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Contributors to this Issue:

Benjamin Banasik

Stefan Piasecki

Heidi Rautalahti

Maria Sharpan

Michaela Simonova

Franz Winter

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Video Games Facilitating Discussions of Good and Bad Religion

Heidi Rautalahti

Abstract

Religion has often been a theme involving contradictory positions in popular culture. Whether we comprehend religion as explicit implications within products of popular culture, such as recognizable characters from known religions or through formations of implicit meanings regarding Christ- figure analogies, religion is commented on and discussed widely in popular culture (Forbes, p. 21, 2005; Love, p. 192, 2010). Video games can be seen as prominent platforms for today's varying and influential cultural discussions. As John Storey has said, cultural products should be researched for the "ideological work that they do, not only for the work that they reflect", which recognizes the significance and impact of the various cultural products around us (Storey, p. 3, 1996), including video games.

This study addresses video games as facilitating and commenting on the state of religion by examining three mainstream video games: BioShock, BioShock 2 (Irrational Games 2007, 2011,) and Dishonored (Arkane Studios 2012). The primary research question concerns how religion is placed in these games, and what criticism and conclusions the games can provoke on matters relating to religion. Using qualitative game content analysis, this article focuses on how religion is commented on in the three aforementioned games by examining the player's position and negotiation of possibilities in the game worlds. This study views video games as cultural critique regarding the question of what is good and bad religion.

Keywords

religion, altruism, cultural commentaries, videogames, Bioshock, Dishonored

1 Introduction

Religion has often been a theme involving contradictory positions in popular culture. Whether we comprehend religion as explicit implications within products of popular culture, such as recognizable characters from known religions or through formations of implicit meanings regarding Christ- figure analogies, religion is commented on and discussed widely in popular culture (Forbes,

p. 21, 2005; Love, p. 192, 2010). Video games can be seen as prominent platforms for today's varying and influential cultural discussions. As John Storey has said, cultural products should be researched for the "ideological work that they do, not only for the work that they reflect", which recognizes the significance and impact of the various cultural products around us (Storey, p. 3, 1996), including video games.

This study addresses video games as facilitating and commenting on the state of religion by examining three mainstream video games: BioShock, BioShock 2 (Irrational Games 2007, 2011) and Dishonored (Arkane Studios 2012). The primary research question concerns how religion is framed in these games, and what criticism and conclusions the games can provoke on matters relating to religion.

Using qualitative game content analysis, this article focuses on how religion is commented on in the three aforementioned games by examining the player's position and negotiation of possibilities in the game worlds. By the player's position, I mean the scope of possibilities and placement of the player in the game world and story. In these game stories, religion is represented as tension between the protagonist and antagonist through the theme of opposing religious organizations. Polarities of good and bad religion become evident, reflecting the player's position in terms of story and gameplay actions. The world of the antagonists displays the negative side of religion, while in gameplay the player as protagonist supports positive connotations of religion. The studied games display religion as an elemental theme in building the game story's worlds, societies and characters, being especially rooted in the construction of the antagonist. This aspect led to the choice of these particular games for possible research material.

The research material consists of the studied games and their according wiki guides (BioShock wiki page, BioShock 2 IGN wiki guide, Dishonored wiki page) as background information. As a premise for this article, religion representations in popular culture are identified as commenting, discussing and residing in dialogue with the surrounding society (Forbes, pp. 11–27, 2005). Traditionally the genre of science fiction, where the studied games can be positioned, has had the tendency to act as a societal commentator through stories of alternative or speculative existences (Milner, pp. 22–23, 2012).

As religion in these games is linked to antagonist characters, it gives the first impression of religion as something evil. This narrative framing the games mediate provides an opportunity to place societal comments and criticism of religion in the games. Whether intended by the game makers or not, the antagonists can be described as representing all that is faulty in religion. The games' milieu or "gamescape", a concept that has been used to define the aesthetics, information and experienced surroundings inside a game world (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysoki 2016), may in these three games give an unflattering impression of representations of religion in recent video games.

However, by analysing the player's actions against those of the antagonist characters and the final resolution of the game stories, interpretations of good religion representations come forth. Hanna-Riikka Roine describes the relation between fiction and reader (or here, more accurately, the player) as communicative and emergent. Especially in the case of speculative fiction, in stories of imagined possibilities and ideas, world-building is a co-creation between receiver and the story, which may be conceptualized as reciprocal communication (Roine 2015, pp. 7–8, 132; 2016). In light of video games, the imagined possibilities are tied to gameplay actions and reflection of story. The co-creation is facilitated in video games on two levels, in the player's reflections of the games' milieu (or in other words, the gamescape) and in gameplay.

Cultural studies views (popular) culture as an arena for “continual struggles” of various meanings of power relations (Storey, pp. xvi–xvii, 2009). Applying this approach, it seems that recent video games are no exception. The studied games, story-wise, set goals for the player to fight against antagonists that may be described as organized but fanatic religious authorities. However, by assigning a specific religious antagonist, the games leave a door open for opposite interpretations: what is assigned as good religion. In addition to game narrative, the same games might address in a positive manner the player's individual meaning-making and reasoning through procedural choices or strategies which players have to actively make in gameplay, a process which can be considered as relating to peripheries of religion (Love, p. 193, 2010). These contradicting variations, the games' goals versus the player reflections the games elicit, may create varying impressions of religion. This study views video games as cultural critique regarding the question of what is good and bad religion.

