A Lust for Dying

The depiction and function of the seven deadly sins in digital games

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Abstract

Firmly grounded in Christian theological spirituality (Evagrius Ponticus) and doctrine (Gregory the Great, Thomas Aquinas), the concept of the seven deadly sins, although the exact sequence and names may differ slightly, can be traced from Dante's Divine Comedy and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales to David Fincher's famous film Se7en and multiple video games, such as The Binding of Isaac, Dante's Inferno, and the already mentioned Darksiders III. An interesting ingredient of the several cultural depictions of the seven sins in past and present, is that the presentation of their physical form (aesthetics) and the words they utter (rhetoric) is very often closely connected to the specific sin they are supposed to represent. In this process of representation, and especially personalisation, the sins are made into characters with specific traits that mirror their theological identity. Lust, for example, is commonly presented as a beautiful woman, while gluttony is represented as an individual indulging in gastronomical orgies, and so forth.

In this article, I want to argue that, within the specific field of digital games, the seven deadly sins are personalised on two levels: (1) essential personalisation – the presentation of the sins reflects their own immoral identity; and (2) characteral personalisation – the presentation reflects the protagonist's negative character traits.

To do so convincingly, I will start with introducing the concept of the seven deadly sins within their proper context of the Christian (theological) tradition. Next, I will introduce and analyse the four case studies – Diablo III, The Binding of Isaac, Dante's Inferno, and Darksiders III – focusing on the topic of the representation and personalisation of the seven deadly sins within the games. After building a synthesis based on the analysis of the case studies in order to illustrate the two levels of personalisation, I will finish with some final remarks.

> Why did the Creator construct a universe teeming with... imperfection? Misery? Sin? Among the scholars of both heaven and hell, this query is known as the Riddle of Sorrows. If sin is in itself a part of the Grand Design, is not sin then, by definition, divine? A question for the sages... (*Darksiders III*, prologue)

When the End Time is triggered prematurely, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – War, Fury, Strife, and Death – are unleashed upon the Earth amidst the battling armies of heaven and hell. Commanded by the Charred Council, which was itself tasked by an unseen Creator to maintain the balance between the kingdoms of heaven, hell and man, Fury is sent to the battlefield to find and destroy the, formerly imprisoned but recently escaped, Seven Deadly Sins: Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, Lust, and Pride. But Fury, who is the most emotional and proud of the four Horsemen, finds more than just seven adversaries. During her travels throughout the war-ridden Earth, the female Horseman discovers that, in the end, sins are not external enemies to be slain on a physical battlefield, but have to be confronted in the depths of her own mortal soul.

Thus is the outset of *Darksiders III* (2018). And right from the start, the third instalment of the series invokes Christian theological imagery and notions, as is apparent in the quoted opening sequence: 'Creator', 'imperfection', 'misery', 'sin', 'heaven' and 'hell', 'Grand Design', 'divine', and so forth. The same applies to the earlier two instalments of the series (Bosman and Poorthuis 2015). The world lore of the series relies heavily on Biblical references including their later interpretation within Christian tradition. This is also the locus of the idea, aesthetics and rhetoric concerning Fury's main antagonists in *Darksiders III*, the so-called 'Seven Deadly Sins'.

Firmly grounded in Christian theological spirituality (Evagrius Ponticus) and doctrine (Gregory the Great, Thomas Aquinas), the concept of the seven deadly sins, although the exact sequence and names may differ slightly, can be traced from Dante's Divine Comedy and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales to David Fincher's famous film *Se7en* and multiple video games, such as *The Binding of Isaac*, *Dante's Inferno*, and the already mentioned *Darksiders III*. An interesting ingredient of the several cultural depictions of the seven sins in past and present, is that the presentation of their physical form (aesthetics) and the words they utter (rhetoric) is very often closely connected to the specific sin they are supposed to represent (Neuhauser 2007:1-17). In this process of representation, and especially personalisation, the sins are made into characters with specific traits that mirror their theological identity. Lust, for example, is commonly presented as a beautiful woman, while gluttony is represented as an individual indulging in gastronomical orgies, and so forth.

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Some words on methodology. In this article, I define digital games as digital, interactive, playable, narrative texts (Bosman 2019:38-43). As a text, a video game is an object of interpretation; as a narrative, it communicates meaning (or at least can be conceived of in such a way); as a game, it is playable; and as a digital medium, it is interactive in nature. I will use the close-reading of the primary sources of my research, the actual video games themselves, as well as secondary sources, i.e. material provided by critics and scholars discussing the same games (Bosman 2019:43-46). The close-reading of the video game series is done by playing the games themselves (multiple times), including all possible (side) missions (the so-called game-immanent approach).

This article is about the representation of the seven deadly sins in digital games, not about the seven deadly sins as represented by individual videogames (Burch 2008), as committed by gamers during their playtime (Swaim 2008, Twinfinite Staff 2016), or as committed by game developers during the production of their games (Marsh 2016).

A last word on terminology. The popular term 'deadly sins' is rather a misnomer (Voli and Kenel 2003). The theological technical term for these sins is 'capital sins', from the Latin caput ('head'), in the sense that these seven sins are at the head of all other sins. Through the English notion of 'capital punishment', meaning the death penalty, the capital sins have been popularized in the West as 'deadly sins'. To complicate things even more, the notion of the 'deadly sins' is also associated with yet another theological notion, that of 'mortal sin': those sins that are so grave that they separate the sinner from God in such a way that the sinner will have to face eternal damnation in hell if not absolved before his death (McDonagh 2003).

Also, mortal, capital, and deadly sins should not be confused with the notion of 'original sin', the theological idea that humankind, through Adam and Eve's sin against God's commandment in the Garden of Eden, has fallen from its initial state of innocence into a state of collective sinfulness (Hunt 2003; González 2005:116). Because of the familiarity of the notion 'deadly sins' in our culture, the term will continue to be used, but in the technical sense of 'capital sins'.

1 The concept of the 'seven deadly sins'

The concept of the seven deadly sins originates in the context of the desert fathers (and mothers) of the Egyptian and Syrian wilderness in the third century of the Common Era (Gšrg 2011; Chryssavgis 2008). These monks renounced all pleasures of a worldly life, settling in the barren lands beyond the borders of civilization, either alone, in small groups around a spiritual leader or in larger monastic communities, to focus themselves on reading the Scriptures, praying, meditating, and – especially – ascetic practices. Fathers like John Climacus and Evagrius Ponticus wrote numerous treatises on spirituality and the monastic life, urging their pupils to purify their souls from vices and to practice the Christian virtues, in order to obtain a state of 'death while living', that means, to have died to the world, and thus already attain the bliss of the future life in heaven.

