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Religion in Digital Games

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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.

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 *indirectly* designs the player's experience, by *directly* 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

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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 *Throne 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 Scrolls*, especially *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006) and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), exemplary for both the variety and frequency of such encounters.[3]

The central plot of much of *The Elder Scrolls* 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 Scrolls V: 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 Scrolls* 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 Scrolls V: Skyrim*. 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 Scrolls IV: Oblivion* with Divine Wayshrines in the wilderness. While these also require a short interaction for

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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 Scrolls* 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 Scrolls V: 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

RYAN THAMES is a PhD candidate in the Moving Image Studies track of the Department of Communication at Georgia State University, U.S.A. His areas of study include video game studies, cultural studies, narrative theory, performance studies, and affect. His current focus is theorizing how narrative and ludic aspects of digital games interact at the site of player experience. He is interested in spaces for moral reflection and decision making in video games as well as in the inherent doubleness in such games as the player, holding the part of both actor and viewer, alternates between movement and rest, free play and reflection.

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