1.1 The Games

Although the studied games can be viewed as intersecting many genres or narrative traditions, the game stories are similar in structure: the player embodies the hero's journey and carries out the monomythic linear path, a premise for many other popular culture stories. The player is the protagonist who saves the world and possible bystanders, thus renewing her identity (Campbell, 1988; Forbes, pp. 20–21, 2005). In all of the games here, the hero (player character) is a father-type who rescues a daughter-type of some sort, unravels the mysteries and hidden agendas of the world, and exposes the antagonist's plans.

The background stories of the games are aligned in terms of their similar structures and player goals. The player characters, the protagonists, find themselves in a situation where they are wrongfully accused and persecuted by governing forces. In *BioShock*, the playable character Jack is stranded in the underwater city of Rapture and proceeds to find his way out. Through his journey, the horrors of the city unravel and Jack becomes the saviour, ending the monstrous reign of the

antagonist Andrew Ryan. BioShock 2 continues the story with new antagonist and protagonist characters. The player character is Subject Delta, whose goal is to save the world from Doctor Sofia Lamb. Delta proceeds to save citizens from Lamb's manipulative reign and ensures the city's future. The game Dishonored's player character Corvo Attano is a bodyguard for the Royal Empress of Dunwall. However, Corvo is framed for the assassination of the Empress, and throughout the game he must restore his integrity. Corvo's goal is to escape, find out who is behind the coup, and ultimately save the Empress's daughter Emily.

All of the games' stories are set in a fictional past with historical familiarities. BioShock and BioShock 2, situated in the years 1940–1960, can be described as biopunk in aesthetic and story, a sub-genre of science fiction and fantasy, which uses themes of biotechnological and genetic engineering, as well as posthuman themes, in a steampunk setting (Schmeink, p. 14, 2016). Steampunk as an aesthetic genre references the industrial age, mixing retro-futuristic interpretations of steam-based technology, machinery and Victorian fashion (Roland 2014). BioShock games are additionally referenced as products of the retro-future genre, as they depict a more technically developed historical environment than their supposed historical era (Bosman 2014). This applies also to Dishonored: while the story is situated at the end of the 1800s, the game's weaponry is seemingly more advanced. Dishonored has been described by the game's Art Director Sébastien Mitton as “neo-Victorian” in its visual style (Hanson 2016) due to the mechanical and architectural world-building of the game.

The studied games not only present interesting intersections of religious themes in video games, as previously mentioned, but have also received commercial success. While the first BioShock game celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2017, the series was remastered and re-released in 2016. Dishonored was continued with a sequel in 2016. All of the studied games were acclaimed by audiences and critics alike, receiving multiple awards and nominations (e.g. the games received or were nominated for BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) awards). BioShock won best game in 2007, BioShock 2 was nominated for best action game and best story, and Dishonored claimed best game in 2014. The games have made an impact on audiences due to their mature narrative ways of explicating power, unjust societal positions, and especially the use of a choice system in gameplay. The third and final BioShock game, BioShock Infinite (2013), was left deliberately out of this study, as it does not emphasize a “choice matters” system in gameplay. Nor is Dishonored 2 (2016) taken into this study, as the game was not released at the time when gameplay material for research purposes was gathered.

1.2 Gameplay strategies – Dealing with choice-systems in game content analysis

In BioShock, BioShock 2 and Dishonored, gameplay is saturated with a feeling of apparent control when choosing the narrative's direction – namely, the way in which the game story or player character proceeds towards the end of the game. Gameplay is a concept that is used to define the intended method of play, as well as possible player strategies in a specific game (Salen & Zimmerman, p. 125, 303, 2004). Choice-making in gameplay, even though limited to predetermined game mechanics, gives the player a sense of autonomy and space for self-reflection in narrative contexts. In general, the player proceeds through the game and interacts through game mechanics and binding rule sets that frame the game's formal possibilities. Choice-systems, sometimes categorized as a “choice matters” game genre, have by now accumulated a solid tradition of featuring moral dilemmas in narratives and gameplay, but in recent mainstream games the trend has become a way to individualize gameplay, contributing to their popularity (Boyan, Grizzard & Bowman 2015).

Gameplay choices regarding game stories can mean, in the case of Dishonored, that optional hostile actions in the world will result in unfortunate consequences towards the end of the game. Choice-systems or different gameplay choices can have different purposes in game mechanics, whether they are seen as a measurement system gathering player statistics (implemented in Dishonored) or simultaneously developing player character features (as in the BioShock games and Dishonored), or as a way of delivering story. In the studied games, the player's choices generally steer the outcome of the storylines and game endings. In this light, it is not trivial to explicate the process of gameplay, as it is an elemental part of the game, carrying the game narrative forward and framing the play experience.