The concentration on the development of the human soul from evil to good, from ruled by vices to ruled by virtues, provides a theological basis for the doctrine of the seven deadly sins, although their name and number were not the same as later on in theology and culture. An important figure in this regard, is the desert father Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345-399), who was trained by Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Macarius of Egypt, and who taught later on in his life, among others, John Cassian and Palladius (Tsakiridis 2010). Central to his spirituality, is the notion of the 'eight evil thoughts' (in Greek: *logismoi*), found in several of his writings among which *Praktikos*, and *Antirrhetikos* (Corrigan 2009:73-102). These eight form a sort of categorical system for sins:

> There are eight general and basic categories of thoughts in which are included every thought. First is that of gluttony (*gastrimargia*), then impurity (*porneia*), avarice (*philargoria* [lit. 'love of money']), sadness (*lupè*), anger (*orgè*), acedia (*akedia*), vainglory (*kenodoxia*), and last of all, pride (*hyperephania*). It is not in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions. (*Praktikos* 6, translation Bamberg 1972)

According to Evagrius, humans cannot avoid being tempted by these evil thoughts, but one can choose if and how one is to resist them.

Evagrius' eight evil thoughts enter the (Latin speaking) Western world through the works of John Cassian (c. 360-435), his pupil. John devoted a considerable part of his *De institutis coenobiorum* ('On the institutes of the coenobia') to what he calls 'the eight principal faults': *gula* (gluttony), *luxuria* (lust), *avaritia* (greed), *superbia* (pride), *tristitia* (despair), *ira* (wrath), *vanagloria* (vanity), and *acedia* (sloth). Essentially, John's eight principal faults are the same as Evagrius' eight evil thoughts, though the order is adjusted (see table #1 for comparison). According

to Morton Bloomfield (1967:71-72), Cassian's theory profoundly influenced theological thinking in especially Gaul and Ireland.

			Theological texts					Cultural texts					Game texts			
Greek	Latin	English	Evagrius P. (8 evil thoughts)	John C. (8 principal faults)	Gregory I (7 principal vices)	Thomas A. (7 capital vices)	CIC 1866 (7 capital sins)	Dante (7 terraces)	Dante (9 circles)	Langland (Piers Plowman)	Chaucer (Parson's tale)	Fincher (Se7en)	Diablo III	Binding of Isaac	Dante's Inferno	Darksiders III
gastrimargia	gula	gluttony	1	1	6	6	6	6	3	6	6	1	x	x	3	7
porneia	luxuria	impurity/fornication/lust/lechery	2	2	7	7	5	7	2	2	7	4	x	x	2	6
pilargoria	avaritia/avaricia	avarice/greed/covetousness	3	3	5	4	2	5	4	5	5	2	xx	x	4	3
lupè	tristitia	sadness/despair/melancholy	4	5	(4)	5	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
orgè	ira	anger/wrath	5	6	3	3	4	3	5	4	3	7	x	x	5	2
akedia	acedia	acedia/sloth	6	8	4	(5)	7	4	...	7	4	3	x	x	...	4
kenodoxia	vanagloria/inanis gloria	vainglory/vanity	7	7	1	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
hyperephania	superbia	pride	8	4	0	0	1	1	...	1	1	5	...	x	...	5
...	invidia	envy	...	...	2	2	3	2	...	3	2	6	x	x	...	1
		limbo							1						1	
		heresy							6						6	
		violence							7						7	
		fraud							8						8	
		treachery							9						9	

Table 1: Overview of the different lists of 'deadly sins' and their English translation, divided into theological, cultural and game texts. The 'x' implies that there is no given sequence in which the sins are met.

It was, however, Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) who anchored the idea of seven capital sins in Christian theology. In his treatise on the Book of Job, *Moralia in Job*, he outlines what he calls 'seven principal vices'. In book XXXI of the *Moralia*, Gregory lists the now familiar number of the *septem principalia vitia*: *vanagloria* (vanity), *invidia* (envy), *ira* (wrath), *acedia* (sloth), *avaritia* (greed), *gula* (gluttony), and *luxuria* (lust). Compared to Evagrius and John, Gregory added one new sin, *invidia*, and incorporated *tristitia* into *acedia* (see table #1).

Based on Job 39:25 – 'At the blast of the trumpet it snorts, "Aha!" It catches the scent of battle from afar, the shout of commanders and the battle cry' (New International Version) – Gregory sketched the seven *vitia* as army captains commanding their own army of vices against the human soul. At the top of this army rules *superbia* as *vitiorum regina*, the 'queen of vices'. Again, just like Evagrius, Gregory warns his readers that no one can think he can escape the attacking forces of vices, but the devout believer can sniff out their approach and prepare him-/herself accordingly (Clarke 2018:17-18).

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), one of the most famous and influential Christian theologians takes Gregory's list and its sequence as the starting point for his thinking, increasing the theological weight of the seven sins even more. In the second part of his *Summa Theologiae* (ST I-II, q. 84, a. 4), Thomas lists the seven as vainglory (*inanis gloria*), envy (*invidia*), anger (*ira*), avarice (*avaritia*), sadness (tristitia), gluttony (*gula*), and lust (*luxuria*), later (ST II-II, q. 35, a. 4) incorporating sloth (*acedia*) into sadness (*accidia sit tristitia quaedam*). As Gregory did, Thomas considers pride not as one of the seven vices, because it has a general influence towards all other sins (ST II-II, q. 162, a. 8).

Thomas is also the theologian who began to understand the seven as 'capital vices' (from the Latin *caput*, 'head'), in the sense that these seven cause the other sins by way of final causality. They have survived within Christian, especially within Roman Catholic doctrine until the present day, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1866) states about what are now explicitly called 'capital sins':

> Vices can be classified according to the virtues they oppose, or also be linked to the capital sins which Christian experience has distinguished, following St. John Cassian and St. Gregory the Great. They are called "capital" because they engender other sins, other vices. They are pride (*superbia*), avarice (*avaritia*), envy (*invidia*), wrath (*ira*), lust (*luxuria*), gluttony (*gula*), and sloth (*acedia*).

Since their appearance as the eight evil thoughts in Evagrius' spirituality, the seven deadly sins have been a part of the Western cultural domain. Dante's descriptions of hell (*inferno*) and purgatory (*purgatorio*) are among the best known and most quoted examples of the popularisation of the seven deadly sins outside the realm of strict theology and spirituality. In his *Divine Comedy* (written between 1308 and 1320), Dante identifies nine circles in hell, and seven terraces in purgatory where the sinners are punished for their crimes, although the torment in the latter is only temporary. The nine descending circles of hell are named Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Wrath, Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery, while the seven terraces of purgatory are named Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony and Lust. In both lists, but especially the second one, the familiar group of the deadly sins can be easily identified.

