attempt to maximize praying time: in nearly 87% of them the praying time is over 30 seconds (out of 60 available).

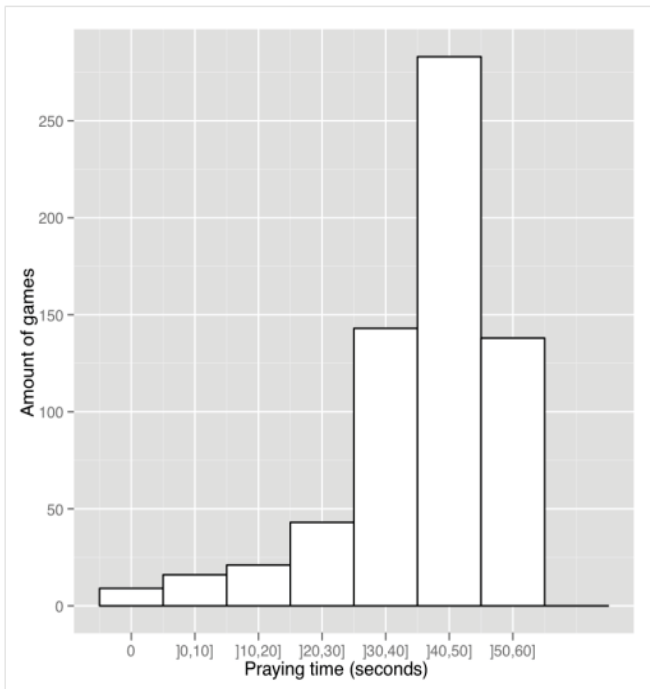


Figure 8. Praying time in successful games

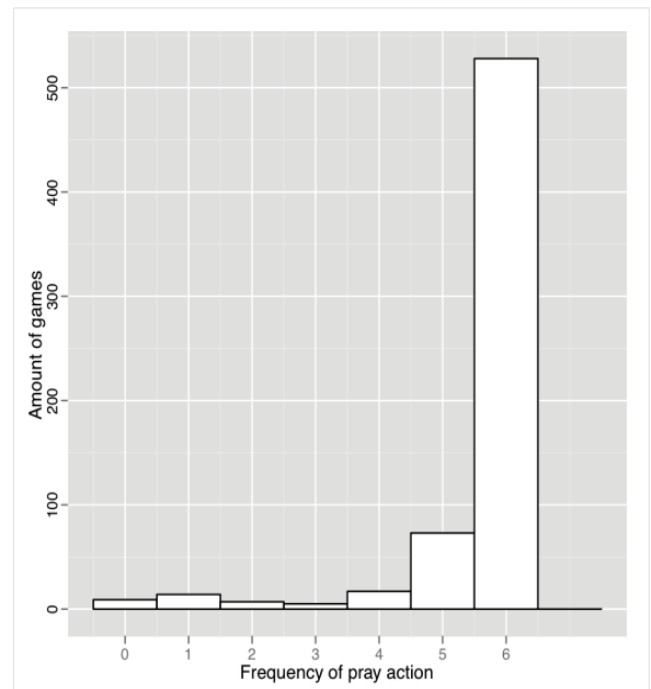


Figure 9. Amount of times that praying was performed in successful game sessions

Figure 9 measures the persistence of the praying action which is shown by the number of times that the players perform that act; players can choose to pray a total of 6 times per match (once for each sighting). In the vast majority of games players (nearly 81%) chose to pray whenever that was possible (6 times).

4.2 Data Analysis

Drawing on the results described above we would like to highlight two aspects from the point of view of participation, which concern the kind of results obtained (sheep vs. praying) and the challenge suggested by the game.

If we look at the number of games won vis-à-vis the total number of games, we can see that only approximately 3% of the games end with a "victory". This finding, along with the duration of the games, in minutes, illustrates the difficulty of staying in the game. Even though the game was designed to generate a sharp conflict with the ultimate goal of keeping all the sheep within the playing field, findings suggest that this particular feature may need to be reexamined. With regards

to the results of the games themselves (in terms of number of sheep which are looked after and praying times), taken as metrics of the “Sensemaking” dimension of participation, we find that there is a clear fall in the number of sheep which are kept. Indeed, results show that in most cases only one sheep is kept while praying time is longer. This trend is visible in the data related to praying time and persistence in praying. Therefore, considering that the game was originally designed with a view to enhancing the players’ dilemma between two courses of action (praying or shepherding), it is questionable whether the design solution developed is indeed satisfactory, insofar as it mostly induces behavior associated with only one of these courses, whereas the ideal solution would be to have a more diverse distribution of results across the two action programs. Having thus analyzed the response to the challenge dimension, we are now in an informed position that allows us to consider in greater detail the extent to which the game design solution was found to successfully meet its intended game experience ideal. In the particular case of Fátima we may now rethink the game design along the following directions: How can we lessen the challenge component in order to increase the number of games played till the end? (Challenge); How can we adjust the game’s elements in order to facilitate a greater variety of gameplay approaches? (Sensemaking).

5 Reflection

Possibly is it too obvious, but a first aspect we think still worth reflecting about, is that we were able to make the videogame we envisioned. Maybe the process itself has been the most significant reward of this project, what we learn and the sense of community and sharing around a common will. Bringing together a team was essential not only for the sharing of expertise and effort but also for the sake of compromise that enabled the project to be finished ahead of time. The sense of accomplishment is reinforced by the fact that it was the first experiment of game design that this team participated in.

If on one hand the fact this group was able to realize the design intent contributes to a sense of achievement, on the other hand we got the feeling that we spend too much attention in the creation of videogame itself. That is, all the energy of the project focused on the implementation of the videogame was accompanied by a planned strategy to promote and disseminate. Because of the effort involved in the project has been considerably higher and also for recognized naivety, the project ended when the videogame's implementation finished. Taking into account our intention to promote reflection would have been interesting to get to know in loco reactions the game in some specific contexts, especially where there was some kind of religious sensibility, in order to promote discussion. However our solution was the simple dissemination through the social network

Facebook, and to interpret reactions from written comments. In the comments there was a player who manifested itself displeased with the game considering it an insult. The comment was as follows:

Player: I personally do not like the idea. A religion should be seen as something serious. I think the videogame ridicules the Fátima Apparitions. So, why the game's creator does not make another videogame but this time with Muhammad. I suspect that I already know the answer...

Game Designers: Thanks for the comment. To what extent do you think the videogame ridicules the Fátima Apparitions?

Player: As the use of terminology related to religious belief, such as pilgrimage, praying, appearance without justification because it is just a game. 1 - a pilgrimage (from Latin *per agros*, ie, through the fields) it is a journey undertaken by a devotee of a particular religion to a place considered sacred by the same religion. 2 - According to Catholic belief, to pray, or simply "talking with God", is a gift of the grace of "God who comes to meet man" and allows the establishment of a "personal and living relationship of the children of God with their Father who is infinitely good, with his Son Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit who dwells in their hearts". But for to distort the Fatima Apparitions we already have a lot of traders around the sanctuary trying to make money at the expense of religion. Thank you for your attention.

Without wanting to overstate a single comment, we think this expression contributes to illustrate that, regardless of the design solution found, our initial intention is not devoid of meaning, in the sense that the use of a particular medium to represent a religious phenomenon is judged as an insult.

A third aspect, perhaps the most important one in terms of legacy, is a reflection on how the preconception of the videogame medium influenced the resulting object. At the time of the design phase we felt it to be important to include ludic elements, to consider the videogame as a game, setting objective and quantifiable results, restricted time to play, great emphasis on the challenge, and so on. Today, we believe those decisions may have been artificial (facing our intention for the gameplay experience) and corresponding to a certain kind of preconceived ideal of what a videogame should be. There is an ample space of expression in the videogame medium beyond the dimensions of challenge and use of ludic elements. Inscriptions such as the praying time progress bar, while not directly related to the evaluated victory condition, seemed to have had much more strength than we anticipated. Today, on hindsight, perhaps we would try to design a videogame less structured, mediating a participation program more open and possibly more ambiguous (Sutton-Smith 2001), with a greater interpretive flexibility. As an example, maybe the notion of victory itself could have been avoided and left for the player to interpret in face of the simulated results

being represented, with a possibly more philosophically and less functional ending and player relation to the gameplay.

6 CONCLUSION

In this paper we reported on the game design and evaluation process of a religiously inspired videogame: *Fátima* – a videogame that places the sightings of Our Lady of Fátima (Portugal, 1917) in a playful context. Through the rationalization of player's participation in different perspectives, it was possible to analyze this game design case, from the initially established gameplay experience intention, through the artifact's constitutive analysis, all the way to the analysis of players' behaviors mediated by this game. In this way, it was possible to evaluate the game design having in mind the intended game experience, objectively pointing which were the artifact characteristics and participation metrics at issue in this design case.

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The Mythic Scope of *Journey*

A Comparative Assessment Concerning the Spirit at Play and Cybernetic Shamanism

Robert William Guyker, Jr.

Abstract

Video games yield some of the most immersive virtual experiences of *mythos* today. They render, conceive and engage in a shared heritage of symbols and images drawn from world stories, mythical tropes, creatures, and environments. Thatgamecompany's *Journey* has recently emerged as a concise expression of this impulse to keep myth innovative, and gaming evocative. Working towards unraveling layers of motifs, I will approach *Journey* as a cybertext and mythic text, drawing on works ranging from philosophical treatises, poetry, sacred narratives and shamanism for comparative analysis. My initial task is to establish the video game as a participatory rendering of the Hero's Journey, while then breaking the cycle into individual components of motifs, themes and mythemes to parse the discourse of *Journey*'s exposition. I then argue for *Journey*'s ongoing engagement with reimagining the gaming experience through a commitment to synergistic immersion in a myth-minded environment.

Keywords

mythology, hero's journey, narrative, *Journey*, motif, simulation, shamanism, video game

We are taken from the mother, chewed into fragments and assimilated to the world-annihilating body of the ogre for whom all the precious forms and beings are only the courses of a feast; but then, miraculously reborn, we are more than we were. (Campbell 1964 [1945], 162)

The task is simple: ascend. The path, however, is *Journey* (2012), thatgamecompany's most recent title described as 'an interactive parable.'¹ The single effort and its course have fascinated schools of philosophy, religions and sacred traditions since antiquity (perhaps even our oldest recorded ancestors). Plato espoused the eternal *ano hodos* *Republic: F8:!*; ('upward path') to celestial origins later echoed in Cicero (*De Re Publica*, 6.16)²; Confucian and Daoist philosophies speak of the Dao 道, or Way of humanity and of Nature; Shinto 神道 of Japan itself as the pathway of her ancestral spirits; the Navajo hold sacred the *Atiin iyinii* ('Holy Trail'); *mar a* in Hinduism has many methods; Muslims embark on the Hajj, pilgrimage to Mecca – these are a mere glimpse into our perennial fascination with pathways and their destinations. As such, *Journey* is, in the Aristotelian sense, properly epic (*Poetics*, 1451a32-36; 1459a17-19) in theme, but mythic in reach. In its mode of simulation and representation, the game fulfills such a task within a concise enough session for a single sitting. Behind the evocative experience lies a storied game carefully articulating the archetypal events of the Hero's Journey. Put in other terms, it symbolically and metaphorically patterns itself on the human life-cycle (Sheffield 2013), from a civilization's rise and fall to the career of a new race of pathfinders. Although *Journey* is grounded in this root metaphor, it surprisingly is rewarding replay, for it is a gaming experience to be shared alongside a companion and, circulated as a story worth telling. Over the course of this article we will explore how many sacred traditions and their stories find cadence with *Journey*. Drawing on myths, mythemes and motifs such as Celestial Ascent, aspects of shamanism, the Hero Twins, the conflict with the dragon and the central mountain we will witness how *Journey*'s creators worked towards shaping an experience that holds to a common and universal storyline within the unique immersive modality of a contemporary video game.