In this study, gameplay was conducted with a specific strategy in mind. While the game stories and endings were heavily influenced by player choice, it is vital to acknowledge the specific type of gameplay, as it affected the whole gameplay experience and understanding of the game narratives. In the studied games, choices regarding narrative outcomes were framed with moral reasoning, which offered the player the option to do good or bad. The gaming style or goal I assumed in gameplay was altruistic when possible, which led especially to a focus on the games' feedback and changes in narrative: what kinds of themes were endorsed or encouraged in the game through altruistic gameplay, and what good ideals the games were promoting. Altruistic gameplay meant that I looked for non-violent, game-enabled ways of completing tasks, quests or chapters, and I made merciful choices when the stories demanded choosing between killing or a more peaceful action. This usually consisted of sparing antagonist characters' lives, thereby taking a more compassionate approach to conflict resolution. The studied games can also be viewed as exploring player emotions by challenging empathy skills through moral choices. The idea of using empathy in

the delivery of ideas is a growing game genre of its own, as seen in the game depicting a child's cancer, "That Dragon, Cancer" (Numinous Games 2016), or the game on mental illness, "Depression Quest" (Zoe Quinn 2013) (Campbell 2013).

For analysis purposes, the chosen strategy of playing in an altruistic way had also an agenda: to reach the positive end of the game. The games' ending scenes acted as key moments highlighting the final verdict of the player's position, as well as the commentary the games were making. In Bioshock, there are three possible endings (Bioshock wiki), varying from positive to sad. In BioShock 2, the six possible endings vary slightly from very positive to dark (Secret Endings, 2012). Dishonored has three possible endings, also ranging from positive to sad (Dishonored wiki). The endings promote a straightforward moral compass: bad choices result in a sad or dark ending and the altruistic path delivers a comforting one.

I would argue that the moral ideals of good or bad that the games may be advocating in gameplay choices' can be seen as reflecting not only the game makers' views, but simultaneously the player's interpretations and reflections on the gameplay experience. In addition, it is to be noted that the studied games guaranteed the game ending to definitively be a good and happy one when playing altruistic options. The games' predictable ethical outcomes were simplistic and, in a way, naïve. A player could easily follow and predict the outcome by managing moral gameplay actions. For example, in BioShock 2 these were when the player saves an antagonist minion and the character becomes friendly, reflects in game dialogue what wrong they have done, and grants rewards to the protagonist. In other recent games such as The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (CD Projekt Red 2015), where the range of gameplay and narrative variations are enormous, choices and predictable moral narrative outcomes cannot fully be controlled by the player; an apparent morally good choice does not necessarily lead to a good outcome.

2 Play as a method for video game content analysis

Researching and analysing a video game begins by gathering research material through play (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2015; Bosman 2016). The grounds of conducting game content analysis, building on a researcher's own gameplay data, begins by viewing game-immanent and actor-centred perspectives in a chosen game. Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll and Jan Wysocki (2014; 2015), use the "game-immanent" and "actor-centred" concepts as a basis to divide research perspectives in a digital game analysis. A game-immanent perspective focuses on chosen themes in game content: story and gameplay. The actor-centred approach takes into account the player's reception and experience. The two perspectives are recognized as entwining and usually

overlapping in a game analysis (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki, p. 164, 2015), which is indeed the case in my work. The viewpoint of treating play experience as source material for analysis is similar to readings of other material within cultural or popular culture research. Close reading in literary theory traditions, being one example of building on the researcher-subject's experiences, is a valid method for qualitative gathering of game data and evaluating the different ways in which meaning is created in the texts (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011).

In this study, the gameplay experience is understood to consist of multiple modes of information, emotions and relations. In a multimodal perspective, multiple levels of communication are regarded as emitting meaning (Stöckl 2013, p. 9-11). The multimodal approach to game analysis (Carillo Masso 2014; 2016) takes into account the interactiveness of a game at various levels of information, from visuals to atmosphere. While Daniel Dunne (2014) argues for the benefits of the multimodal approach for analysing video games, Espen Aarseth speaks of games as “ludo-narratological constructs”, both writers describing similarly the distinctive nature of gameplay (Aarseth, p. 130, 2012). They argue that games should not be comprehended only as story or actions, but interpreted as a combination of experienced information. Gameplay could be then regarded as negotiations with modes of meaning, and videogames as facilitating discussions with multiple modes of information.

I combine Aarseth and Dunne's perspectives with those of Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki (2015) in my approach to how a thorough game content analysis can be conducted. I began my gameplay documentation in the summer of 2016. For recoding I used a game capture device connected to PlayStation 3 and 4 consoles, and I took log notes of significant scenes, which I explicate more in the analysis. I uploaded the videos on a video-sharing website for safekeeping and future examination. After this, I returned to the videos, taking notes on the significant scenes according to research questions on the player's position.

2.1 De-constructing the player's experience

Storytelling and gameplay are major game elements when constructing the play experience. Video game stories may be identified as multiform stories, where the player sees the alternative and even clashing futures in different story directions (Murray, pp. 36–38, 1997). These story structures form the foundation of the player's experience. In terms of gameplay, the studied games are first-person shooters (FPS) with story-driven narratives. In a visual sense this means that gameplay is mostly constructed through acting with a first-person point of view. In terms of story, the game narratives portray a typical set of branching storytelling, meaning that the games implement multiple endings with alternating gameplay paths leading towards the game endings (Lebowitz & Klug, pp. 203–204,

2011). These branching narratives are represented to the player in the studied games through choice-making and morally framed choices, as previously discussed.

The Dishonored game utilizes branching stories consisting of side objectives and other discoveries the player might encounter in the environment. Side objectives may include following an optional short story, such as when Corvo follows little Emily for a game of hide-and-seek in the beginning of the game. Discoveries may include Corvo finding number codes, which can be used to open safes. Part of the excitement of exploring the game environment is that side objectives or surprises are usually hidden.