While Dante does not personalise the sins in full-fledged characters, there is certainly a connection between the vices, the sinners who commit them (crime) and the way in which they are punished (punishment), a process called *contrapasso* or 'counter-suffering' (Pertile 2010). For example, in the first ring of violence (in the seventh circle of the Inferno), dedicated to the punishment of murderers, the souls are immersed in a river of blood whilst centaurs shoot their arrows at whoever tries to lift him-/herself higher above the water than permitted (Papka 2010:494; Triolo 1998:153-154). And, to give another example, in the first terrace of purgatory the proud souls

are bent over by the weight of huge stones on their backs, while confronted with beautiful sculptures expressing the opposite virtue of humility (Psaki 2010:710).

A more or less 'real' personalisation of the seven deadly sins can be found in *Piers Plowman*, written by the English poet William Langland in the second half of the 14th century (Bright 1930). Like the other 'morality plays' of the Middle Ages (Styan 1996:40-41), *Plowman* introduces virtues and vices as characters, able to speak and act independently. In *Passus* ('step' or chapter) V, the Seven Deadly Sins come forward to confess 'their idle selfishness and gross behaviour among friars, merchants, money-lenders and drunkards' (Langland 2014:59) to Repentance, who urges them to seek out Truth, while a ploughman, an allegory of Jesus Christ (Steiner 2013:219), called Piers, gives them directions.

The seven deadly sins, now more or less in the same sequence and wording, can be found in numerous cultural *loci*, from 'The Parson's Tale' from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (second half 15th century), a series of paintings by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1558), and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (end 16th century), to Kurt Weil and Bertolt Brecht's *ballet chanté* named after the seven (*Die sieben Todsünden*, 1933), and David Fincher's famous movie *Se7en* (1995).

In this movie, the seven deadly sins are the inspiration for John Doe (Kevin Spacey), a psychopathic murderer, linking crime and punishment together in Dante's fashion. Detectives David Mills (Brad Pitt) and William Somerset (Morgan Freeman) are confronted with a man forced to eat until his stomach ruptures (gluttony); a defence attorney killed after a pound of flesh was taken from his body while still alive (greed); a drugs dealer and child molester found strapped to a bed, emaciated but alive (sloth); a prostitute raped with a bladed strap-on by a client, forced by Doe to do so (lust); and a model, who, given the choice to call for help and live disfigured, or commit suicide, chooses the latter (pride). For the last two sins, Doe involves detective Mills by first killing his pregnant wife Tracy (envy towards their relationship), and then by provoking Mills to kill him on the spot (wrath towards Doe).

From Evagrius to *Se7en*, we see an evolution from eight evil thoughts to seven deadly sins, although varying in sequence and naming. The more or less standardised seven, effectively after Dante, are widely known and used from medieval to modern culture, either as classification instruments for evils, or as a personification of the primary vices.

2 Case #1. Diablo III

The *Diablo* series consist of three games, numbered from one to three (1996, 2000, 2012), and an important expansion pack, called *Reaper of Souls* (2014). All games are isometric looter-based

dungeon crawlers. The player can choose from a variety of classes like Warrior (*Diablo*), Amazon (*Diablo II*), or Monk (*Diablo III*), all giving access to multiple kinds of playstyles, special moves and abilities. *Diablo III*, the main interest for this article, is divided into four Acts, while *Reapers* adds a fifth one, besides multiple new classes and abilities.

The series features an elaborate cosmology, revolving around a single perfect pearl in which the supreme godhead Anu resides (Bosman and Wieringen 2018). In Anu there is light and dark, good and evil. But after having reflected upon itself, Anu cast away his dark side (or 'dissonance'), that formed into a second being Tathamet, the Prime Evil. Both divine beings battled with one another inside the pearl, until it exploded into the known universe. The cosmic event led to Anu's victory and subsequent departure from our part of reality, leaving Tathamet dissolved into the great evils of our world.

The name 'Anu' is probably derived from the Sumerian and Babylonian sky-god with the same name (Hutter and Jonge 1999), while 'Tathamet' is probably a variation of Tiamat (Alster 1999), the Babylonian goddess of the ocean who was killed by Marduk (Abusch 1999), causing heaven and earth to form from his body parts. The struggle between Anu and Tathamet also resembles that between the twin-brothers Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainya from Zoroastrian mythology (Boyce 1975:192-228).

The seven heads of Tathamet became the seven Great Evils, the seven most prominent and powerful demon lords of hell. The first three are collectively called 'the Prime Evils', while the other four are known as 'the Lesser Evils'. These demon lords are called: Mephisto, Lord of Hatred; Diablo, Lord of Terror; Baal, Lord of Destruction; Andariel, Maiden of Anguish *aka* Demon Queen; Duriel, Lord of Pain *aka* Maggot King; Belial, Lord of Lies *aka* Master of Deception; and Azmodan, Lord of Sin *aka* General of Vices.

In Azmodan's title, the General of Vices, the position of the sin of pride within the theology of Gregory and Thomas resonates, her being the queen and army-commander of all other sins. Under Azmodan, seven Sin Lieutenants serve: Cydaea, Maiden of Lust; Ghom, Lord of Gluttony; Vidian, Lord of Envy; Zaboul, Lord of Wrath; Bholen, representing Sloth; Greed, Baroness of the Treasure Realm; and Snitchley. In this list Greed is represented twice, in Greed and Snitchley, while Pride seems to be missing altogether.

Cydaea (lust) appears to be a minor boss in the Arreat Crater of Act III. She is depicted as half-spider (bottom), half human (top), with a pronounced décolleté (image #1.1). She taunts the player's avatar (and thus the player him-/herself) seductively during their journey through the crater, while dangling from a string of silk.

Image 1.1: Model of Cydaea, Maiden of Lust.

Ghom (gluttony) is the first boss of Act III and is a giant dog-human hybrid with two short arms, a large open mouth on his belly, and a tiny helmed head on top (see image #1.2). His body is covered in bumps and his flesh is torn open in numerous places. Whenever he speaks, flatulence and the licking of lips are heard. He attacks using a rather foul-smelling gas, a putrid vomit attack and a bone- crushing snap or bite.

Image 1.2: In-game screenshot of Ghom, Lord of Gluttony.

Vidian (envy) is the disobedient one of the seven, even neglecting or even refusing to do the bidding of his master Azmodan. He can be found in the adventure mode of the game, activated after ending Act VI with the *Reaper of Souls* expansion pack installed. Initially, Vidian disguises himself as an NPC follower of the player by the name of Daivan the Adventurer, 'Daivan' being an anagram of 'Vidian'. He later appears as a boss at the end of the Temple of the Firstborn. His new true form is that of a fire-breathing black dragon with long, sharp claws (see image #1.3). Envy is very self-confident ('I am like no other demon!'), and tries to lure the player's avatar into submission ('So much power. You could rule the Burning Hells instead of playing servant to a fallen angel').

Image 1.3: In-game screenshot of Vidian, Lord of Envy.