1 Method and Procedure

Video games are a unique medium, they can do more than represent actions and events; they can also simulate them implicating the 'user' more so than any other medium. A plethora of images can be woven into a seamless syncretistic whole. Although these aims yield a game like *Journey* with mass appeal to a collective international audience, the experience (the game itself reminds us) can also be a deeply personal one. In part, I argue that it is due to *Journey*'s relatively open system of fragmented tale-types, symbols and images which offer entry in a wide range of interpretations based on what each person brings to and takes away from the experience. I will be pursuing a select

1 See <http://thatgamecompany.com/games/journey/>; thatgamecompany (2012, Mar. 13) *Journey Launch Trailer*: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVFLq4OS_pU

2 "The way which leads to heaven" (Trans. Rudd, 2008)

few avenues of the mythic elements represented in the game world, demonstrating a reading of the game as ergodic literature (Aarseth 1997, 1, 179) and mythic text (Lincoln 2000, 150-151).

Figure 1: History of the Ancestors³



Table 1. Storyline of the Ancestors

Visions of Pre-History	Events Revealed	Motif(s)
<i>Vision 1</i>	-Maize (Corn) bestowal by Celestial Birds -Harvest/Harness of crop energy, weaving of cloth	Creation Story & Fire-theft, <i>poiesis</i>
<i>Vision 2</i>	-Craftsmanship, architecture, infrastructure and further innovations in maize/star energy (terminals and generators)	Innovations, Architecture, <i>techne</i> , First Culture Heroes
<i>Vision 3</i>	-Depletion of crops, rise of Tower(s) and Onset of Hierarchy	Tower of Babel
<i>Vision 4</i>	-Loss of Fabric (societal/communal), resource war -Draco-machines -Rise of Great Dragon	Schism, Armageddon, Eschatology
<i>Vision 5</i>	-Annihilation of the Ancestors -Birth of Hero Traveler	Out of Death, New Life; Transformation
<i>Great Vision 6</i>	Revelation of the Hero Journey, Twin Heroes, Confrontation with Dragon, Tower of Light (Ladder)	World Pillar
Embodied Vision 7	Final Ascent up the Twined Peak	-Axis Mundi -Celestial Ascent

Source: Tapestry Storyline of Events Partitioned into Episodes.

3 https://getsatisfaction.com/thatgamecompany/topics/story_tapestry_art . Retrieved September 6, 2013.

1.1 Ancestor's Story

For a foundational text, I will rely on the ‘Tapestry Story’¹ revealed through the visions with the Ancestors (tall white ephemeral figures of the cut scenes), and discovered in the wasteland as episodic hieroglyphs by the player. A depiction of the Tapestry (Figure 1) can be roughly outlined (Table 1) along with how the storyline effectively aligns with and diverges from traditional sacred histories found in our global village (Table 2). How a translation of these sacred traditions takes to the profane world of video games will especially be of interest for this study. Simply put: does syncretism and eclecticism of this scope work? What are the unique emergent qualities offered by the medium?

Table 2. Themes & Motifs Across Five Mythologies

Theme/Motif	Journey Tapestry Storyline	Chinese	Navajo	Greek	Black Elk Oglala Lakota
Sacred Mountain	Twined Peak	Mt. Kunlun	<i>Dzil Na'oodilii</i> Travelers' Circle Mountain	Mt. Olympus	Harney Peak, Black Hills
Origin of Humans	Star seed, soil and maize	Clay by <i>Nüwa</i>	From Maize	>Clay by Prometheus >Cadmos, Dragons Teeth >Stones by <i>Pyrrha</i> & Deucalion	Emergence: Brought to surface by <i>Iktomi</i>
Ancestral Spirits	Celestial Bird, Six Ancestors	> <i>Shenren</i> Holy Person, > <i>Xianren</i> Immortal Person, >Six <i>wu</i> -shamans of Mt. Kunlun	<i>Nilch'idine'e</i> Air-Spirit People <i>Haashch'eeh dine'e</i> Holy People <i>Ha'aznani dine'e</i> Emergence People	Ancestral Shades, Culture Heroes	Six Grandfathers
Ancestral War	Resource Wars	Yellow Emperor : Flame Emperor	Air-Spirit Conflict	Trojan War	Peace Pipe conflict

1 Jenova Chen supplied fans with a two-part tapestry of the ‘History’ and ‘Current Story’: https://getsatisfaction.com/thatgamecompany/topics/story_tapestry_art; See Also Frank Bosman (2013, Feb. 5) *Journey – Narrative (/ eginning, visions, ending)*. Retrieved October 31, 2013 from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UaBvdLB2O0>

Dragon	-Dragon(s) of Ancestors -Lesser Pit Dragon(s) of Travellers	<u>Zhulong/Zhuyin Gong gong</u> (Flood Demon)	<u>Binaayee</u> ’ League of Monsters	<u>Typhon/Python</u>	-
World Parent(s)	Heaven & Earth	<u>Nüwa</u> (sometimes with <u>Fu Xi</u>)	First Man & First Woman	<u>Pyrrha & Deucalion</u>	Mysterious One & Earth
Culture Bearer	First Farmer, Weaver, Craftsmen Travelers	<u>Fu Xi</u> , <u>Shen Nung</u>	Coyote, First Man & First Woman	<u>Prometheus</u> , <u>Cadmos</u> , <u>Daidalos</u>	<u>Iktomi</u> , Black Elk
Supernatural Aid; Talisman	Scarf, Cryptogram	Healing Herb of six <u>wu</u> -shamans	Feather		Medicinal Herb
Twin Heroes	Travelers as Twins (born from sky and earth)		Monster-Slayer & Water-born (Son and grandson of Sun)	<u>Castor & Polydeukes (Dioskouroi)</u>	-

1.2 The Hero’s Journey

Recent interviews with thatgamecompany’s co-founder Jenova Chen have demonstrated *Journey*’s overall story-structure and engagement with the Hero’s Journey or monomyth pattern, developed by the renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).¹ I have outlined the structure, charting points of correspondence between *Journey* and Campbell’s hero cycle (Campbell 1964 [1945], 245) (Table 1 & 3). I further demonstrate the cycle’s own affinity to rites of passage as studied by Arnold Van Gennep in his monograph. Knowing the in-built pattern of the Hero Journey serves as a point of departure into myth’s operation within the game world, while Van Gennep’s work illuminates ritual’s own contribution and relationship with myth and avenues of game-play. Just as Campbell did not see the monomyth as a rigid storytelling formula, the world of *Journey* also encourages wandering, exploration, perusal and *aidia* (See Caillois, 1961) (i.e., spontaneous play).

Figure 2: Hero’s Journey & Great Vision Tapestry²

1 Ohannessian 2012, para. 5: “What we did was borrowed the Hero’s Journey, Joseph’s Campbell’s work, and the three-act structure from filmmaking, the transformation of the character. So you get two players who will go through the transformation of life together.”

2 See https://getsatisfaction.com/thatgamecompany/topics/story_tapestry_art . Retrieved September 5, 2013.

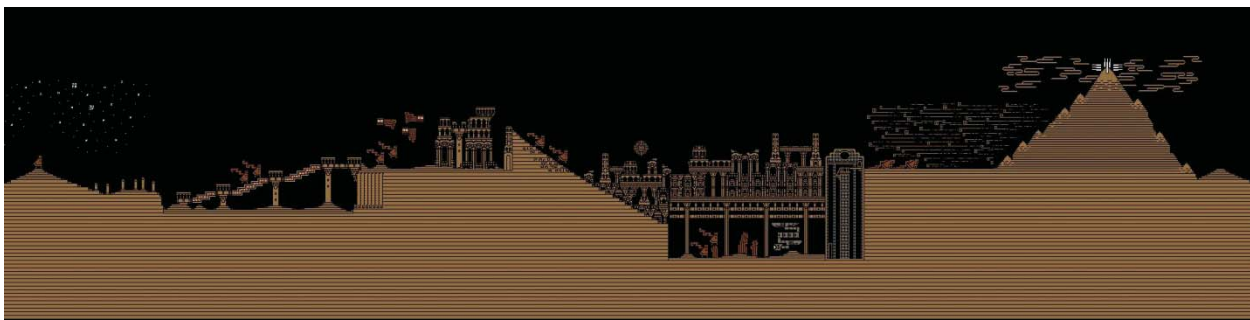


Table 3. *Rite de passage*, Monomyth, *Journey* Three-fold Pathway

<i>Rite of Passage</i>	<i>Hero's Journey</i>	<i>Journey</i>
Separation	Departure	
<u>Preliminal</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call to Adventure • Supernatural Aid/Helpers • Crossing Threshold • Wonder Journey → Belly of the Whale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start Play • Cloth/Star Symbol Talisman • First Gateway • [Pit with <u>Dracomachine</u>]
Transition	Initiation	
<u>Liminal</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Road of Trials • Atonement • Apotheosis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Game Course (<u>agôn</u>) • Pure Light; [White Garb status] • Embodied Celestial Ascent
Incorporation	Return	
<u>Postliminal</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magic Flight • Rescue from Without • Return Threshold • Master of Two Worlds • Freedom to Live 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celestial Descent to Beginning • [Revived by Ancestors] • Credits • (Re)Play (with foreknowledge of the path) • Freedom to Play Any Level (Nexus Hub)

Sources: Van Gennep 1960 [1909], Campbell 1968 [1945], *Journey* 2012

1.3 Themes and Motifs

To assist in the comparative study of mythic elements, I have drawn from the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* by Stith Thompson who further expanded the pioneering Tale-type system of classifying folktales originally developed by the folklorist Antti Arne. Their collaborative efforts resulted in the A-T (Aarne-Thompson) system used to this day. Such a comparative tool enables the mythographer and folklorist to identify motifs and cross-reference them discovering more nuanced motifs and

their occurrences in other tales from around the world. Finding the nuances are essential, otherwise we end with too general a situation (e.g. ‘F0-199 Otherworld Journeys’, where we could arrive at more sophisticated motifs: ‘E721 Souls Journey from body’, or ‘D2121 Magic journey’ with subsequent delineations). For this study, we can then demonstrate the video game’s ability to render such motifs through simulation, representation and ergodics. This opens a level of analysis necessary to un-package the content and its shared patterns with particular traditional myths (See Table 2). I have cited motifs throughout the article and have compiled an index as supplementary material, leaving some motifs up to the reader for perusal.