BioShock can be argued to represent multiple-ending storytelling rather than branching stories. In a multiple-ending story, the player has minimal influence on the different endings. BioShock is only built with three possible endings, as Josiah Lebowitz and Chris Klug have pointed out (Lebowitz & Klug, pp.176–177, 2011). Although BioShock and BioShock 2 are not as freely branching with side objectives as Dishonored, the BioShock games' stories change in a progressive way according to continuing player choices in important events. The player may also find other stories when searching the environment, such as by finding game lore in notes or audiographs. Lore is commonly referred to as a body of knowledge which in this case is used to define the game world's larger origin story.

While the player's experience is constructed by story, game milieu and gameplay, player agency is used to describe the player's position of possibilities in the game world. While the selected games place importance through gameplay choices and narrative on the player's feeling of self-control, I stress player agency as a key factor in the interpretation of the game analysis. Agency as a concept has been used in qualitative game analyses to describe the player's position, referring to the player's feel of autonomy when acting in a game world, and to comprehend the player's position as creating the game narrative (Knoll 2015). By agency, I also mean the perception in gameplay of "empowerment" of an individual's experiences of one's selves, as Eichner describes it. Eichner also argues that the experience of agency comprises the essential enjoyment in playing video games, which profoundly divides digital games from other media (Eichner, pp. 11–12, 2014). Playing video games is also linked to experiencing emotional pleasure and satisfaction (Grodal, 2000, p. 197). The pleasure of the play experience is entangled with different individual emotional responses to game stimulations responding to actions in the game world (Grodal, p. 201, 2000). According to Torben Grodal, experiencing control of gameplay skills and control of one's emotions during play is an especially central part of the enjoyment of playing video games (Grodal, pp. 203, 211–212, 2000). Although it is debated in digital game studies to what degree a game designer's perceptions of intended gameplay affects, agency and immersion in the game world are overly emphasized qualities for composing a meaningful play experience (Frasca, p. 167, 2001), it cannot be denied that the play experience is meaningful to the player individual.

The play experience consists of emotional and individual responses to various play moments. The implicit feel of agency in playing first-person games creates the illusion that events are happening to the player herself. The sense of being the author of the game story is misleading, however, as the original authorship belongs to the game designers (Murray, pp. 152–153, 1997). Still, the memories of a gameplay event can be remembered and articulated through such lines as: “When I was...” or “When I did...”, as Tobias Knoll argues (Knoll 2015). Not only does the act of gameplay engage the player and promote a feeling of agency, but the experienced active position of existing in the game world facilitates a space for self-negotiation towards given game topics – in this case, issues concerning religion.

It is to be noted that the feel of agency and the amount of choices available for the player are not necessarily analogical. The mainstream survival game *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) utilizes an interactive traditional story. While it does not enable the player to choose narrative directions or change the ending, through other convincing actions and design solutions the feeling of agency can be evoked. In the case of *The Last of Us*, the lack of choices can, storytelling-wise, send a more powerful message in a survival game than agency gained through the feeling of unlimited options. In comparison, the *Bioshock* games and *Dishonored* place an imperative on the player’s feeling of self-control vis-à-vis choices regarding the story, which positions the player to self-reflect options and form opinions on the game events and story encounters.

3 Facilitating Discussions of Religion

As many other works have also stated, digital games represent and comment on current societal issues. Conrad Ostwalt argues that popular culture is an informative arena through which beliefs, myths and values are understood (Ostwalt, p. 154, 2003). If we understand video games as tools used for understanding the world around us, the information, narratives and interactions that games communicate can be seen as reflecting, discussing and commenting on our world. As works of art, games, film and other popular culture products represent the viewpoints and values of their makers, but they also present a chance for viewer self-reflection on the represented values. As Mark Cameron Love comments: “[playing video games] leads players to reflect” (Love, p. 208, 2010). Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, among others argue that religion and popular culture exists in a dialogic relationship (Forbes & Mahan, pp. 240–241, 2005). In the example of video games, the player becomes an active conversational counterpart where video games facilitate the space for the discussion. In the studied games, the themes of what is good and bad religion become central questions.

Even though the depictions of religion and violence can be seen as combined themes in mainstream video games, it should be noted that violence overall is a common theme or gameplay function in video games. Shooting, violent acts and grotesque scenes are commonly portrayed through visuals or actions. However, it is not in the focus of this research to discuss the research paradigm of violence in digital games or the assumed consequences this might have on players. Here I view violent acts as the game's narrative procedures, or how the story is conveyed to the player. George Perreault found that recent RPGs (role-playing games) show representations of institutionalized religion mainly linked to depictions of violence (2012). The claim can be verified examining this article's research material. The studied video games all include strong religiously themed antagonist characters who set the atmosphere for the main story.

3.1 The Milieu of Bad Religion

In the studied games, religion is placed in the game worlds as an origin story to explain how people are organized or why they are mistreated, and thus it is given as a reason for the existing hierarchical order. Religion in a game's story is used as a manipulative tool for the antagonist characters to represent credible social order (Love, p. 195, 2010). The bad religion milieu is constructed through leader authority and follower depictions, and these depictions and ideals are those which the player is supposed to fight against in gameplay.