Bholen, incarnation of sloth, takes the form of a unique Colossal Golgor, an enemy-type the player comes across a lot during the game. He is found in Act III, depicted as a very fat person, whose body is covered in blue tattoos, and – again – with a very small head. He is almost naked except for a very small skirt-like garment and a half-open helmet (see image #1.4).

Image 1.4: In-game screenshot of Bholen, representing sloth.

In the *Reaper of Souls* expansion pack, Greed, Baroness of the Treasure Realm, can be found, serving as a level boss. Greed is a double-horned, fat, green, giant monster, covered in gold jewellery and carrying a sack full of gold and treasure on her back (see image #1.5). The demon sits on a large gold throne, positioning her right foot upon a gold footstool under which a large amount of cash is stashed.

Image 1.5: In-game screenshot of the demon Greed.

Snitchley is also one of the seven Sin Lieutenants, but is not explicitly linked to a sin, although from its appearance (a treasure-hoarding goblin), name ('to snitch' is 'to steal something') and function (defeated by the player, it drops a considerable amount of loot) in the game, it would be hard to connect it to anything else than greed, just like the demon with the same name (see image #1.6).

Image 1.6: In-game screenshot of Snitchley.

The seventh of the Sin Lieutenants is Zaboul, Lord of Wrath. Unfortunately, he is only mentioned in *Diablo III*, but never shown.

3 Case #2. The Binding of Isaac

The Binding of Isaac (2011) is a roguelike top-down dungeon crawler, designed by Edmund McMillen (designer) and Florian Himsl (programmer). Directly inspired by the classic 1986 NES game, The Legend of Zelda (McMillen 2012a), the game connects chamber to chamber, incorporating procedurally-generated levels that particularly enhance and stimulate multiple playthroughs, for which the player is rewarded by unlockable characters, passive items or achievements. The gamer must first defeat all the monsters in a given chamber before he/she can enter the next. The player controls a naked figure, Isaac, whose primary weapon is his ability to 'shoot' tears at his enemies. Helpful items can be found and active and passive abilities can be unlocked during the game to add to Isaac's armoury. When Isaac's life reaches zero, the player is forced to restart the game from the beginning.

In various online articles and interviews, the designer McMillen has quite clearly articulated the religious inspiration for *The Binding of Isaac* (Holmes 2011; Jagielski 2011; Smith 2011; McMillen 2012a). He describes his religious upbringing as a hybrid between Roman Catholicism and born-again Christianity, both sides contributing to the creation of *The Binding of Isaac*:

> I grew up in a religious family. My mom's side is Catholic, and my dad's side is born-again Christians. The Catholic side had this very ritualistic belief system: My grandma could essentially cast spells of safe passage if we went on trips, for example, and we would light candles and pray for loved ones to find their way out of purgatory, and drink and eat the body and blood of our saviour to be abolished of mortal sin. As a child growing up with this, I honestly thought it was very neat, very creative and inspiring. It's not hard to look at my work and see that most of the themes of violence actually come from my Catholic upbringing, and in a lot of ways I loved that aspect of our religion. Sadly, the other side of my family was a bit more harsh in their views on the Bible; I was many times told I was going to hell for playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering* (in fact, they took my MtG cards away from me), and generally condemned me for my sins. (McMillen 2012a)

The name of the game is an almost explicit reference to the Biblical story of the same name (Jagielski 2011). Genesis 22:1-19 tells the story of Abraham of whom God demands that he sacrifice his son Isaac. When Abraham takes his son to the mountains of Moriah, he builds an altar for his son, who is still oblivious to the real purpose of the journey. At the very moment Abraham

wants to strike him with the sacrificial knife, an angel of God intervenes, forbidding him to touch his son, and providing a substitute offering in the form of a ram. Abraham is praised by the angel for his unwavering loyalty to and love for God.

The narrative text has been fiercely debated among exegetes, both diachronically and synchronically (Argus 1988; Rowley 2015; Westermann 1981:429-447; Wieringen 1995:293-299). At the same time, the story is also heavily criticised for its supposed support for blind obedience and religion-fused violence. For example, Richard Dawkins (2006:242) disqualified Abraham's behaviour as: 'By the standards of modern morality, this disgraceful story is an example simultaneously of child abuse (…) and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defence: "I was only obeying orders".' Although the game does indeed feature a substantial degree of religion criticism, it's underlying themes include divorce-connected psychological child trauma, and religion as a coping mechanism against such trauma (Bosman and Wieringen 2018).

In the meantime, the seven deadly sins make their appearance in *The Binding of Isaac*, serving as 'mini-bosses' for Isaac to defeat. The sequence of their appearance is randomised: in any case, Isaac will meet Pride, Envy, Greed, Wrath, Gluttony, Lust, and Sloth (see image #2.1). In the 'Rebirth' version of the game, Isaac can also encounter supersized versions of the seven (see image #2.2), featuring slightly different aesthetics, but similar in-game behaviour. After defeating all seven deadly sins, Isaac is rewarded with an unlockable item, called 'The Book of Sins'.
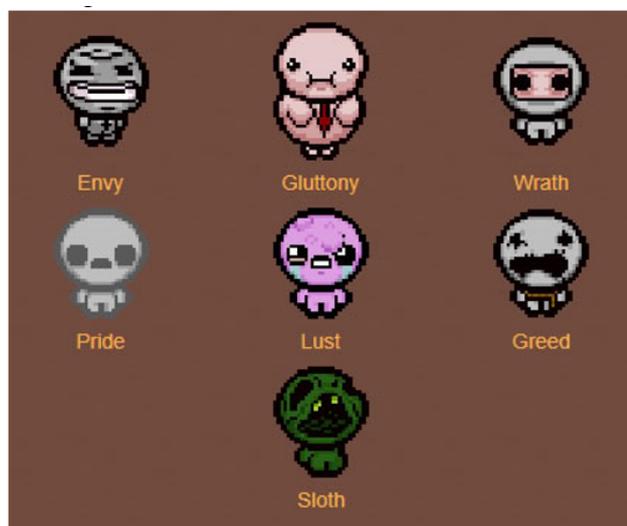

Image 2.1: Overview of the appearance of the seven deadly sins in The Binding of Isaac.
Source:
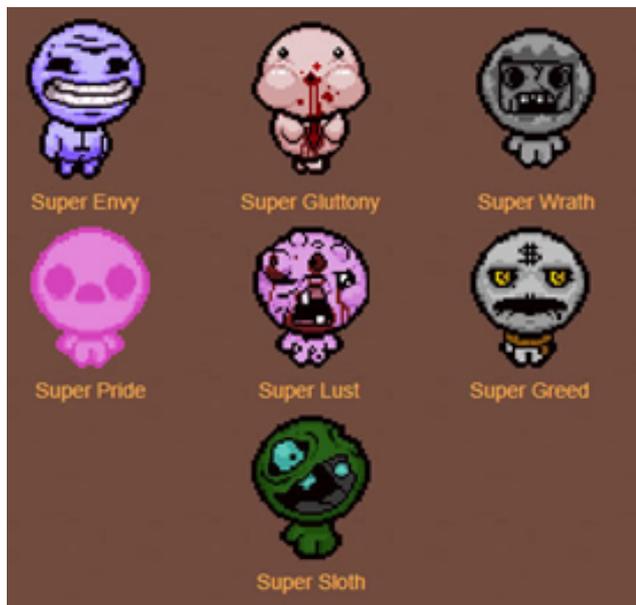*https://bindingofisaacrebirth.gamepedia.com/Seven_Deadly_Sins.*

Image 2.2: Overview of the appearance the seven super deadly sins in The Binding of Isaac. Source: https://bindingofisaacrebirth.gamepedia.com/Seven_Deadly_Sins.