Due to the dual modes of single-player and paired-player game play in *Journey*, I have found it necessary to draw on tales of both the solo path (exemplified through shamanic, poetic and philosophical texts of a common celestial ascent theme), and the paired path represented by the Hero Twin motif in particular (Navajo in detail, Dioskouric in some detail and others briefly mentioned), which itself could be classified as ‘AT 613 the two travelers’ or more comprehensively represented in Thompson’s *Motif-Index* as ‘T685 Twins.’ This tension between a shared and a private experience is, I suggest, integral to the games dynamic structure.

The aim of this study is not to be encyclopedic, but rather interdisciplinary and comparative in practice to create a space for further inquiry and application for video games as expressive vehicles of traditional lore and motifs and for the impact video games have on our inherited mythologies. There are many traditions that find representation in *Journey* that unfortunately may not be addressed here. However, I have attempted to be highly selective and monographic to address themes that are formative to the experience of the text.

1.4 Simulation, Cybertext, Ergodics

Motifs in a video game are not stagnant artifacts, but are rather dynamic entities discreetly experienced in the video game world. In this regard, I suggest sustaining the integral quality of the game as a cybertext (Aarseth 1997, 21)¹, which Espen Aarseth has defined as “a machine for the production of variety of expression” (Aarseth 1997, 3). These varieties invite an open system of approaches in which the user (Traveler), text (*Journey*) and machine (i.e. Playstation 3) form a reciprocal ‘feedback loop’. We may think of the motifs as ‘scriptons’ within Aarseth’s typology (Ibid., 62).

By asserting the game be approached as a cybertext, this implies that we set apart the video game medium in general as a unique configuration of the otherwise universal narrative sequences of

1 Aarseth’s “Textual machine,” is of value to this study. It serves as a reminder of the unique position the user, text and machine feedback loop.

Journey's exposition, employing Aarseth's formulation of ergodics. By ergodics, I follow Aarseth's term rather strictly, derived from the Greek *ergon* ('work') and *hodos* ('path') (Ibid., 1). With its open system of symbols and glyphs that invite perusal, a connection can be forged that *Journey* was designed to be treated as both ergodic literature and mythic text at once. He further states:

The successful ergodic work of art maintains tension and excitement while providing a path for discovery, a coming into focus of a didactic of the design and hidden principles at work in the work. (Ibid., 179)

As such, *Journey* may be approached as a text requiring traversal and navigation (literally and ergodically) that is in-formed through a mythological structure. A path of discovery arises in the revelation of episodes in the Ancestor's history, which eventually link up into a single wall (what I call the 'Great Vision' episode). A rectification of the text is achieved by actions performed by the player/user.

1.5 Evocative Game Design and Poetic Gameplay

Evocation emerges from aesthetics, mediation and mimesis, which encompass the outer skin and art direction of *Journey*, i.e. visual content, soundscape, and musical score. The mythic architecture and geography of the game space are clues as to how its relatively simple storyline was able to achieve resonance both amongst the gaming community and beyond. Our main task here is to open up the material to its manifest traditional content. To retain the *experience* of the game on the visceral level, I will argue *Journey*'s shared cadence with shamanism, our species' oldest technique and pathway to the sacred realm.

1.6 Many modes, one action

I will be engaging with the motifs and myths of a select few particular cultures and their wisdom traditions, demonstrating how each represents the single action of ascension. While each medium conveys the congruent action, how each does so differs according to the nature of the texts mode of rhetoric and to the unique symbolic inflections pertaining to each culture. For example, philosophical treatises tend towards allegory, direct analogy and signs espousing the contemplative state, while poetic renderings give form through metaphor, allusion and fertilization of the imagination. Myths tend to consolidate, concentrate and intensify such approaches, while also mirroring back to their given cultures an image of the world and its ways. *Journey* as a cinematic videogame (the mode of simulation, ergodics, immersion, and story combined), asks of the user to witness and participate in the action and to be in play – it thus, exists within its own unique

province and discourse, i.e. within the gaming culture. And yet from these seemingly disparate disciplines and traditions there underlie a common scheme, storyline and configuration expressed.

2 Co-creating Spiritual a Spiritual Game World

As a Traveler in *Journey*, the player begins *in medias res*, seated in meditation posture in a desert. Hints are given as to the subsequent steps with a brief, user-friendly, integrated tutorial of the basic controls of the game, which use the PlayStation 3 controllers Tilt to pan and traditional stick or direction pads. From there the action buttons are simply delegated to X/R1 (jump) and O (call). Although the controls are minimal, they are not lacking and match up with the overall feel of the game.

2.1 A Shift in Perspective: From Single- to Mutli-player

When the Traveler begins making his or her way through the stages, a new arrival may enter the game world. The being differs from all other zoomorphic cloths encountered thus far, for the new Traveler is not artificial, but human. (S)He bears a striking resemblance to the player's protagonist, dressed in a similar androgynous garb. Depending on the temperament of this new 'Other', they may very well demonstrate a knack for showing the ropes. But, as *Journey* seeks to metaphorically represent the comings-and-goings of life acquaintances, Travelers link up, and also diverge (N772). This is reflected in the list of fellow players revealed during the credits.

There are three main visual indicators of another player's rank: 1) Scarf length, indicating the span of time a player has stayed alive in game time, 2) patterned adornments on the cloak, and 3) a white garb, symbolizing growing similitude with Ancestors. These encounters can be slightly jarring to the neophyte Traveler, since it is the first experience of another human in an otherwise barren landscape of ruins inhabited only first by zoomorphic AI cloths.

Communication between Travelers is reduced to a single form of gesture: a musical calling that emanates a luminous cryptogram. There is much room left for the player to figure out as to the exact nature of the cryptogram, nonetheless the call-symbol will be revealed as a critical form of communication and search signal (akin to sonar, and echo-location). For the game development team this marked a transition in the kind of games they were known for: *fLOW*⁸ (2006) and *Flower*^M

2 Thatgamecompany (2011, Feb. 18) *fLOW Trailer* Retrieved October 31, 2013 from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTVDSOnPLns>

3 Thatgamecompany (2011, Feb. 18) *Flower Trailer* Retrieved October 31, 2013 from:

(2009) debuted thatgamecompany's style of relaxing ambient *solo* gameplay with sweeping musical accompaniment. Such is the situation with *Journey* with the significant addition of a multiplayer experience, made possible via the *Playstation Network*. In a larger sense, the subject matter from game to game shares a certain narrative of mythological inquiries: *fLOW* sent players into the depths of an inner cosmos of evolution, *Flower* had players ride the wind across pastures, and now with *Journey* there is the human-centered quest up to the celestial heavens.

The solitary experience can shift spontaneously as another Traveler happens to enter the game world; here is where the quest becomes interesting. *Journey* was subtly designed with a key principle: refiguring the experience of the 'Other'. What's more, it works towards re-visioning the *resence* of 'Other' in the virtual gaming world. In a recent article published in *The Escapist Magazine*, Jenova Chen, co-founder of thatgamecompany, declared that *Journey* is "a game about strangers," subtly designed to "look at that person as another human being" (Vanderwall 2013). One can hear a touch of the philosopher Martin Buber's words: "If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things" (Buber 1958). Jenova Chen and the development team seem to be mindful of this kind of principle, developing the game as a counterpoint to the long-standing "myth" of video games as violence-inducing and objectifying of fellow players (Vanderwall 2013). Instead, the world was developed to evoke emergent meaningful bonds (Sheffield 2013).

2.2 Beyond the Game: Player as Storyteller

In a multifaceted endeavor *Journey* has attempted to forge meaningful bonds by attempting to facilitate an emotional experience for users, which in itself has resulted in players telling stories about their rounds of play. Entire sites dedicated to the stories of playing *Journey* have come about from grass-root communities where fan art and cosplay are woven in with personal stories and commemorative screenshots of companions met.⁴ In this way, the game is the raw source of experience, later mediated by storytelling that fluidly stays alive circulating among players and fans with more ease and rapidity than ever, in part due to our evolving online communities. Mythology can be felt and expressed from designers to players in a transaction of what we might call *e-cocreative* communities (Jenkins 2003). However, given that *Journey* is still a relatively young fictive world, I suggest we develop an understanding of its purport from the inside out, for it is first and foremost a gaming experience, and second an experience narrated.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1oZnf3475c> ;

4 See <http://journeystories.tumblr.com>

2.3 Respawn, Rebirth, Reincarnation

When the player completes *Journey* in its sublime finale, one fascinating event occurs while the credits role. As a transfigured star, the Traveler is jettisoned back to the very beginning of the game. The hub station then enables the player to step into any stage of the game. At this point, it can be inferred, if not from prior events (e.g. list of travelers met), that any other Traveler met during an initial run of *Journey* was another human with possible foreknowledge of the terrain. Furthermore, if the player keeps an eye towards the sky, shooting stars can be observed. In other words, the online component has been seamlessly woven in. This subtle change to the games storyline in a way transforms the concept of ‘respawning’ into a form of ‘reincarnating,’ within the mythic world of the Travelers. Players become, as it were, keepers and storytellers of the virtual lore themselves. For the tradition amongst the Ancestor and Traveler is kept alive not by a highly sophisticated language, nor even through any verbal expression or articulation, but rather through visions, images and symbols: a visual canon. Player’s in this configuration complete what’s missing by voicing their experiences beyond the game (i.e. player as storyteller).

2.4 Numinous Players: Re-visioning the Other

Conventional means of communication and identity found in multiplayer games – i.e. messaging, voice-chat, and player-names – are curiously absent in *Journey*^o. Instead, players are left with a single chime that emits various melodic notes. The overt design by the developers seems to be a cleansing of language, for language is, by nature, a potentially divisive force (hence, the confusion of tongues). By radically reducing communication, players are situated in a more spiritual, ineffable modality that is markedly universal. It is as if the game urges players beyond words into a shared experience of the numinous, wherein language is playfully renegotiated. By reducing the nominal, textual and vocal elements of conventional gaming rhetoric, players move out of the realm of signs and into the more expansive and playful realm of symbols. Stripped of identity, orientation and even gender, Travelers collaborate with one another in a *articipation* , 'stique. Rudolph Otto, theologian and scholar of comparative religion, sought a similar task reprising holiness in the study of religion noting that “For the ‘creature-feeling’ and the sense of dependence to arise in the mind the ‘numen’ [*wholly other*] must be experienced as present” (Otto 1923, 8-11). *Journey*’s ability to draw players together in a shared space reconfigures the apparatus of language and confronts them with an alien environment. By reducing convention, a new *felt experience* emerges.