A fanatic can be defined as "a person who has very extreme beliefs that may lead them to behave in unreasonable or violent ways" (Cambridge Dictionary). This understanding of the concept fits the antagonists of the studied games. Love argues that the fanatic representation and behaviour of religious "devotees" in video games is an accepted role, while the general public discourse of unconditional religious followers suggests that deeds done in the name of religion are understandable (Love, p. 195, 2010). The studied games support this position.

In BioShock's story, the main antagonist and creator of the BioShock worlds, Andrew Ryan, sets out to build the underwater city of Rapture, where entertainment, glamour, and hedonism can thrive outside government control and restraining religions. Ryan's self-proclaimed dictatorship centres around a personality cult, even though he denies all known faiths. Rapture is Ryan's vision of a truly liberated society, where he condemns organized religions. However, in the beginning, the player finds out that Ryan's control is not absolute. Most of Rapture's citizens have gone mad through misuse and addiction of a drug called "ADAM", which functions as a fuel for self-enhancement potions called "plasmids". One of the player's goals is to save characters called Little Sisters while discovering Rapture. The Little Sisters are children who were abducted to Rapture, enslaved and genetically enhanced to gather and reclaim ADAM for re-use from corpses around the city. The girls were given a bodyguard, a "Big Daddy", and whenever a Little Sister is met the

player must also defeat the bodyguard. However, each time the player encounters a Little Sister, he has the choice and morally framed option of either “exorcising” the child, thus freeing her from her slavery, or taking her ADAM and killing her in the process. By saving the children, players get less of the drug (but they will receive gifts of ADAM in later scenes). By taking ADAM, players can modify their character faster and improve their weaponry, but at the same time they also move towards the sad finale. The Little Sisters act as an embodiment of Ryan’s plan to control his followers and keep them obedient. The player also witnesses the city surroundings, destroyed by civil war and conflict between Ryan and local gangs. The references to religion in the game milieu are situated to frame the ambiguous environment and events. Bibles are seen smuggled into the city, and eerie Christian hymns are sung by antagonist characters. Even though Ryan has banned religions, the citizens continue practicing in secret. Religion in BioShock is present in the negative sides of personality cults and religious persecution. It is worth noting that the designers of BioShock were critical of the author Ayn Rand’s neo-liberalistic views, and this is hinted at implicitly and deliberately in the game (Bosman 2014).

In BioShock 2, the main antagonist scientist Doctor Sofia Lamb represents a rebellious new sovereign of Rapture. Lamb aims to build a world where community comes first and individuals come second, opposing Andrew Ryan’s original vision. The player finds out during the game that Lamb aims to join all of Rapture in one hegemonic mind, “The Rapture Family”, by using ADAM for gene modification and sacrificing her daughter, Eleanor Lamb, as a sacred vessel in the process. The player is sometimes accompanied by Eleanor, who slowly comes to realize her mother’s horrid plan. The ADAM-addicted people of Rapture are shown throughout the game as lunatics, mindlessly worshipping in candlelight and chanting in unison in front of pictures of Lamb and her scientific publication: the book on “Unity & Metamorphosis”. Additionally, the city is filled with creepy graffiti citing biblical words such as “Salvation”, referring to Lamb’s agenda. The Little Sisters are taken back to Rapture, while Lamb needs ADAM to fulfil her scientific and sacred quest. Rapture’s milieu in BioShock 2 is very similar to the first game’s feel and imagery, with the exception of a few gameplay changes. Again the objective is to save the Little Sisters, but the player may also exploit their ADAM-gathering skills without turning the narrative entirely to a sad ending. In this case, the player accompanies the child in a corpse-gathering trip and defends the Little Sister from citizen attacks while she gathers ADAM. The player also encounters other hostile characters who may be forgiven or killed. In comparison to the first BiosShock, the options and moral choices in BioShock 2 are not as straightforward, but to ensure a happy game ending all hostiles have to be let free. Here the antagonist Lamb shows religion as fanaticism, caused by mental instability and twisted moral agendas. Lamb’s Rapture presents religions as harmful through the depiction of a personality cult, fanaticism and references to ritual human sacrifice.

In the Dishonored game, the religious militant leader Lord Regent represents the governing forces of the rat plague-infested city of Dunwall. As a corrupt dictator, Lord Regent has seized power after the coup following Corvo and Emily's imprisonment. In Dunwall, a religious order called the Abbey of the Everyman is used to uphold the city's laws and religious tradition. The remaining ordinary citizens are shown as poor and miserable, praying in secret to a mythical and magical deity called the Outsider. However, the order has banned folk beliefs, and the order's foot soldiers, the Overseers, actively hunt heretics or citizens for their use of forbidden magic. In Dunwall, a division between the city elite and common citizens is clearly present. Class distinctions are noticeable, while during the game Corvo explores environs ranging from upper-class homes filled with food and artwork to beggars' squats. The player can, if she so chooses, actively change the sad future and witness kindness through gameplay actions assisted by magical abilities granted by the Outsider. These abilities help Corvo use certain powers, like the ability to possess rats and crawl inside walls without notice. The player's objective is to save Emily and bring the coup leaders to justice, but the way in which this is achieved – by killing or imprisoning them – are left to the player, resulting in a positive or negative game ending. The misery shown in Dunwall tempts the player to "take revenge" in an aggressive way, while the game's tagline "Revenge solves everything" hints in this direction. However, the challenge of completing the game in an altruistic way is to proceed in a stealthy and unnoticeable manner. The game story presents religion through societal power, religious persecution and oppressed diversity.