All seven deadly sins are different versions of Isaac, both aesthetically and existentially. Since Isaac thinks he is to blame for the violent divorce of his parents, which becomes apparent after analysing and synthesising all possible endings (Bosman & Wieringen 2018), the game is littered with references to Isaac's self-blaming. According to the *Binding of Isaac*'s *fandom.com* webpage on 'the seven deadly sins' (see bibliography at the end of this article), McMillen would have personally identified the seven as 'all Isaac', however no source is given and confirmation could not be found elsewhere.

Pride is depicted as a ghostly, grey version of Isaac, with hollow eyes and a somewhat sad face. Pride has two different ways of attacking the player-controlled Isaac: pulsing waves in a large x-shape pattern with himself in the middle, and spawning four bombs randomly in the room. During the first attack option, Pride is shown with a 'Forever Alone' face, while during the second one, Isaac's face is that of a 'Trollface'. The 'Forever Alone' face is a famous internet meme, used to 'express loneliness and disappointment with life' (Kip 2000), while the 'Trollface' meme represents 'the facial expression of an internet troll' (Funky Rasberry 2009). An 'internet troll' is internet slang used to describe 'user behavior that is meant to intentionally anger or frustrate someone else' (James 2009).

In the context of the game's narrative, Pride represents not so much Isaac's vice – he is nowhere shown to be proud of anything – but symbolises Pride on a more universal, though postmodern level. The figure of the internet troll is especially a digital form of the vice, since internet trolls devote a substantial part of their lives to grieve other people online for no other purpose than to feel superior to them. As we will see in a short while, McMillen links pride directly and explicitly to envy, including the figure of the internet troll.

As stated earlier, in the 'Rebirth' version of the game, Isaac can also encounter 'Super Pride'. This version also resembles Isaac, but the grey colour of the ghostly figure is now pink. According to the *fandom.com* webpage on 'Super Pride', the choice of the colour pink should be interpreted as a reference to 'gay pride' and the LHBT community. Since *The Binding of Isaac* is heavily influenced by the Christian tradition, the website suggests that it 'might be a reference to the fact that many Christians stated homosexuality (as well as bisexuality and transgenderism) to be a sin.'

The next sin is Greed, who is depicted as a hollow-eyed, grey puppet, with a noose around his neck and his mouth in a silent scream. Greed's noose resembles that by which Isaac commits suicide in the third ending of the game, a *mise en scène* that can be interpreted as a reference to the Biblical figure of Judas, who is said to have taken his own life after betraying Jesus (Matthew 27:3–10). Judas is also one of the unlockable characters in the game. Again, it is worth mentioning that within Christian tradition suicide is seen as a grave sin. In Dante, those who commit suicide are found in the second ring of the seventh circle of hell: they are turned into thorny trees, again a reference to hanging oneself from a branch of a tree.

According to a *Tumblr* post of McMillen (2015), Greed is connected both to Isaac, as are all sins, but also to the shopkeepers: 'shop keepers are dead isaacs from past runs and greeds are reanimated shop keepers'. The shopkeepers in *The Binding* can be found randomly on any given floor, and resemble Greed including the noose. Isaac can buy items and power-ups from them. The connection between the sin of greed and commercial enterprise, especially in situations in which the buyer is heavily dependent on the good-will of the vendor, is easy enough to spot.

Super Greed has the same appearance as his normal version, but with a dollar sign on his forehead and two gold coins instead of his normal hollow eyes. Except for the obvious reference to money and the love of it – the greedy interpret the world around them in strictly financial terms - the coins in the eye sockets could also be linked to Charon's obol, the coin placed in or on the mouth of a dead person before burial in classical Greek and Roman societies in order to pay the Styx's ferryman, but also to the Jewish custom from the Second Temple period of covering the eyes of the deceased with coins prior to burial (Fine 2014:41).

Pride and Greed do not only have a normal and a super version of themselves, but also an ultra one. Ultra Greed is just a very muscular version of his normal self, with glowing yellow eyes without pupils. The financial symbols are removed from his appearance. Ultra Pride is, however, more interesting. In appearance, Ultra Pride resembles (Super) Sloth much more than his own normal or super version. Next to Ultra Pride a floating baby can be seen, with big rectangular spectacles and dark hair. According to the *fandom.com* webpage, Ultra Pride resembles the two creators of the game, McMillen as Pride and Florian Himsl as the baby.

The room ID to spawn Ultra Pride is 'us', perhaps referring to 'Ultra Sloth', the non-existing ultra version of this sin, whose appearance Ultra Pride seems to have taken over. On the other hand, the word 'us' could very well be a reference to McMillen and Himsl. When defeated, Ultra Pride drops the Left Hand trinket, a possible reference to McMillen being left handed. In appearance, Ultra Pride and his baby resemble the classical image of Frankenstein and his monster (from the 1818 novel by Mary Shelley). According to many interpretations, Shelley's novel is about human *hubris*, the endeavour to become godlike beings, the ultimate form of pride (Rehmann-Sutter 1999). This suggests, if these premises are correct, that McMillen and Himsl were – probably satirically – critical of their own creative process, qualifying themselves as susceptible to this specific sin.

Envy is an Isaac-version that is floating in the air with a large grin on his face. Again, his face resembles that of the Troll Face meme, as Pride did earlier. In his normal form Envy is grey, but in super form he appears blueish. When Envy kills Isaac, he does not appear on the so-called 'Last Will' of Isaac; instead Pride is named. The reason is unknown: it is either an error or a reference to the interaction between these two sins from the side of the creators. When attacked, Envy can split up into two, then four, and eventually into eight increasingly smaller versions of himself. The eight smallest ones feature the Poker Face meme, used to express and illustrate 'mostly awkward and sometimes embarrassing social situations' (Moargun 2010). The other versions of Envy feature the Troll Face meme, as Pride does too. As McMillen (2012b) stated, while – again – making a link between envy and pride:

> Envy is based on internet trolls, hence the face. when you attack them back they just grow in numbers.