2.5 Simulacra, Contemplation & Shamanism

Sacred traditions from around the world tend to agree on the general directive of the soul in a state of contemplation (Eliade 1979., pp. 477 & 482). The single driving action of *Journey*: traveling to and ascending the Twined Peak, finds echoes in many wisdom traditions and tales as the soul’s journey (D2120, D2135, E721). Drawing on celestial ascent as a metaphoric vehicle of the vision quest, purification and contemplation we may examine the *ascent* or *anos hodos* (‘upward path’) from two major branches: philosophical discourse and shamanism (See Table 4).

Table 4. Celestial Ascent Storyline over Five Texts

<i>Journey</i> (Traveler’s tale)	Chariot Allegory	Cave Allegory	<i>Yuan You, Far-Off</i> Journey	Black Elk’s Great Vision
Sand dunes, facing Sun (East?) Bound Game Path	Sensible Realm Upward Path	Underground Dwelling Road to Upper World	Grieved by worldliness Heaven Bound	Fallen ill Path up into Clouds
Flight gained from celestial energy, winged cloak Fabric Creatures & Draco-machines	<i>Psyche</i> as Chariot pulled by winged horses, feathered soul Procession of Zeus, gods and daimons	Forced Ascent Celestial Bodies	Chariot pulled by Eight Dragons Pure Ones <i>zhenren</i> & Immortals <i>xianren</i>	Spotted Eagle as Guide Thunder-Beings
Meeting the 6 Ancestors Final Realm of limitless energy Summit of Twined Peak	Intelligible Realm	Upper World	Realm of Primal Spirit	Meeting with 6 Grandfathers Rainbow Gate World Mountain (Harney Peak), world hoop(s)
Pure Light	<i>Hyperurania</i>	Behold the Sun, source of time/season-cycles, illumination	Purity, vision of Nothing	
Star Descent (Re)Start Game	Shooting Star (<i>Timaeus</i> & <i>Rep.</i>) Metempsychosis	<i>Katabasis</i> , Descent Return to Cave	Great Beginning	Return guided by Spotted Eagle Return to Tribe with Herb

Plato’s Allegories of Ascent

In his *Dialogues* the Athenian philosopher Plato (c.427-347 BCE) was prone to use allegories and myths to express what could not be arrived at directly through straight, argumentative discourse (*logos*). Instead, he relied on *mythoi* and, hesitantly, allegory (his *hyponoia*) to impart core concepts such as the intelligible realm of forms (*eidos*) and ideas. He often composed them as tales of ascension. The Allegory of the Cave from the *Republic* *Rep*° 514a–520a;5 centers on a prisoners journey to the sun (previously formulated as the source of good) (Ibid° 508a-509c), and subsequent

return to the cave. A true philosopher could achieve elevation to (and expedient recollection of) the intelligible realm and the Good (*agathon*) through knowledge, contemplation and the shedding of the gross body and the cultivation of the winged soul (*syche*).

In *Phaedrus*, Plato's Socrates likens the soul (*syche*) to a winged chariot with a good and bad horse (*Phaedrus*, 246a-b). Cultivating the good horse compelled the chariot aloft until it reached the intelligible realm of the divinities (*theoi*), ideas and forms (*eidos*). Within *Phaedrus* Plato goes on to theorize the process of *metempsychosis* (*Phaedrus*, 249a-b) which he demonstrates throughout the *Dialogues*, such as the closing sections of the *Republic* (621b) (e.g. 'Myth of Er') and within *Ti₁ aeus* (43d-c), likening the soul's birth and assignment to a shooting star. For Plato humanities original nature and origin dwelt in a celestial ancestry, wherein the individual must find accord with the rhythms of the universe (*imaeus*, 90a-d). Within Plato's discussion of the winged soul of *Phaedrus*, lies correlative material with *Journey* offering a philosopher's rendition of our central motif: celestial ascent. However, in *Journey* the player is the animating principle, the soul of the Traveler who puts forth the effort and *agôn* ('struggle') (*Phaedrus*, 247b).

Shamanism and the Holy Peoples

An older spiritual tradition that has rippled down through philosophical schools like Platonism and into *Journey* is shamanism. Mircea Eliade defines a shaman as "a man [person] who has immediate, concrete experiences with gods and spirits," in efforts to achieve a *healing* (Eliade 1979, 88)°Eliade further states:

Healer and psychopomp, the shaman is these because he commands the technique of ecstasy – that is, because his soul can safely abandon his body and roam at vast distances, can penetrate the underworld and rise to the sky. (Eliade 1979, 182)

Christina Pratt elaborates on Eliade's 'narrow' definition, amending the shaman's unique attainment of *not only* 'spirit flight' in the spirit world, *but also* attaining the ability to embody spirits to administer healing in the physical world (Pratt 2007a, xxii). The clearest cinematic moments that are markedly shamanistic in *Journey* are the Visions where the Traveler comes in contact with celestial beings (Ancestors).

Shamans in ancient times and in living traditions today often were (and are) keepers of myth as *sacred narratives*. Through the handed-down myths shamans establish a lineage, for initiates enabling them to keep a direct connection with the ancestral realm. In this regard, the Ancestors of *Journey* fulfill the role of the Holy People found frequently in shamanic traditions, that is, initiating neophytes into the source, course and destiny of life, while the Traveler(s) as neophytes keep the tradition alive through participation in the rite. A critical feat of the shaman is his or hers ability to experience the invisible realm (usually through flight), return back into the visible realm and

formulate the experience into a transmittable healing module, be it oral storytelling, myth and ritual – i.e. creating a visceral road map of the spirit world and naming its denizens.

For example, in Chinese tradition there exist various degrees of celestial or holy persons. Two such beings often encountered in mountains (F460) are the *xianren* 仙人 immortal person, prone to flight, and *shenren* 神人 holy/spirit person. A third being is the *zhenren* 真人 realized person, a romanticized peak individual of ancient times. Often conflated with the *shenren*, the *zhenren* was one who coursed through life in accord with the Tao, able to “climb the highest places and not be frightened” (Watson (Trans.) 1968, 77). One famous tale of a run-in with a *shenren* of Mount Guye occurs in the Taoist text the *Zhuangzi* (c.300BCE):

With skin like ice or snow, gentle and shy like a young girl. He doesn't eat the five grains, but sucks the wind, drinks the dew, climbs up on the clouds and mist, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond the four seas. By concentrating his spirit, he can protect creatures from sickness and plague and make the harvest plentiful. (Ibid, 33)

This remains one of the few instances where a *shenren* is described in detail, garbed in the fabric and language of myth. Inhabiting a mountain, the *shenren* as well as their close relatives the *xianren* contribute to our engagement with Sacred Mountain motif explored more fully later (5). From pure aesthetics the Ancestors of *Journey* take on a similar appearance: adorned in white garments, haunting a sacred mountain (F460.1.4.1), but with a more careful reading the *shenren*, like the Ancestors seeks to preserve, guide and vitalize life-cycles and agriculture.

In a different strain of Chinese tradition is the shaman-based poetry of Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period (475 BCE to 221 BCE) with his anthology the *Chuci* or *Songs of the South*, compiled in the later Han Dynasty by Wang Yi (2nd century CE). Featured in the anthology is a particular poem *Buan Bou* (“Far-off Journey”) which gives a detailed poetic rendering of both shamanic ecstasy and celestial ascent.¹ In sum, the narrator's soul partakes of an out-of-body experience (E721), visiting mythical sites (e.g. Hanging Gardens of Kun Lun) and beings (*zhenren*), and Feathered Men (*Buan You*, ln. 71. (Trans. Hawkes); See also Hawkes, 2011, 201)² on the Hill of Cinnabar. One stanza reads:

I honoured the wondrous powers of the Pure Ones [*zhenren*],
And those of past ages who had become Immortals [*xian*].
They departed in the flux of change and vanished from men's sight,

1 Although the entire poem may not be addressed here, I encourage the reader to engage in a reading of the *Buan You*, alongside a session of *Journey*.

2 Hawkes offers commentary that treats the Feathered Men as a title for a ‘Taoist Adept’, while the cinnabar is near synonymous with alchemy. Here, I suggest, we may also glimpse shamanistic undertones.

Leaving a famous name that endures after them. (Hawkes (Trans.) 2011 [1959], p.195, ln.25-28.)

We have similar imagery depicted in the relationship between Ancestors and Travelers in their shared legacy. Such sentiments, however, were and are grounded in very human experiences across the world, as any individual may feel when remembering the deceased in deep reflection.

The Six Ancestors

Journey presents a very specific quantity of six Ancestors. What might we make of this? Perhaps it can be ascertained with the following analogues: In the mythological text *Shanhaijing* (a text discussed in more detail below), we have a brief passage mentioning the six shamans atop the Kun Lun Mountains: “East of the Beast-Facing-East are the wu-shamans Peng, Di, Yang, Lu, Fan and Xiang, who bear the corpse of Yayu, each holding the Never-Dying Herb to revive him” (Trans. Strassberg 2002, 193). In a similar shamanic strain, the Lakota Souix Holy Man and Healer Black Elk shared one of the most comprehensive accounts of a vision,³ In the account Black Elk describes in detail a meeting with the Six Grandfathers (representing the six sacred directions) in a vision set to initiate him into a direct ancestral lineage as the healer of his people (he himself becoming the sixth embodying his doppelgänger). The user of *Journey* encounters six Ancestors, who congregate to rejuvenate the fatigued Traveler atop the snowy heights before launching him/her into a cinematic celestial ascent to the final climb of the Sacred Twined Peak. The similarities are suggestive, placing *Journey* in deeply evocative engagement with an old sacred path laid down since our species’ first breakthrough into the invisible, spiritual, mythological and virtual realm.

3 Ritual: Recurrence and Transmission

As I alluded to earlier the work of the renowned scholar of world mythology, Joseph Campbell, played a formative role in the patterning of *Journey*. One need just listen to Austin Wintory’s musical scoring to understand how multifaceted Campbell’s work impacted the production of *Journey*. Drawing influence from Campbell’s research main book *The Hero *ith a ~housand , aces* (1945) and inspiration from *The Power of 4 yth* (1988), Chen duly noted the scholar’s ability to reveal the Hero Journey Cycle’s proliferation amongst world mythologies.⁴ In so doing, *Journey* readily expresses a milieu of cultural symbolic forms.

3 First attested in Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), 17-36, and later in a raw and complete compilation in R.J. DeMallie’s *The Sixth Grandfather* (1985), 111-142.

4 J. Chen (personal communication, April 8, 2013)

3.1 Simulated Rite of Passage

Campbell's basic Hero Journey sequence of *separation-initiation-return* was heavily influenced by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep's work on ritual patterns. In Van Gennep's classic work *The Rites of Passage* (1960 [1909]), he analyzed the impact that ritual had in inducing states of 'liminality' (from the Latin *limen*) or threshold experiences that guide individuals during moments of transition through the course of life. Deemed *rites de passage*, Gennep further partitioned them into three main strands: rites of separation, rites of transition and rites of incorporation, or preliminal, liminal and postliminal respectively. Usually a talisman, sign or adornment is given to the initiate (as traveler) as they undergo departure (Van Gennep 1960, 37). Campbell's innovation was in translating the ritual pattern back into myths of the hero, reporting their proliferation. *Journey* takes the next step and translates the ritual/myth cycle into participatory media – i.e. offering a *limes* ('pathway') to the divine. Hence, it can be theorized that the Traveler's experience is that of participating in a ritual specifically rendered as a shamanistic initiation (Prologue-Tower), which is consummated by the Great Vision and Celestial Ascent (cinematic climax).