3.2 Criticizing Religious Institutions

The framing of organized religions and their leaders as evil, which is the image of religion that the studied games promote, is not an unfamiliar theme in video games. The well-established video game series Final Fantasy (Squaresoft 1987, first volume) can be described as criticizing organized and institutionalized religions as well (The Game Theorist 2013). It is still debatable whether this theme has affected the representations of religion in later video games. In the studied games, however, noticeable parallels are found with authoritarian organizations and stock images from Western Christianity.

Crosses or the placement of a crucified smuggler in the first BioShock game refers explicitly to Christianity. The second BioShock game relies in a graphic sense even more on biblically derivative language and portrayals of Christian art, such as crucifixion themes, due to incorporating a subsidiary story of a new Rapture church existing alongside Lamb's reign. Dishonored is the only game that relies on indirect references in the construction of religion; however, it also presents general representations of institutionalized religions through the societal placement of the religious order. In Dishonored, the Abbey of the Everyman resembles a conservative and historical

interpretation of Christianity, while following a dogmatic scripture which is even named “The Seven Strictures”. Thus, the order builds a dichotomy between folk beliefs and its position vis-à-vis orthodox religion. Whether these parallels are intentional or represent general Western understandings of religion in popular culture, the familiarity nevertheless sets a certain tone for the player. Intertextuality leads the player to further remark on the game’s similarities regarding religion and reflect on what the games might be suggesting (Love, p. 196, 2010).

Religion is a topic in popular culture which is expressed in various ways, through allegories or implicit and explicit means (Forbes, p. 21, 2005). The protagonist in all of the games considered here challenges authority, the status quo of the present order, and distances himself from the villain’s world. Many of today’s games follow similar narrative tropes, where prior to deception and misfortune the leading character faces strong enemies (King & Krzywinska, pp. 172–173, 2014). These narrative conventions often embody ideologies concerning individual freedom in a Western cultural context (King & Krzywinska, pp. 172–173, 2014). In the studied game narratives, the depictions of religion may echo larger cultural discussions of the presence and placement of institutional religions in society. The studied games’ story theme of opposition to or retreat from dominant or existing religious relations or institutions is a process that can be said to depict the current shift in the Western religious or cultural atmosphere (Heelas & Woodhead, p. 3, 2005). The discussions that the studied games facilitate relate to Western understandings of the secularization conversation. The individualization or subjectivization of life experiences on a Western scale (Heelas & Woodhead, 3–4, 2005) reflects a similar detachment that the protagonist endures in the games. The player’s position is to fight against everything that the antagonists and their worlds stand for. Even though video games are a part of popular culture entertainment, the video game player can be seen as connecting to critical discussions and commentaries on what religion is or should be in today’s society.

In a retrospective sense, the game worlds were on the brink of destruction if the protagonist had not stepped in. The explicit criticism of religion that Frank Bosman (2014) convincingly argues as the “janus-face” of recent video games applies to this articles studied games. Bosman viewed the game narratives of BioShock, Bioshock Infinite, Dishonored and Brink (Splash Damage 2011) to connect themes of religion closely to dystopic representations and societal criticism (Bosman 2014). These connections are explicit and well suited, while religion, according to Bosman, is a tool for criticism and simultaneously a constructive part of video game dystopian narratives (Bosman, p. 179, 2014). Agreeing with Bosman, Booker (p. 7, 2013) suggests that dystopic presentations are well fitted for sharing criticism on institutionalized constructions of religion and other societal topics. However, dystopic stories often present warnings, guidelines or solutions as an opposite mirror to the explicit criticism (Booker, p. 7, 2013). The gameplay actions and negotiations position

the fighting player as executing the opposite; these are the ideals worth fighting for, as the altruistic gameplay approach in this research shows.

The research approach to video games and religion usually aims to analyse religion in games or review the cultural commentary the games might make on religion (Love, p. 195, 2010). The commentary the studied games state the loudest is that religion becomes bad in the hands of dictating and oppressing authorities. However, the player in her gameplay actions makes way for something good: the individual, freedom of choice, and forgiveness.

3.3 The Ending Scenes

Despite the overall negative milieu of religion, highlighting gameplay strategy and acts tells a story of individualism and forgiveness. As described in the introduction, I entered the games with a pre-position of altruistic gameplay strategy in order to reflect how the games endorse supposed good choices in their progress and what this could mean. I played and made choices, seeing how the game worlds reacted to altruistic play, when this was enabled, and what effect it had on the games' ending scenes and resolution.

In BioShock, altruistic play mainly consists of how many Little Sister characters the player chooses to save. The killing of antagonist characters does not have an effect on the ending narrative. BioShock 2 follows a more complex system: if certain key enemy characters are left alive and "forgiven", the game world becomes friendlier. For example, when the hostile character Grace Holloway is spared, she removes some villain characters for the player and gives useful supplies. Holloway is embedded in the story as an individual who came to Rapture in hope of a better life, but over time saw the deterioration of the city. In Dishonored, altruism is calculated by the number of hostiles, civilians and key characters killed. Here also the strategy of forgiving enemy characters allows the player to proceed with stealth actions and a less hostile environment which lead to a peaceful ending.