McMillen seems to suggest that the vices of envy and pride are closely interlinked, but how exactly remains unclear.

Lust is a pink version of Isaac covered in bumps and markings, caused by 'The Virus' (a passive collectible in the game). It is a possibe reference to STDs, diseases most commonly associated with sex and porn. The 'Pills' Lust is dropping could be – in this context - a reference to birth control pills and/or medicines against STDs. Lust's attack (chasing after Isaac) may be a sign

of love and/or lust for him. The link between sex and STD's is obvious and within Christian circles frequently used as a 'proof' of the immorality of 'free sex' (Berthrong 2004).

Wrath's version of Isaac resembles a grey version of the iconic 'Bomberman' from the video game series of the same name, ranging from 1985 to 2017: totally clothed in a grey tight suit, with the exception of a rather large part of the face leaving the eyes free. Also the lay-out and attack patterns of Wrath resemble those of the classic Bomberman. The connection between the game character and the specific sin is unclear. The same applies to Super Wrath.

Gluttony resembles a very fat version of Isaac with a vertical fissure along his body. Super Gluttony has the same appearance, but leaks blood from his mouth as if he has eaten something bloody. The connection between Gluttony and the sin he represents is easy enough to spot.

Sloth is a green (or black in the case of Super Sloth) version of Isaac, with open mouth and two small white teeth. One of his attack options is the spawning of 'Chargers', a kind of aggressive maggots which crawl towards Isaac. The connection between vermin and this specific vice was also made in the film *Se7en*.

4 Case #3. Dante's Inferno

The game *Dante's Inferno* (2010) is an action video game with hack-n-slash, puzzle and light parkour elements. The game is based on, not so surprisingly, the first part of Dante's famous *Divine Comedy* (as introduced earlier in this article) and on the hellish and bizarre paintings of the Dutch painter Jheronimus Bosch (c. 1450-1516). The player controls Dante, a weary warrior of the Third Crusade (1189-1192), who returns to his home in Florence (Italy) only to find his father Alighiero and his lover Beatrice Portinari murdered. Torn by grief Dante enters the nine circles of hell to free Beatrice's soul from Lucifer's grasp, while fighting hordes of demons, and ultimately facing his own sins committed in the Holy Land.

Dante's adventures during the Third Crusade are communicated to the player through in-game flashback cutscenes in a distinct cartoonish style, different from the game's main aesthetics (see image #3.1). The game suggests that these cartoons are drawn upon a great red cross (that of the crusaders), sown directly into the flesh of Dante's breast by his own hands. Dante's journey down the nine circles becomes a descent into his own soul, filled with sins that are carved into his flesh.

Image 3.1: In-game screenshot of a flashback depicting Dante and Beatrice. After their first sexual intercourse, they plead eternal loyalty to one another.

Even though *Dante's Inferno* is undeniably based on the *Divine Comedy*, the developers took some creative liberty to alter details for their own story. In the *Comedy*, Dante does indeed find himself in a *basso loco* ('low place'), but the crusader context from *Dante's Inferno* is completely absent. In the poem, it is Virgil who guides Dante through hell and purgatory and Beatrice who takes over that task for Dante's visit to heaven. While in *Dante's Inferno*, Beatrice is Dante's love interest who is to be rescued from the clutches of hell, in the poem she symbolizes theology. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the Beatrice of the *Comedy* was also the poet's love interest in real life, to be identified with the daughter of the Florentine banker Folco Portinari, as *Dante's Inferno* actually does (Ferrnate 2003).

Together with Virgil, who agrees to help Dante on his journey through hell in return for Beatrice's advocacy in heaven – Virgil cannot enter heaven because he is a pagan (Hollander 2010) – the weary knight fights his way through the nine circles. Dante enters hell with Charon's ferry (Cherchi 2010), killing him in the process. In Limbo (first circle), Dante does the same with King Minos, the Judge of the Damned (Baldassaro 2010).

In the second circle, dedicated to lust, Dante enters the Carnal Tower to find Beatrice, whose soul slowly changes into a succubus (see image #3.2), a female devil, which, in Christian demonology, is thought to specifically seduce men (Elmer 2003:648). Lucifer explains that Beatrice's fate is brought upon her by Dante's actions, although the exact nature remains unclear for the moment. Dante slays Queen Cleopatra and her lover Mark Anthony (Lansing 2003), but is also confronted by his own sexual misconduct though a cartoon cutscene.
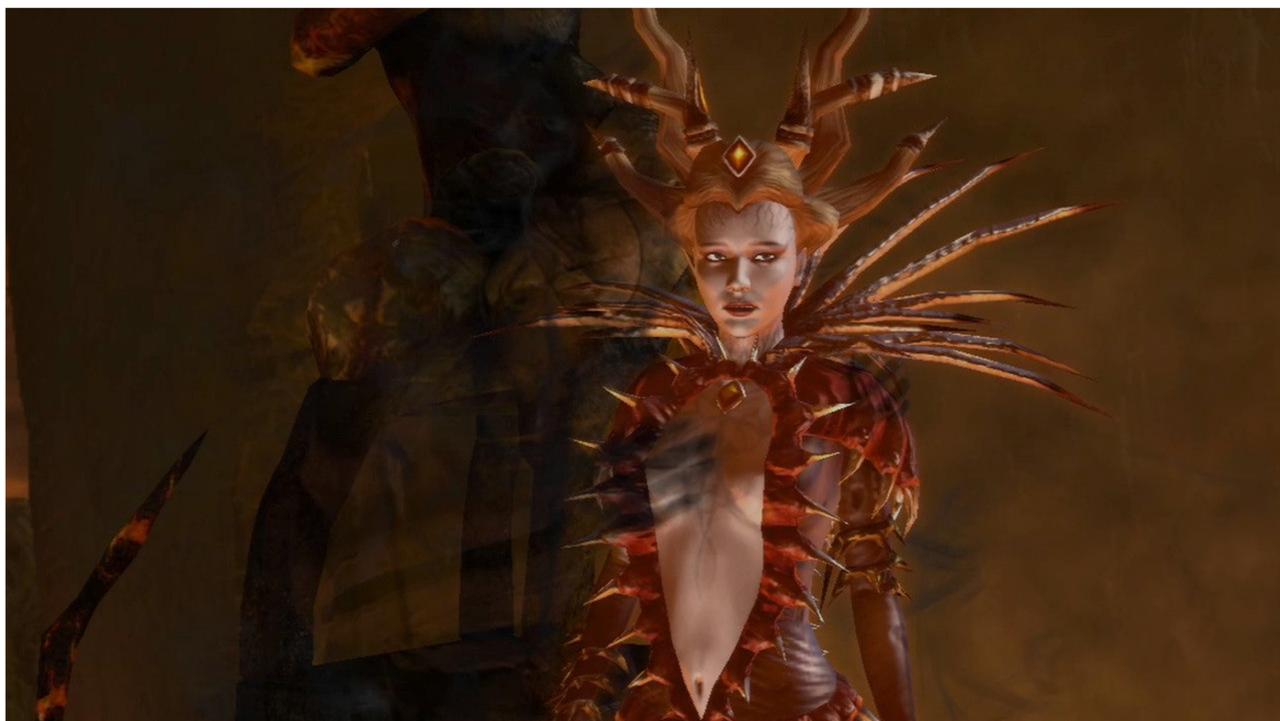
Image 3.2: In-game screenshot of Beatrice in her succubus form.