4 Molding a Myth-minded Game World

Classical mythology, especially in its Homeric inflection, has influenced the video game medium since its 1972 domestic inception as the Magnavox Odyssey.⁵ Prototypical structures like the labyrinth of Daedalus have provided a template for cunning level-designers with a Thesean user-ship. Our latest technological achievements allow for hyper-real miniature cosmos to be constructed and explored. Myths can now be coded and rendered in action within a virtual space of fluidity, immersion and (most importantly) play. Conversely, myths do not always point to a desirable truth, but to hard realities of limits – i.e. game rules. In other words, they can impose structures as much as reveal vistas of the imagination.

4.1 A Definition of Myth

Before proceeding any further, a definition of 'myth' may be in order. It can be a polarizing term ranging from profane disproven theories (mere fictions) to sacred and/or authoritative insights. *The American Heritage Dictionary 7th ed.* (2011) defines myth as:

5 The first commercial home video game console being *Magnavox Odyssey* (Atari, 1972)

1. A traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society.

To provide an apparatus for the function of myth and its use in *Journey*, I suggest we consider Jaan Puhvel's circumambient approach to the content:

In myth are expressed the thought patterns by which a group formulates self-cognition and self-realization, attains self-knowledge and self-confidence, explains its own source and being and that of its surroundings, and sometimes tries to chart its destinies. (See Puhvel 1987, 2)

Myth attempts to straddle the tension between immanence and transcendence, hence such occupation with metaphor, metaphysics and the virtual. One might also think of the challenges faced by the shaman in trying to communicate an ecstatic experience - often this is when a myth enters in as *a lastic expression of an extraordinary experience*. Networked together into whole systems, myths form mythologies, becoming near synonymous with 'comprehensive worldviews' or *Weltanschauung*. As such, they often become so deeply entrenched in a culture that they may no longer be referred to as 'mere myth' consciously within the group, but rather sacred truths, narratives and histories (See Lincoln, 2000).

4.2 Myth in the Game World

Myth, within J.Puhvel's above perimeters, finds its place in *Journey* as the sacred history of the Ancestors *and* as an image of the world for Travelers to seek meaning in the inherited wasteland. It enables Travelers to reconcile the ruined material culture, with a continuum steeped in bygone lore. Following Maria Beatrice Bittarello's recent argument for the confluence of the mythic and virtual realms (See Bittarello 2008, 252-253), I suggest we consider *Journey's* world akin to such a typology, that is to say, approaching the game world as a plane wherein "*ordinary actions [occur] in an extraordinary context*" (Ibid. 259). A significant addendum would be that *Journey* exercises a tight synthesis of the mythic and ergodic, wherein users fall into accord (and perhaps even intimacy) with each 'Other' via co-questing. That is to say, a pathway and plotline is more consciously mapped for user-experience. It should also be reiterated that Traveler(s) play out, or simulate the myth as lived reality, while users are once-removed in a place of tension as 'observer/participant' of/within the Traveler culture. This, I would add, is a significant innovation of the video game medium and virtual spaces in general: they allow the dynamics of myth to be observed, felt and played with by the user within emergent complexity.

4.3 Metaphor of a human life-cycle & Mythological Systems

The pathway on which the monomyth, and *rites de passage* unfold, I suggested earlier, operates on the human-life cycle metaphor in *Journey* (See Ohannessian 2012, para. 11; See Sheffield 2013). In this aspect, the game path grapples with very primal, archetypal patterns that have been handed down through various cultures' myths. By heeding the primacy of the organic model in the otherwise synthetic game world, the developers of *Journey* seem to further implicate Aristotle's notion in his *Poetics* that a story (*muthos*) must be conceived in similitude to a single living organism – that is to say, its unity of action must be in sync with the whole and its parts over a three part sequence (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1459a 17-20).

It has recently been proposed by Michael Witzel (2012) that the storyline and its affinity with the human life-cycle may be traceable to a much older innovation in story composition dating to about 40,000 bce. He suggests an insight was reached, namely by shamans, that our human life-cycle correlated with the life-cycle of the cosmos to form a “narrational scheme,” with comprehensive explaining power. Mythologies (creation myths to eschatological myths) form(ed) the path of root metaphors, symbols and images to express such cycles from the outset. In sum, the storyline helped our early ancestors come to terms with the conditions of existence: birth, life, death (and in some cases rebirth, reincarnation or metempsychosis).

4.4 Mythic Arcs and Elements of the Ancestors & Travelers

As the Ancestor's history attests (*Oisions* :3T), generations have their own life-cycles, but since the user lacks reference to a specific quantity of time or duration, the ancestral realm truly exists in a *mythic* epoch partitioned only arbitrarily by episodes. We learn that the Ancestors started out as peaceful, agriculture-based peoples, but succumbed to power, corruption, violence and war resulting in the rise of great draco-machines (e.g. *Oisions* 3-5; B11.2.1.2). Following Aristotle, we could phrase it as a shift from history to epic: from the *narration of a period of time* to the *simulation and/or representation of a single action* (*Poetics* 1459a 20). In other words, the Visions narrate the history of a particular succession of ages,⁶ while the career of a Traveler rests on a universal path. Together, they form the intimations of a near entire mythological system. Woven into the Tapestry, Murals and landscape are salient symbols, gestures and customs that help define a mythic space:

6 *Oisions* 1-4 follow a succession similar to A1101 'The four Ages of the world', which is often seen as a decay from gold, silver, bronze and iron. The loss of a “Golden Age” (A1101.1) occurs with its attempted retrieval. The Ages are vividly described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1.89-150.

Astral Symbol

From the Confluence Myth 1, we learn that star energy was harnessed by the symbols (the stars are literally the symbols), which seed the soil yielding cornfields (*Oision 1*). Through the invention of weaving, and the embroidering of the symbols, the early ‘Artisan’ Ancestor was then able to complete the work of making the celestial energy a viable terrestrial resource. Mythologically, the Astral Symbol serves as a reminder to Travelers of their origins in the Heavens (i.e. Plato’s ‘celestial ancestry’), while practically serving as a beacon for communicating with fellow Travelers. Earlier I suggested the stars function operates similarly to the Platonic cosmos, as those players who reach the end embody a descending star.

Fabled Fabric

The fabric both serves as the courier of loaned celestial energy, a bridge between buildings, and the one-piece garment worn by Travelers and Ancestors. This introduces a suggestive allusion to the value of fabric as a symbol of yoking, weaving, and binding, lending itself to the notion of audio and visual *oiesis* or poetics. For as the game itself demonstrates, the fabric becomes energized by touch between Travelers, and itself charged by the vocative emanation of the Astral Symbol by the Traveler. Throughout the game, the fabric also functions as a bridge and ladder. Here, we may return to our discussion of shamanism, since the motif of the bridge/ladder factors into the entire orchestration of rites and metaphoric means of celestial ascent (Eliade 1979, 483). However, as the cinematic celestial ascent takes place, the Traveler loses his or her scarf (V81.2), perhaps suggesting the relinquishing of temporary celestial empowerment for an experience of the divine source directly: celestial embodiment, i.e., apotheosis.

Whether in the prehistory of the Ancestors or the game-time of the Traveler, the fabric remains constant as a symbol of *oiesis*, or a fabricating and weaving of code into song or myth. Simply put, the world is brought to life by creativity. Each note a Traveler/Ancestor) sings animates the fabric, activating the old murals and grave markers.

The Way of Song

The multimedia experience needn’t remain stuck on the visual aspect of *Journey*, our symbolic reading of the fabric echoes in *Journey*’s soundscape. Since we are dwelling in the parlance of mythology, it seems necessary to give credence to the art of poetics, song, and Oral Tradition for they are some of the major modes cross-culturally of how myths get handed down. A prime example is the Aboriginal sacred practice named ‘songlines’, (dream-tracks) of Dreamtime, a state where the Ancestral realm and its beings commune with present day Aborigines. The peoples ‘sing the land’ as a form of ancestral worship and traverse the dream-tracks laid down by said Ancestors during creation as they themselves sing the land into existence (Chatwin 1987; Pratt 2007b, 149). In Homer’s *Odysey* 8, we get a glimpse into a similar arrangement in the bard’s power founded on the

gift of “the Muse [who] taught the *aths of song [oimas]*” (emphasis added) (Trans. Murray 1945. *Odyssey* 8.481-482). The Muses, being the daughters of Mnemosyne (‘Memory’), come to the bard seeking to propagate the way of the Immortals and Ancestors. And so in *Journey*, players sing the land back into existence, guided by their Ancestor’s dictations. Similarly, Horace, in his *Ars Poetica*, states “In song oracles were given, and the way of life was shown” (Trans. Fairclough 1970; Horace *Ars Poetica* 403-404)⁷. Song has remained a way of saving the past from being forgotten, that is, letting it fall prey to Mnemosyne’s opponent, Lethe (‘Oblivion’, or ‘Forgetfulness’).

Maize: A Symbol of Transformation

One of the early salient visual motifs of the murals and tapestry of the Ancestor Myth (Visions 1-3) is the imagery of maize or corn crops. Stylistically, the entire tapestry and wall murals speak to motifs found in world art from sand paintings and woven blankets of the Navajo to the Överhogdal tapestries of the Viking Age to the mimetic allusion to 8-bit graphics – i.e. visual syncretism. And like these traditional pieces of folk art, the mural reflects the myth that the Travelers are *born* into.⁸ By this, I mean that the narrative of *Journey* does not set in, nor become self-revelatory until the Visions of the mural/tapestry storyline coalesce with the user’s path.

Further, the maize literally offered sustenance, energy and fuel for industry. Simply put: it transformed the Ancestor’s way of life. As mentioned above, the Ancestors capitalized on the fabric to harness the astral energy called forth by song.⁹ The iconography and its narrative implications suggest that attention should be given to the crops deeper significance. Here, we may turn to cultural myths to flesh out its symbolic value.

Among the Navajo (Diné) peoples of the Four Corners area of Southwestern North America corn or maize¹⁰ frequently recurs as a symbol of fertility and new life.¹¹ Within the context of the Traveler(s), the internal myth of the mural/tapestry functions as a cautionary tale, a history of the Traveler Peoples revealing a stratagem on how to ascend by way of the crops’ energy source and the fabric. The allusion to corn also indicates a deep engagement with the cyclical aspect of nature when viewed through the perspective of agriculture: the seed must die to the earth for transformation to occur and new life to emerge. Such knowledge often revealed through mystery

7 “Dictae per carmina sortes, et vitae monstrata via est.”

