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

J.D.F. Tuckett

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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 *World of Warcraft* within the same classification as *Second Life*. However, as *World of Warcraft* 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*; *Fallout*) 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 *epoché* 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* (*MW2*), 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 (WoW)*, which Reverend Lowe in particular regarded as non-contradictory to his provinces of meaning. *WoW* 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 *WoW* 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 *MW2* and *WoW* 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 *WoW* 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 *WoW* as a simulation is a product of his own provinces of meaning, and with a different set of provinces another person could regard *WoW* 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 IV (GTA)*, 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 *MW2* 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 *WoW*.

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, *GTA* represents a “Giant’s Drink”¹⁵: a game which cannot be won without cheating. He exhorts Christians to play the game precisely because *GTA* 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 *GTA*, where 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 Vegas (NV)*, 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 *GTA* 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 *NV* 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 *NV*, 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*, 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 3 (F3)*. 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 *NV*, 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 Commands: 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 Scrolls* 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 *Trials of St. Alessia*, the book also mentions how the two enter into a “Covenant” which seals closed Oblivion, the *Elder Scrolls*’ 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 *Fallout*, 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 *per 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: A 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 Scrolls: 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 *Ten Commands: Nine Divines*, 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 *WoW* 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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