During prison duty in the Holy Land (King Richard tries to ransom thousands of Muslim civilians for the True Cross, then in possession of Saladin), Dante is seduced by a female prisoner, who offers to 'comfort' him in exchange for the freedom of her also imprisoned brother. Even though Dante speaks about Beatrice back in Florence, he lets the woman comfort him, while another soldier forcefully restrains the protesting brother. Afterwards both are released by Dante. In the meantime, it becomes clear to Dante that all his sins in the Holy Land have been revealed to Beatrice by Lucifer.

The third circle of hell is dedicated to gluttony, where Dante slays the great worm Cerberus (Heilbronn-Gaines 2003). Lucifer reveals that Dante's father Alighiero indulged in gastronomical and sexual orgies during his lifetime, eventually causing Dante to do the same while he was on crusade. When Dante reminds Lucifer that the Roman Church, in-game represented as 'the Bishop', has promised that all sins of the crusaders would be absolved even without confession, the demon lord dismisses the crusaders' faith in the 'salesmen of salvation'. Dante remarks that he does not see any of his adversaries' souls, to which Lucifer replies that 'because this isn't their hell, it is yours'.

In another flashback cutscene, a crying Beatrice, waiting for Dante's return, is confronted with his father who tries to force himself upon her as a form of 'comfort'. Then an eastern Assassin

(Bosman 2016) appears, the one who earlier on had gravely but not mortally wounded Dante in the Holy Land, to kill both Dante's father and lover. The Assassin identifies himself to be the 'brother' of the girl Dante slept with, only that he was not her brother but her husband.

In the fourth circle, that of greed, Dante fights a deformed version of his father Alighiero (see image #3.3), who is revealed to have not only been prone to lust and gluttony, but also to greed by way of extorting his farmers. His father mocks him: 'You think you are a better man than your father', to which Dante replies: 'I think I am too much the same man as my father'. When defeated by Dante, his father exclaims: 'Use me as an excuse, blame me for everything', thus indicating that even though he was a very bad example for his son, this did not take away Dante's own moral responsibility for his own actions.

Image 3.3: In-game screenshot of Dante's father Alighiero. Source: www.magalo.com.

Wrath is the fifth circle in which Dante is portrayed, in a flashback, as having been very prone to anger towards the Muslims of the Holy Land, soldiers and civilians alike. Tempted by Lucifer and out of grief for Dante's unfaithfulness, Beatrice eats three seeds of the forbidden fruit, a reference to the Biblical story (Genesis 2 and 3) of Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, causing their expulsion from paradise (Kissling 2004:192-193). Lucifer however, claims that Beatrice's eating of the fruit is a way for him to regain heaven, a reference to the story of the Fallen Angels from the apocryphal book of Henoch (Riley 1999). After eating the fruits, Beatrice

changes into a full-fledged succubus, while Lucifer comments 'the faithful has lost her faith'. Both kiss passionately.

The sixth circle, devoted to heresy, seems not to be of any interest to Dante's inner life: there are neither cutscenes nor flashbacks. Neither Lucifer nor Beatrice make an appearance. It is almost as if the developers could find ways to materialize all sins connected to eight of the nine circles of hell and connect them with Dante's biography, except for heresy. Maybe the explicit religious nature of this sin – the others are both secular and religious – made it more difficult for the developers to work with.

Violence is the theme of the seventh circle of hell, divided into three rings: those who violated others, who violated themselves, and who used violence against God. In the last two rings, Dante has two significant meetings. In the Wood of the Suicides, Dante meets his mother Bella, hanging from a noose in a tree (see image #3.4). She took her own life because she could not live with her husband Alighiero's cruelty, although Dante was told that she died of fever when he was only a child. She scorns her son: 'You learned his ways', as has become apparent numerous times earlier in the game's narrative.

Image 3.4: In-game screenshot of Dante's mother Bella.

In the third ring of violence, Dante comes across Beatrice's brother and his fellow-crusader Francesco, who – in vain – tried to temper Dante's violence against the prisoners (see image #3.5). Dante kills the remorseful man after a fierce fight.

Image 3.5: Caption: In-game screenshot of Dante's brother-in-law, Francesco.

In fraud, the eighth circle of hell, Dante is told by Beatrice-turned-succubus to find his 'final resting place' among the 10 Malebolge, the ten 'trenches' dedicated to those who betrayed trust and love. When entering the ninth and final circle, treachery, Dante's flashback reveals that Francesco took Dante's place when King Richard hanged the one responsible for the mass-murder of the prisoners, thus betraying not only his brother-in-law, but also committing treachery against his king and his holy duties as a crusader. When Dante is confronted by Beatrice with this act, he finally gives in:

> I give up on this journey. My place is here in hell. Yours is in paradise. I am truly sorry for what I have done. May you one day forgive me.

This act of supreme repentance towards Beatrice and the sins he committed in his past, liberates Beatrice from devilish control. The archangel Gabriel descends and takes the now familiar looking Beatrice to heaven, but only after he encourages Dante: 'Your redemption is near. (…) Trust me, you will see her again.'

Dante prepares for the final confrontation with Lucifer. However, the first stage of the final battle does not end Lucifer's existence, but only frees him from his eternal prison. He also reveals that seducing Beatrice was only a rouse to trick Dante into liberating him. Lucifer invokes – again – the legend of the fallen angels when he accuses God of loving humankind more than him:

> You dare to assault me. You who have done far worse than I. I stood for my fellow angels, for reason and justice. And then He made you in His image. You the flawed creation. And I was to bow down to you.

After defeating Lucifer for the second time, he conjures up a last flashback (not through Dante's cloth but through some sort of mirror) into Dante's mind: the Assassin who gravely wounded Dante at the beginning of the game's narrative. It becomes apparent that Dante was not only wounded, but actually killed by the Assassin, making his stay in hell eternal. Lucifer explains his desire to ascend through purgatory to heaven in order to take control of the universe. Eventually Dante manages to stop Lucifer at the last possible moment by invoking all the 'damned souls' he had absolved during his journey through hell (like those of Francesco and Bella). Dante re-imprisons Lucifer.