8 For a fascinating grass-roots interpretation of the mural see DAISHI’s Thread: *I ore Theory*
<http://www.thatgamecompany.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=10957#p10957>

9 One may think literally of corn in the form of Bio-ethanol as a fuel source.

10 “Corn in Navajo Traditional Life” (2013). ~*in *Rocks Trading Post*. Bluff, Utah. Retrieved from
<http://www.twinrocks.com/legends/72-corn-in-navajo-traditional-life.html>.

11 It is also worth acknowledging the greater significance the Maize (Corn) Mythologies on Native American traditions beyond the Navajo. See Redish, L., Lewis, O. 2009: “Native American Maize (Corn) Mythology.” *Native Languages of the Americas*. Retrieved from <http://www.native-languages.org/legends-corn.htm>

cults and parables seems to recur throughout the storyline of the Ancestors history, that is, a predilection with birth, life, death and rebirth – or the manifold emergence of the life-cycle metaphor. For example, what was the crop field for the Ancestor's became the graveyard for the Travelers.

On an immediate level the symbol of the maize and its predilection with transformation seem to suggest a commentary by the game developers, challenging the 'myth' (pejorative) of video games as violent and escapist. In a forthcoming article on the significance of maize mythology within Native American culture and the crops reception in myth over time, Paul G. Zolbrod argues that the progression from hunter-gathering to agriculture marked a shift in the mitigation ('sublimation') of violence (*in res*). In a similar gesture and trajectory might the rhetoric of *Journey* allude to a similar complex of symbols on which maize is yet again used as a subversive tool? Perhaps more acutely: are we ready to give video games and their developers authority to defend the medium via the medium?

4.5 Hero Twins in Quest

Playing *Journey* with a companion opens the experience out from the Hero's Journey to that of Heroes Journey, or more eloquently put: the quest of the Hero Twin's. Twins in quest is a prolific motif (AT 303, A515.1.1, T685), holding tremendous value in particular for Native American traditions. The Cherokee tale, Selu the Corn Maiden, is one such case that brings together the motifs of birth/death, maize and the twins (Ferguson, 2001). The twin brothers born of Corn Maiden seek out violence against their mother who then offers herself as sacrifice, becoming the first maize bestowed on humans. There are significant parallels between the Hero Twin storyline of *Journey* and the career of the Mayan Twins Hunapu and Xibalbanque. In sum, the twin's fathers One Hunapu and Seven Hunapu (also twins) play a lethal game with the denizens of the House of Death, Xibalba, ending in their sacrifice. Hunapu and Xbalanque descend and ultimately defeat the Lords of Xibalba through the artistry of transformation, thus saving their fathers (Tedlock 1996, 91-142). Culturally, the Mayan twins came to symbolize maize itself. We also have the famous Divine Twins of the Navajo, who offer a compelling analogue with *Journey* that can be developed in some detail.

Diné Bahane' and the Navajo Hero Twins (Naayee Nezghani & Tobajishchini)

The *Diné Bahane'* (Navajo Creation Story) features one of the richest epics of a people's emergence from a primordial chthonic domain to a sophisticated human society. It is important to acknowledge that their story is alive and well today as a living oral tradition, albeit regrettably elders struggle to pass on the traditional stories to younger generations. Paul G. Zolbrod provides one of the fullest accounts committed to text, preceded only by Washington Matthews' *Navaho Legends* (1897). In

the Fifth World of the Emergence cycle, we have the myth of the Hero Twins born to vanquish the Monsters (*Binaaye'*) plaguing the community. The myth, as recorded in the joint effort of Jeff King, Maud Oakes and Joseph Campbell in *6 here the ~*o) ame to ~heir , ather* (1943), offers valuable contextualization to the legends used in war ceremonials performed for young Navajo men in preparation for serving during World War II specifically. Campbell would later go on to use the Navajo Twins as exemplary models several times throughout *Hero* (Campbell 1945, 69-71, 93, 131-133).

The affinity of the heroic life of the Navajo Twins and two Travelers in *Journey* prompted my initial research. The visual presentation of two seemingly identical figures on a dune facing towards a mountain and sun was nothing short of a mythic image. Like the Navajo Twins, Traveler's of *Journey* heed a call to ascend a holy mountain. And like the Navajo legend, Travelers are guided by the wind (Navajo: *Nich'I* Wind-spirit). Instead of relying on invisible walls, or objects to block players, the use of wind suggests a subtle presence or animated principle guiding players – a simulated spirit as it were. In the legend *Nilch'I* accompanies the Navajo Twins throughout their quest to the Father, *Johanaa'ei* the Sun, much like in *Journey* where wind both helps (and challenges), but is nevertheless a major factor to the simulated atmosphere.

A key theme woven throughout *Journey* and the Navajo legend is the deferment of identity, and the aid of a talisman. The attainment or revelation of identity is postponed until the end of both quests. However, the talismans of Travelers *and* the Navajo Twin's remain critical as symbols of ancestry: the talisman given to the Traveler(s) is actually a star, pointing to their celestial origin, while the Navajo Twin's talisman (given to them by Spider Woman) heralds them as *divine* sons of *Johanaa'ei* Father Sun who heed the call to travel the *Atiin'iyinii* Holy Trail (Zolbrod 1987, 197). To earn their titles (as Monster Slayer and Water Born) the Hero Twins must endure four trials before entering *Johanaa'ei*'s dwellings: 1) Pass the Clashing Rocks 2) Cross the Cutting Reeds 3) Cross between the tearing Cactuses and 4) Cross the Boiling Sand. When they earn the meeting with their father *Johanaa'ei* the Sun, they gain identity and look down at the earth from aloft:

Centered between those peaks you can see *Dzil no'oodelee* the Traveler's Circle Mountain. Our home is very near to that place [...] And down there you can see the limits of the world that our people made after they fled the rising waters inside the earth, long before the monsters were born who have brought fear and disorder into our lives. (Ibid., 214)

As initiated young warriors, the Twins are fitted with armor and weaponry to combat the monsters for the remainder of their heroic cycle (A531).

Hero Twins of World Mythology

Beyond Native American mythologies, Divine or Hero Twins span many traditions (A515.1.1, T685). Although they appear as two individuals, Hero Twin myths often function as pedagogical

stories of the two aspects of humanity, a dyad working as a single unit. Consider such pairings as the civilized Gilgamesh the animal-man Enkidu in one of our oldest written stories (and co-quests) the + *ic of Gilgamesh*, or the Greco-Roman Dioskouroi Castor and Polydeukes (Latin: Pollux), and the extended Indo-European relatives the Ashvin's of Vedic tradition (West 2009, 186-191).

Recalling a central image of the sun *Journey*, the Divine Twins are very often sons or grandsons of the Sky God (A210); we have seen this with the Hero Twins of Dine Bahane', but also in the twins Castor and Polydeukes/Pollux whose shared title Dioskouroi translates as 'Sons of Zeus.' Most versions (Apollodorus 3.10.7 & 3.11.2) only have Polydeukes as the son of Leda and Zeus (guised as a swan) (Puhvel 1987, 141)¹², while Castor was born of Leda and Tyndareus. Together the Dioskouroi were known as saviors at sea, assisting sailors by calming the sea and tempests. This is further attested in their serving as crewmembers with Jason and his crew aboard the *Ar o* in their own mythic careers. They eventually became installed as the constellation Gemini ('Twins') as Polydeukes pleaded to Father Zeus to heal his near-fatally wounded mortal brother, offering up first this divine stature to die with (*thanaton syn*) Castor, instead Zeus allowed Polydeukes to split his immortality with Castor as they both alternate between the heavens and the subterranean (See Ovid's *Fasti* 5.715-720; Pindar's *Le, ean O e* 10.49-90; Homeric Hymn 33: Sons of Zeus). They are, in this regard, a fitting pair in our exploration of Hero Twin mythology.¹³ On a practical level, the struggle of long quests can be mitigated with a fellow companion (e.g. the strength of guild quests versus going lone-wolf in Massively Multiplayer Online games and other online multiplayer genres). Along this tradition *Journey* offers a participatory Dioscouric experience, ancestry from Celestial Birds in the Myth of the Ancestors (ornithomorphous hierogamy), and both an apotheosis and a re-installment as celestial bodies.

4.6 Confrontation with the Dragon

Companions come in handy when facing a dragon. The act of slaying is often required when the Hero confronts the great beast, but *Journey* adds a unique twist to this episode: emphasis on *nonviolent* solutions. The fall into the underworld places the Traveler(s) in an encounter with a subterranean dragon equipped with a search-light. *Journey* could easily have followed the well-established timeless formula, Hero-Slays-Dragon, depicted across many Indo-European, Ancient

12 Puhvel coins the term *ornithomorphous hierogamy*: the sacred marriage between a divinity (as bird) and a mortal, often tied to the birth of a hero.

13 What I find particularly compelling is the Dioscouric myth's prevalence as an emergent motif within *Journey*, especially as the white garbed, 'deified,' players assist lesser ranked players. The Dioskouroi as soothers of the sea compliment *Journey*'s calming gameplay - a signature of Thatgamecompany's titles. Also, the Twined peak as a symbol of the twins help orient the player's path, much like the astral twins (Gemini) for sailors.

Near East myths and even beyond into the mythologies of the world (B11.11). The motifs ubiquity and lineage usually traces back to a Sky God battling a Cosmic serpent, or Order : Chaos (A136.1): Indra : Vrtra, Marduk : Tiamat, Set : Apophis, Zeus : Typhon, Apollo : Python, Thor : Midgard Serpent, Baal : Yam, God : Leviathan down to the age of demigods and heroes (B11.11): Cadmus : Serpent, Heracles : Hydra, Bellephrontes : Chimaira, St. George : Dragon, Sigurd : Fafnir, Beowulf : Wyrm and even Far East Asia with Japanese Susa-no-wo : Yamato-no-orochi, and Chinese Yu the Great : Gong-gong - *Journey* could have easily taken this path. However, in a shift in the combat motif, the Traveler(s) outwit the dragon by evasive tactics rather than combative. Thus: Hero-evades-Dragon formula.¹⁴ This divergence suggests a different approach to the dragon as a factor in the Hero Journey.