The altruistic strategy ensured good feedback in the games. In all of the studied games, key characters literally gave feedback in specific scenes in video and dialogue on the player's previous actions and choices. In altruistic gameplay, the feedback was usually thankful, as characters reflected on their newfound realization of the world's poor condition and that goodness would be the answer to all problems. This was especially reflected in the characters' ending speeches, which I observe here more closely. The speeches in the ending videos assessed the player's gameplay actions, framing the player's gameplay path to that point. The positive endings thus acted as a retrospective response, affirming and thanking the player.

In the most positive ending scene of BioShock, a guiding supporting character, Dr Tenenbaum, narrates during the ending video:

“They offered you the city... and you refused it. And what did you do instead? What I have come to expect of you. You saved them. You gave them the one thing that was stolen from them, a chance. A chance to learn, to find love, to live. And in the end, what was your reward? You never said, but I think I know... a family.”

The “them” that Dr Tenenbaum refers to means the Little Sisters. Even though these characters acted as a moral meter, by saving them the player also symbolically destroyed the antagonist’s plans and introduced goodness into the surrounding game world, as the speech underlines. Through merciful actions, the player demonstrates the error in Ryan’s vision. The player strengthens the game’s claim that diversity, in religion and individual freedom, is desirable. The scene ends with pictures depicting the Little Sisters growing up, receiving high school diplomas, getting married and having children of their own. In the last scene, the sisters gather around Jack’s hospital bed to say goodbye.

In BioShock 2, the six possible endings vary slightly from very positive to dark (Secret Endings, 2012). The accompanying supporting character Eleanor changes her attitude towards the protagonist in relation to how many Little Sisters were saved throughout the game. Eleanor summarizes at the end:

“And then, father, the Rapture dream was over. You taught me that evil is just a word: under the skin, it’s simple pain. For you, mercy was victory... you sacrificed, you endured, and when given the chance... you forgave. Always. Mother believed this world was irredeemable... But she was wrong. Father, we are Utopia, you and I. And forgiving. We left the door open for her... If Utopia is not a place... but a people, we must choose carefully. For the world is about to change... And in our story, Rapture was just the beginning.”

The mother that Eleanor is referring to points to the main antagonist, Dr Sofia Lamb. Her plans consisted of Rapture becoming one through a metaphysical and supernatural connection, to which end she manipulatively recruited followers. By showing the possibility of atonement, the player teaches Eleanor forgiveness and compassion. By doing so, the player verifies the importance of individual freedom and diversity, the opposite of the antagonist’s plans.

In Dishonored, the deity Outsider narrates and reflects on the player’s actions and previous choices in cut scene videos throughout the game. The Outsider is a neutral character but becomes slightly more reassuring after positive actions. The Outsider’s final ending speech after consistent altruistic gameplay is comforting:

“So ends the interregnum, and now Emily Kaldwin the First will take her mother’s throne, after a season of turmoil. You will stand at her side, Corvo, guiding her young mind, and protecting her from those who seek to exploit her, or cause her harm. You watched and listened when other men would have shouted in rage. You held back instead of striking. So it is, with the passing of the plague and Emily’s ascension, comes a golden age, brought about by your hand. And decades hence, when your hair turns white and you pass from this world, Empress Emily – Emily the Wise, at the height of her power – will lay your body down within her mother's great tomb, because you were more to her than Royal Protector. Farewell, Corvo.”

The happy ending is measured by how the protagonist, Corvo, has reacted to the world: that is, with hostility or with a non-lethal approach. Through altruistic play, the player makes the antagonist’s plan obsolete. By assuring that Emily is saved, the power of the Lord Regent is displaced, and a new, compassionate sovereign emerges. The player confirms through altruistic gameplay that even when suffering persecution, the forgiving approach to dealing with hostility pays off in the end.

3.4 Good Religion – The Individual Prevails

While no specific theme explicitly relating to religion is visible in the ending speeches, they summarize the protagonist’s path as representing freedom from fanaticism and oppression. Religion in the game stories plays a significant part as an instrument legitimizing the antagonist’s power and simultaneously mirroring the opposite, namely, what the denial of religious diversity might lead to.

The good that came out of an altruistic game path can be seen as a reflection of a desirable world, where authorizing restraints are minimal and the individual is free to make her own choices. The prevailing individualism is highlighted through first-person player agency but also through the game protagonist, who alone fights the antagonist forces. The altruistic gameplay and the fight against the antagonist represent forgiveness and a chance for atonement. Reflecting gameplay and narrative, individual freedom (of religion) and the choice to make individual decisions is a main, and even compassionate, form of commentary in the games. The player becomes the bearer of hope in the dystopic and conflicted game worlds, arguing for the societal freedom of individual beliefs – whether they are explicitly religious or not.