Torch-Dragon

We find, instead, much in common with its Far East Asian breed, particularly of Chinese mythology. For the player is accompanied by the dragon even during the Celestial Ascent, which seems to illuminate the motif of the dragon surrounding the sacred mountain (AT303, B11.3.2; B11.4.1) There are intriguing parallels between the wide array of dragons of Chinese myths and the general nature and demeanor of the dragons in *Journey*, but the most compelling seems to be one in particular: Zhulong 燭龍 Torch-Dragon. Zhulong was said to reside on Mount Zhangwei according to the important ancient mythological text *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Classic of Mountain and Sea) of the 4th – 2nd century bce (Strassberg 2002). Qu Yuan's *~ian Wen* 天問 (Heavenly Questions) of the previously referenced *Chuci*, features the dragon also known as Zhuyin 燭陰, Torch-Shade. Within the poem there is a key line connecting the sun and Zhulong.¹⁵

The Wisdom of Yin

Within *Journey*, a Zhulong-like creature fiercely imparts the wisdom of *yin* 陰 (the same character for *yin* 陰 is found in the alternative name Zhuyin 燭陰) of Taoism's essential *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. One could then arrive at the following interpretation: the dragon functions as Zhulong/Zhuyin, teaching the Traveler(s) the art of cultivating *yin* 陰); essentially, how to integrate the wisdom of the depths. From within the game it seems to point to a greater lesson ritualized and handed down by the Ancestors. Namely, how to avoid the calamity of *Vision E*, itself seen as the backlash of letting the shadow, or the unconscious go unacknowledged. In Jungian psychology, it would be known as a catastrophic *enantiodromia* within the collective psyche – a violent reversion to the Shadow opposite. What was the rise of the Great Dragon in the Ancestor's chronicles is discovered in the

14 We aren't entirely bereft of this type of dragon, however, since it does erupt from the ground like a massive worm, which could be a play on the Old English term for dragon: *' *rm*; Old High German: *wurm* (Watkins 1995, 522).

15 *~ianwen* ln.44: 'What land does the sun not shine on and how does the Torch Dragon light it?' (trans. Hawkes, 2011).

depths by Travelers. Only now the confrontation finds sublimation in the ritualized life-course of the Traveler – the societal wounding as become a place for learning hard truths and healing.¹⁶

4.7 Twined Peak and the Sacred Mountain

The sacredness of mountains (F132; F460; V1.6.1.1) is well accounted for in world religions and sacred traditions. One need just mention such stations as Mount Sinai of the Hebrew Bible, Mount Tabor, St. John of the Cross's Mount Carmel, Mount Meru abode of Lord Brahma and the Devas, Mount Olympus of Greece, Mount Fuji of Japan and the Kun Lun Mountains of China. These peaks have not only served as vitalizing centers to the spiritual life of their native peoples, but have also continued to stir the imagination generating and inspiring folk tales and mythical narratives shared world-wide. In mythological terms, the central mountain can function as the *axis mundi* (A875.1.1) where the human and divine meet. Consider the poet Hesiod's (c.700 BCE) *Theogony*, bestowed on him atop Mt. Helicon by the Muses, daughters of Mnemosyne ('Memory'). In this regard, the mountain is the locus of transformation and also where transformative achievements of human expression receive boons from the divine.

4.8 Journey's Universal Mountain: Monolith as Monomyth

Amongst the sacred mountains of the world's traditional stories we have briefly accounted for, *Journey's* Twined Peak is quite unique in one essential area: its virtual non-locality. This is in part due to its remediation through a virtual space, and further recapitulates the universality of the games rhetoric. As we have seen in the great vision of shamans such as Black Elk, the central mountain of the world has been proclaimed and mediated into the videogame (Eliade 1979, 269). In a real sense, the emotional impact of Travelers ascending the Twined Peaks is a fascinating rendering of a spiritualized nonlocal center-peak: a monomyth about the monolith.

Mountain as Symbol of Humanity

The Twined Peak of *Journey* is as much philosophical as it is mythological. It elusively remains in the background as a form to be contemplated. Furthermore, it serves a high mimetic function as a mirroring of the graphic illustration of the Twins (F523). This is even more apparent in the mural of Ancestors, where each is angled towards one another echoed further in composition of the Twined Peak (M301.15). In other words, the Travelers and Mountain share an association. And rather than

16 The symbol of the dragon/serpent has often come into association with the healing arts (e.g. the staff of Asclepius), aspects of shamanic rites of initiation with the various manifestations of the Rainbow Serpent amongst the Aborigines of Australia (See Pratt 2007b, 390-91).

the fate of the Ancestors, who sought after artificial and technological means severed from origins, the new destiny laid out before the Traveler is a reinstatement of origins, that is to say, a return to the *axis mundi*. That the Twined Peak is presented as two Ancestors or Travelers also suggests that tending to person-to-person relations even of divine origin.

Confucius's philosophy played a significant role in formulating the story structure of *Journey* (See Ohannessian 2012, para. 11), itself espousing the fundamental worship of and reverence for ancestors.¹⁷ If there were one teaching of Confucius's five virtues (*ren, yi, li zhi* and *xin* (humaneness, righteousness, propriety, knowledge and integrity) *ren* 仁, humaneness, may be the most appropriate. In both meaning and purport, *ren* shares a close relationship to the character for person/people (*ren* 人). *Ren* 仁 fundamentally addresses a deeper philosophical quality to our relationship between one another than simply *ren* 人, people. Through this lens we no longer regard others and ourselves as separate, but more profoundly unified through a common inborn nature individually, and as a society. We may reiterate Buber's transformation of "other" from *you* to *thou*. In a mythological or symbolic level *Journey* conveys such a tenet. The character for person(s) (人) consists of the simple strokes *ie* 丿 and *na* ㇇. One could say that the character represents the resting of the two strokes. The connotation being reliance on fellow peoples, with *ren* 仁 elevating this reliance to a single project: humanity's path towards Heaven's Mandate. In cultivating this particular quality, *ren* 仁, humaneness, or *humanitas* may emerge. *Journey* plays this virtue out visually by representation, viscerally through simulation, and practically through ergodics. Hence, the storyline may read: two persons (人) working (Greek: *ergon*; Chinese: *gong* 工) it out together as shamans/mediums/healers (*wu* 巫) along a pathway (Greek: *hodos*; Chinese: *Dao* 道) (See Aarseth, 1997, 1; Turner, V.W. 1982, pp.30-32; Harbough, R., 1998). Thus, a synergodic¹⁸ cybertext: how to be co-operative cybernetic shamans.

5 Conclusion: Implications and Outlook

5.1 Mythopoetics and Game Design

I have intimated how the video game medium, as represented through thatgamecompany's *Journey*, is capable of expressing and modeling substantial mythic worlds drawn from a ravine of world narratives and motifs. The key is having game developers who have a synoptic vision, bringing

17 J.Chen elaborates on Confucius's 'Six Stages of Life,' (*Analects* 2.4) and how they were woven into the Three-Part story structure.

18 Here, I loosely define it as: A pathway emphasizing the cooperative efforts of two or more users, which yields unique emergent factors formative to the work.

forth content from mythopoetics.¹⁹ In Aristotle's *Poetics* he argued that epic was a distinct genre from tragedy in that it could handle a system of myths, within the trajectory of a single guiding action or theme. Video games are of such a capacity, however, they not only represent their action through *mimesis* (with a passive audience/reader), but allow *user-ship* and agency to embody action within a world. Here, I have drawn on Aarseth's theory of ergodics and the cybertext, which offer substantial theoretical framework and potential for a meaningful dialogue.

Within a cybertext we needn't turn to myths for mere decór. Instead, designers can learn from recent cases like *Journey*, which carry the mindset that myths can be formative to the gaming experience. Henry Jenkin's referred to a similar concept in his theory of emergent meanings within the magic circle of the game world.²⁰ Meaningful symbolic forms of discourse can exist in the ludicity of game worlds with the proper approach and with designers well versed in traditional images, symbols, lore and myths. Therein mythologies *as systems of symbols, motifs and images* can help charter an innovative leap when simulated in video games, informing, structuring, preserving and communicating how we experience such systems of our shared global heritage along *unique pathways of effort* (ergodics) for each user.

5.2 Critique of Violence

Through the language of mythological symbols and mechanics of gameplay, *Journey* conveys a sustained engagement with the controversial 'myth' (as fallacious fable) of violence often attached to video games. By alluding to the particular motifs demonstrated in this article, I have demonstrated how the game further brings about a healing quality, wherein the gaming arrangement is reconfigured, i.e., situating the *agôn* ahead of players rather than between them. This, in part, is further facilitated by the deferment of conventional game world identities (e.g. name tags and unique avatars), instead placing players in a shared experience of estrangement. As such, *Journey* asks of players to renegotiate their potential role as companions rather than combatants. I suggest this gesture is a subversive move by the developers in an effort to revitalize the video game medium as a pathway of artful expression and of potential emergence of the numinous.

5.3 Mythology and Ludology

Journey inherits and creatively responds to gaming's basic social tenet: that it takes two to have a game – i.e. the foundational 'syzygy' (from the Greek *suzugia*: yoke with; conjoin); perhaps a

¹⁹ By 'mythopoetic' I mean an intentional fabrication of a world, its culture and its lore, sourced from and re-visioning traditional culture mythologies.

²⁰

fitting homage to video gaming itself.²¹ One need just look to the larger movements of social media networking and convergence to realize that regardless of how privatized or escapist the act of video gaming can be (or misrepresented as), the shift towards re-socializing the experience has been there all along. A ‘mythos,’ in this instance, can emerge as not only in-game lore, but as the structuring principle that in-forms the gaming experience and the culture, allowing for identity, *communitas* and the liminal to persist.

5.4 Outlook

Games such as *Journey* mark a significant contribution to the larger project of elevating digital games to the rank of art (See Burden & Gouglas 2012), affirming their status as viable cultural artifacts (See Bogost 2006, vii) with their own unique expressive value. And yet, *Journey* takes it one step further, putting players in touch with the numinous, the realm of the sacred and the mystery of human relations. The convergence of the ludic, mythic and spiritual has an old history in material culture: many of the motifs and themes presented in *Journey* echo back to ancient games like the Indic Snakes and Ladders (200 bce).²² The material has only found a new hyper-iteration in video games enabling an intensified refiguring and synthesizing of traditional stories and philosophies from across the globe into a cohesive potentially transformative gaming experiences shared on a much larger scale.

The themes and pathways of events depicted in *Journey* touch on very real experiences and ideas that have founded sacred traditions, mysteries of antiquity, religions and philosophical schools. That the material has now found translation into a contemporary video game is a feat, I submit, that could not have been achieved without the care taken in respecting (and rendering) the nature of sacred paths, texts and myths themselves – a task not to be undertaken lightly.

Supplementary Material

~ale3~ypes:

AT 300 The Dragon Slayer

21 Consider the aptly named but never-born history of *Atari In!*'s first iteration *Syzygy* by co-founders Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney. Derived from physics, a ‘syzygy’ is also applicable to the conjoined endeavor of two entities. (Kent 2001, 35). Deities and their consorts function on such principles.

22 ‘Moksha-Patamu’ (Liberation’s Ladder), which became the basis for Chutes and Ladders. Players are rewarded for self-less actions, hastening their ascendancy to *moksha*. (*Encyclopedia of Play in Today’s Society* 2009, 646-647).

AT 303 The Twins or Blood-brothers (N772; A515.1.1)

AT 613 The Two Travelers

Motif Index:

A. MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIFS

A136.2 Combat between god of light and dragon of ocean.

A151.1 Home of gods on high mountain.

A210 Sky-god.

A418.1 Deity of particular mountain.

A418.1 Angel of mountain.

A495 Mountain-God

A515.1.1 Twin culture heroes.