The games’ commentary on the rise of individual beliefs does correlate with secularization discussions, suggesting that secularization can affect religious authority rather than beliefs themselves. In this light, secularization concerns the institutional make-up of religions rather than dissembling individual beliefs (Ostwalt, p. 5, 2003). Video games can be seen as playing a part in this cultural shift by mediating these conversations. Paul Heelas argues that today’s Western non-conservative Christians might feel the need to leave church-driven communities, as they sense a

loss of self-autonomy concerning traditional values that may now be perceived as discriminating (Heelas, p. 46, 2011). He continues by stating that due to this subjectivization, the feeling of (religious) authority becomes internal (Heelas, p. 46, 2011). This phenomenon of leaving displeasing authorities and taking self-control comes through in the studied games, albeit in a dramatized form. The dynamics between the antagonist and protagonist might also represent a common narrative position borrowed from fantasy literature. The portrayal of traditional religions being less in the face of magical individuals is a known narrative theme within fantasy fiction (Feldt 2016), which the studied games also confirm. The games place traditional religions in the same category as the antagonist characters, while the protagonists' characters are situated more or less with supernatural or magical connotations.

The studied games' criticism relates to Stuart Hall's "incorporation" and "resistance", describing positions and aims of cultural materials in popular culture. Cultural content represents the opposition to or compliance with the existing and surrounding cultural context (Hall, p. 509, 2009) or, as Storey describes it, an empowering process when resisting societal structures (Storey, p xix, 2009). Here the studied games can be seen as mediating resistance, especially through player agency, placing the player in a reflective position. Gameplay and narratives provide a space for real world reflections and discussions, such as those concerning religion and beliefs. In video games, the epic fights are no longer against aliens and/or spike-shelled turtles, but against discourses that represent societal ideals and criticism, including issues of religion. As Bogost says: "Video games represent processes in the material world—war, urban planning, sports, and so forth—and create new possibility spaces for exploring those topics" (Bogost, p. 121, 2008).

Religion themes become representative of societal hopes and wishes, and thus should not only be seen as a subsidiary narrative motivation for violence, as Perreault claims (2012). For games that rely on player narrative construction through procedural choice strategies, the emerging understandings of the play experience become individual, and interpretations vary.

However, Perreault is correct in linking violence with religion concerning the overall game world milieus in the studied games. The violent atmosphere and disappointment with authority can be seen as representing attitudes of cultural pessimism in popular culture (Stroup & Suck 2007). Stories of cultural pessimism can go hand-in-hand with coping with real-world misfortune (Stroup & Suck 2007).

Whether we comprehend religion as a narrative building block for the villain or the villains themselves as setting the tone for religion interpretations, the scenes and gameplay are explicitly critical towards issues of organized religion and representations of authority, especially in a Western Christian context. Simultaneously, the contradictory good image of religion – the message of individualism, choice and forgiveness – is highlighted through gameplay.

4 Conclusion

Whether in the game milieu or gameplay, religion is an element that outlines the studied games' enemy characters, but it also allows the player to participate in discussions defending ideals of individual autonomy and forgiveness. The studied games reflect on authority by negotiating the position of the individual, and the games act as commentaries situating religion in relation to this power struggle. I argue that the discussions the games facilitate reflect ongoing cultural changes of how individual beliefs are understood, and they invite the player to self-reflect on these undertones in the play experience. Referring back to Storey (Storey, p. xix, 2009), the games can be said to deliver empowering agencies when mediating commentaries on good and bad religion. The gameplay choices and options become ways of partaking in the conversation.

The studied games use emotional gameplay experiences in communicating their commentary on religion and beliefs, as well as the games' understanding of good and bad religion. In particular, the moral choices the games use to forward the narrative frame the connotations of good and bad religion to position the individual and religion in opposing corners.

Game worlds and antagonist characters have become platforms for communicating criticism on institutionalized and organized religions, which the game analysis confirms. The player becomes the liberator, who advances ideas of individualism, diversity and forgiveness, and the positive endings act as validation. The player brings change to worlds that have fallen under destructive ideologies and misplaced order. Controversial subjects that are represented through emotional video game play may change our views on which ways difficult themes can be discussed in society, including issues of religion. Interestingly the studied games' criticism of religion only touches on the construction of religion, and the structure and representation of authority, and not necessarily doctrinal content or concepts of gods, rituals or deities. These present interesting possibilities for future research.

The study of cultural values in popular culture as represented by video games is relevant now and in the future, not only due to representations of sociocultural reflections in games, but given the major impact of game consumerism today, which is steered both by designers and audiences (Flanagan & Nissenbaum 2014). Teemu Taira states that new media platforms have become vital environments for today's religions and, as such, are a natural arena for research (Taira 2015). In addition, "choice matters" games challenge the perception of how game content analysis is to be understood. The games' stories are not fully written until the player decides how the game should proceed, and thus the researcher becomes the co-creator of his or her research material in situ. The game world does not exist beyond the player's or the researcher's participation.

Discussions of religion in video games take place in the world-making, resonating with the player's mobile position from the beginning to the end. Although conflict is a common starting point in most video game stories, the studied games place religion especially within conflicts, resulting in good and bad connotations of religion. It can be argued that this placement reflects today's ongoing world events. This would situate the comments the games make, and the fights against fanatics they depict, among very real and current issues.

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Biography

HEIDI RAUTALAHTI is preparing her PhD-research in the field of study of religions in the Doctoral Programme in Theology and Religious Studies in the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research focuses on how religion and video games facilitate meaningful encounters in today's (popular) culture. More information on publications and activities: <https://tuhat.helsinki.fi/portal/fi/person/rautalah>

Heidi.rautalahti@helsinki.fi