A531 Culture Hero (demigod) overcomes monster.

A662 Upper world (heaven) as a mountain

A722.7 Mountain where sun goes through

A875.1.1 Mountain at center of earth

A962 Mountain (hills) from ancient activities of god (hero).

A1101 The four ages of the world. A development of the present order through four stages or periods, the golden, silver, bronze, and iron ages, or the like.

_____ A1101.1 Golden Age. A former time of perfection.

A1117.4 Mortal transfigured to god on mountain.

A1142.2 Thunder from flying dragon.

A1241 Man made from clay (earth).

A1255.2 Man from ears of corn.

B. ANIMALS

B11 Dragon

_____ B11.2.1.2 Dragon as modified serpent

_____ B11.3.2 Dragon's home at top of mountain. His breath forms clouds to hide the mountain.

_____ B11.4.1 Flying dragon; "drage" (flies over the mountain)

_____ B11.8 Dragon as power of good

_____ B11.11 Hero fights dragon.

C. TABU

C771.1 Tabu: building too high a tower (Tower of Babel).

C771.2 Tabu: piling up mountains to reach heaven.

D. MAGIC

D1149.2 Magic tower

D1365.9 Tower causes magic forgetfulness

D1552.2 Mountain opens to magic formula

D2004.9.1 Forgetfulness caused by Tower of Babel.

D2120. Magic Transportation

D2121. Magic journey.

_____ D2121.4. Magic journey by making distance vanish.

_____ D2121.7. Magic journey in cloud.

_____ D2121.7.1. Magic journey in cloud of fire.

_____ D2121.7.2. Magic journey in whirl of snow.

D2122.0.1. Journey to otherworld with magic speed.

D2135. Magic air journey.

D2135.0.3. Magic ability to fly.

D2135.4. Magic transportation to highest summit by divine power.

E. THE DEAD

E481.3 Abode of dead in mountain.

E721. Soul journeys from the body.

E722.2.1. Soul borne away on cloud.

E722.2.2. Soul borne away on wind.

F. MARVELS

F0-199 Otherworld Journeys

F55 Mountain reaches to sky.

F55.1 Mountain stretches to sky.

F131 Otherworld in hollow mountain.

F132 Otherworld on lofty mountain.

_____ F132.0.1 Otherworld visible from high mountain

_____ F132.1 Earthly paradise on mountain

_____ F132.1.1 Earthly paradise in air over mountain.

_____ F132.2.2 Dwelling of Fortune on lofty mountain.

F460 Mountain-spirits

_____ F460.0.1 Mountain spirits as souls of dead.

_____ F460.1.4.1 Mountain-men in white caps.

_____ F460.3.2 Mountain-men play games.

_____ F460.4.2.1 Mountain-spirits help build palace.

F523 Two persons with bodies joined. Siamese twins.

F601.5. Extraordinary companions are brothers (twins, triplets)

H. TESTS

H61.1. Recognition of twins by golden chain under skin

J. THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH

J2711 How the tower was built.

M. ORDAINING THE FUTURE

M301.15 Mountain in human shape prophesies whole family's death

N. CHANCE AND FATE

N772 Parting at crossroads to go on adventures. (*Type 303)

T. SEX

T685 Twins

_____T685.1 Twin adventurers

_____T685.2 Hostile twins

_____T685.3 Twins who look exactly alike;

_____T685.4 Twins: as twins are reared one born earlier becomes continually weaker, the other stronger.

V. RELIGION

V1.6.1.1 Worship of mountains and hills.

V81.2 Tails fall off mountain spirits when they are baptized

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Review: „eGods. Faith versus fantasy in computer gaming“¹

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The author of the monograph under discussion, William Bainbridge, is a renowned scholar of the sociology of religion. In the 1980s together with Rodney Stark he developed his own theory of religion. This model draws a highly economic picture of religion. The model as well as the authors was highly influenced by Christian forms of religion, which also becomes quite obvious in the monograph. To quote Bainbridge: “[...] the borders of religion become unclear, once we move far away from mainstream Christian denominations.” (B. p. 214)

“eGods” focuses on various aspects of religion in terms of the Bainbridge-Stark-theory. This shows itself in the organization of the book, which has eleven chapters with titles like “Cults” or “Quests”. He sees his work in this book as rather ethnographic, “focusing on the culture of the games while playing them” (B. p. 33). To gather data Bainbridge played many games for large amounts of time, including the (notorious) World of Warcraft for “fully 2,400 hours”. (B. p. 19) He also used online resources and the help of other players (B. pp. 19 -21), although it seems like the perspective of those other players did not play a major role in the formation of this book. This is curious given the fact that he mostly analysed massive multiplayer online games (MMOs) and sets out to explore the “culture” of these games. Bainbridge’s enormous dataset presents him with a wide range of examples, which he uses to show what part of game worlds things like “Magic” (another chapter title) form.

The first two chapters differ from the rest of the book insofar as the first one being is a brief introduction in his method and field of research and the second is mainly an introduction to the cultural setting in which he locates this work. His monograph is easy accessible and obviously written for scholars and the public alike. This might explain why Bainbridge doesn’t address or even mention several of the key discussions in the field of game studies. His conclusion is that computer games offer a starting point for a wider consideration of changes in society linked to the process of secularization, which he defines as “the erosion of religious faith [...] a form of cultural progress that liberates the playful human imagination”. (B. p. 24) In some cases he himself offers some alternatives to religious practices to be found in virtual games (e. g. the idea of “veneration

1 Bainbridge, 2013, eGods. Faith versus fantasy in computer gaming, Oxford University Press, Oxford. (cited as B.)

avatars” on page 105). This oscillation between description and scientific analysis on the one hand and his cultural agenda against religion on the other hand shows itself already in the first chapter.

In the second chapter Bainbridge positions the book and himself on one side of a certain struggle: “This book and its topic are enmeshed in a culture war. The two sides are not clearly drawn, but on one side we can vaguely see conservative forces that want to preserve traditional American culture including old-time religion, and on the other side radical forces that are exploring alternative cultural options connected to new technologies” (B. p. 25). This sentence sets the tone for the whole chapter, which, considered by itself, gives some interesting insight into the campaigns launched by Republicans against federal funding for research projects in anyway linked to video games. An analysis of a player-made quest line for the Star Trek game “Star Trek Online” shows another problem with Bainbridge’s work: The analytical parts often remain more than vague. Here it only consists of the following sentence: “This player-created mission clearly implies that humans will be intensely religious only if their culture has regressed to a primitive stage of development.” (B. p. 55) This could on the one hand be a summary of the summary of the quest line given before but sadly, in the broader context of the book, this could also be understood as a moral judgment of Bainbridge. The introduction Bainbridge gives to the chapter “Deities” exemplifies the other problem with this book best: lack of analytical rigor. It has therefore to be quoted in length here:

Some scholars believe that monotheism encouraged the emergence of science during the Renaissance and afterward, because it assumes that all of nature was created by one deity according to one law that can be discovered through research. But humanity is not unified, and nature seems to be a chaos of conflicting forces. Thus, monotheism expresses a utopian ideal, but harsh reality may better be described by polytheism in which multiple deities compete. The computer games described here are about winning, and thus about competition, but with the paradoxical promise that all players can win. From the “winner take all” perspective of chess or tennis, this seems unnatural—even supernatural—and one way it can be accomplished is by letting every player triumph over nonplayer characters, in a fictional struggle between virtual gods, even sometimes fighting against deities. (B. p. 21)

Bainbridge has a predilection for overarching theories and he either presents these completely uncritically or downplays any usefulness by pointing to the fact that it “is a question for historians of the particular time and place” to figure out how “well this all worked”. (B. p. 77) This leaves the reader wondering why he presented them in the first place. He does not argue but rather arranges highly suggestive lines of identification which suggest a logical connection between unconnected statements. A good example stems from this chapter: After describing the religions of “Sacred II”, in which NPCs attend “mass” and only believe in the existence of one single deity out of a group of six, Bainbridge states: “The connection of Kybele to the ancient cultures of the classical world reminds us that real religions were not very different from today’s fictional polytheisms, an

observation reinforced by the MMO ‘Gods and Heroes: Rome Rising’.” In the discussion of the game and polytheism that follows this similarity doesn’t become apparent at all. Indeed it would be just as possible to point out the obvious differences between historical polytheism and polytheism in video games.

Also a recurring feature of all of the book’s chapters are narratives about the adventures he had in the games in question (e. g. B. pp. 60-66, which are preceded by a lengthy piece of Bainbridge’s family history describing how he chose the name for the Everquest II Avatar he deals with on the following pages) that are loosely connected and impressionistic rather than informative.

All the remaining chapters simply contain variations on the patterns described above. They present lengthy narrations of how Bainbridge solved quests and explored certain game worlds combined with vague interpretations of the findings connected to the title of the chapter in various games, as well as quick summaries of sociological theory with only thin connections to the topic, digressions and barbs against religion.

The chapter “Souls” deals with different kinds of player characters and also the relation of the player to NPC-companions in order to explore human notions of identity. The before mentioned “veneration characters” for deceased ones close to the player, which, in Bainbridge’s view, could take over one of the “original functions of religion” (B. p 104), also feature in this chapter. This leads to “Priests”, in which he explores the function of “religious professional” (B. p. 107) in game worlds as playable character classes. This is of course again mixed with a quite fundamental critique of religious institutions, e. g. he offers “plausible theories about shamans: (1) they are crazy, and (2) they are frauds” but notes that he came up with his own theory, which is a combination of the two mentioned before. (B. p. 107) The chapter also offers a quantitative analysis of some gender related issues in World of Warcraft. (B. 120- 127). In the following chapter, Bainbridge seeks to analyse “virtual sacred spaces” (B. p. 134). He also explains the difference between world model and display model of a video game. “Magic” analyses relationships between speech and magic, and the transformations which magic has to undergo to be incorporable into a video game. The next chapter elaborates to what extent religion and morality are linked in certain video games and moral decisions are in general framed within certain games (“The lesson most gameworlds teach is that morality should be limited to members of one’s own faction” B. p. 212). It also explores how ethical religious concepts like “heaven” and “hell” can be reduced to not clearly morally evaluated backgrounds for virtual worlds. The concept of “Cults” is explored in the following chapter. At first Bainbridge reviews the concept within the frame of his own theory of religion before looking at “radical religious movements” (B. p. 218) in game worlds. The second to last chapter, “Death”, explores how it is integrated into game worlds, given the fact that a real end of existence is not part of the possibilities given in the mechanics of video games for player characters. Finally Bainbridge deals in an even more activist chapter with the question, how meaning can be found in life.

As has been shown, for example in Russell McCutcheon's discussion of Mircea Eliade (in: McCutcheon, R 1997, *Manufacturing Religion. The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford) scholars' religious interests tend yield problematic pieces of research, arisen from the ideological slant of the given scholar. A similar problem is at work in this monograph. It seems to live up to its own intentions but fails to convince on a scholarly level.

Biography

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