Afterwards, Dante is visited by Beatrice, who takes him to the foot of the mountain of purgatory. Both of them are naked, a possible reference to the pre-fall innocent nakedness of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2 and 3). At the foot of the mountain, Dante rips off the now blackened cloth from his naked chest as a symbol of his redeemed sins.

This is a theological anomaly, since in Roman Catholic tradition the transition from hell to purgatory is not thought possible, and where hell is the place of punishment for one's sins, purgatory is the designated area for redeeming them. The cloth falls onto the ground only to disintegrate into a snake slithering away. This is – again – a reference to the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, as well as to the Christian identification of the Garden's snake with the devil or Lucifer (Hannah 2006:193-202). While the laugh of Lucifer is heard, the screen turns black with the words 'to be continued'. Unfortunately, the developers of *Dante's Inferno* have not created a follow-up.

5 Case #4. Darksiders III

In every instalment of the *Darksiders* series, one of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse is featured as the main protagonist: War in *Darksiders I*, Death in *Darksiders II*, and finally Fury in *Darksiders III*, leaving only Strife for a possible future ending of the quadrilogy. The developers have taken

these four characters from the Bible book of Revelation (6:1-8), where the riders are connected to the breaking of the first four of seven seals that are attached to a book held in God's hand. The first horseman, riding on a white horse, is commonly thought of as symbolising the conquest of pestilence, while the red horse carries the incarnation of war. The black one is associated with famine, as the pale rider is with death (Uehlinger 1999:707; Resseguie 1998:176). War and Death feature in the *Darksiders* series, but Fury and Strife seem to be the product of creative freedom from the side of the developers.

The three games so far released are different from one another ludologically. The first one is a hack-n-slash brawler game with an emphasis on the aesthetic quality of War's killing abilities. The second one retains the hack-n-slash element but incorporates traits from looters, rpg's, and Metroidvania styled games. Death can be equipped with increasingly stronger weapons and gear, while he has to backtrack regularly to advance through earlier inaccessible territories. The third game of the instalment also keeps the hack-n-slash element and the need for backtracking, but minimalizes the equipment possibilities. Regular third person perspective gameplay is combined with in-game cutscenes to move the narrative forward.

The world lore and metanarrative of the series is quite elaborate and full of references to the Christian tradition (Bosman and Poorthuis 2015). To summarise the *mythos* of the series would be too extensive a task, but some context has to be given (Marmell 2012). In the *Darksiders'* universe, an unnamed Creator founded three kingdoms: Heaven, Hell, and Man. While virtually nothing is known about this Creator, he is held in high esteem by both angels, demons, and humans, although some (like the angel Absalom) claim that He has left his creation out of sadness and frustration.

To maintain balance in the universe – balance is the key notion of the *Darksiders'* metanarrative – an equally mysterious force is set in place, known as the Charred Council. Aesthetically, they appear as three talking volcanos with seemingly unlimited power over all kingdoms. Their exact nature is obscure, although the Lord of Hollows, a character from *Darksiders III*, claims that the Council is comprised of higher angels and demons.

When the Kingdom of Man appears on the cosmic theatre, the Council plans to give them Eden as a place of existence, as humankind will become invaluable to the maintenance of the universal balance, although exactly how is unclear. Eden, however, is about to be ripped from humankind's dominion by the Nephilim (Genesis 6:1-5; Coxon 1999), a race made from the dust of both angels and demons by the she-demon Lilith (Isaiah 34:14; Hutter 1999) at the behest of her master Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12; Riley 1999).

The Charred Council strikes a deal with four Nephilim: in exchange for unimaginable power, they have to wipe out their brothers and sisters. The four accept and perform their gruesome task, becoming the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and one of the prime tools of the Council in their

struggle for universal balance. Humankind is given the earth, and both heaven and hell are strictly forbidden to intervene until the seven seals are broken for the final battle.

Darksiders I and *II* are dedicated narratologically to very complex political manipulations by both the Charred Council, and by some very high ranking demons and angels. The details are too complex to expand upon here and not relevant for the discussion on the deadly sins, but the events of the first two instalments leave the earth almost destroyed and humankind nearly extinct by a pre-emptive unleashing the Apocalypse. War is – falsely – blamed by the Charred Council (*Darksiders I*), leaving Death on a rampage to exonerate his brother (*Darksiders II*). Fury is unaware of the political machinations while Strife is notably absent and unspoken of.

Darksiders III starts with the narrator setting the scene and introducing the seven deadly sins, implicitly introducing the theme of the theodicy, which is unfortunately not reflected upon any further in the game or the series (Bosman 2019:125-149):

> Why did the Creator construct a universe teeming with... imperfection? Misery? Sin? Among the scholars of both heaven and hell, this query is known as the Riddle of Sorrows. If sin is in itself a part of the Grand Design, is not sin then, by definition, divine? A question for the sages...

Fury is tasked by the Charred Council to capture the Seven Deadly Sins, who – mysteriously – were released from their prison during the start of the Apocalypse. Again, the Council is to be blamed, but it is only at the ending of the game that Fury understands the true nature of the recent events. Fury accepts, but is impertinent enough to ask something in return: 'When this task is complete, I demand that you grant me my rightful place leading the Horsemen.'

It is only the first of many references in the *Darksiders III*'s narrative about the egoistic and aggressive character of Fury, constantly mocking everyone - especially humans - who is less powerful than she is ('they are so weak!'). Even her three brothers are the object of her scorn. When War, captured in chains and led before the Council, warns her about the machinations, she refuses to help him or to take his advice into account. It is made very clear from the start that although the Four Horsemen are not of the political or friendly type in the first place, Fury stands among them as the toughest one, constantly trying to prove herself to be the true leader of the Council's helpers.

Fury ventures upon her mission in the company of a 'Watcher' (a reference to the book Henoch again; Collins 1999), a guardian spirit tasked to make sure that the Horseman is doing exactly what the Council wants. The Watcher presents herself as a very loyal 'fan' of Fury, burying her with compliments, which the Horseman, half pleased, half grudgingly, accepts. The sequence in which Fury meets the Seven is not totally fixed, but in a regular play-through the player will come across: Envy (1st time), Wrath (1st time), Avarice, Sloth, Pride (1st time), Lust, Gluttony, Wrath (2nd time), Pride (2nd time), Envy (2nd and 3rd time).

In *Darksiders III*, the Seven Sins physically represent the nature of the vice, but also invoke the (usually darker) parts of Fury's subconsciousness. Envy, the first sin Fury comes across, appears as equal parts vulture, crow and mage dressed in an armoured cloak that depicts bones (see image #4.1). Also, she wears a glowing, spiked skull on a chain around the neck, serving Fury as both a prison for the Seven Sins themselves and as a honing device for finding them in the world.
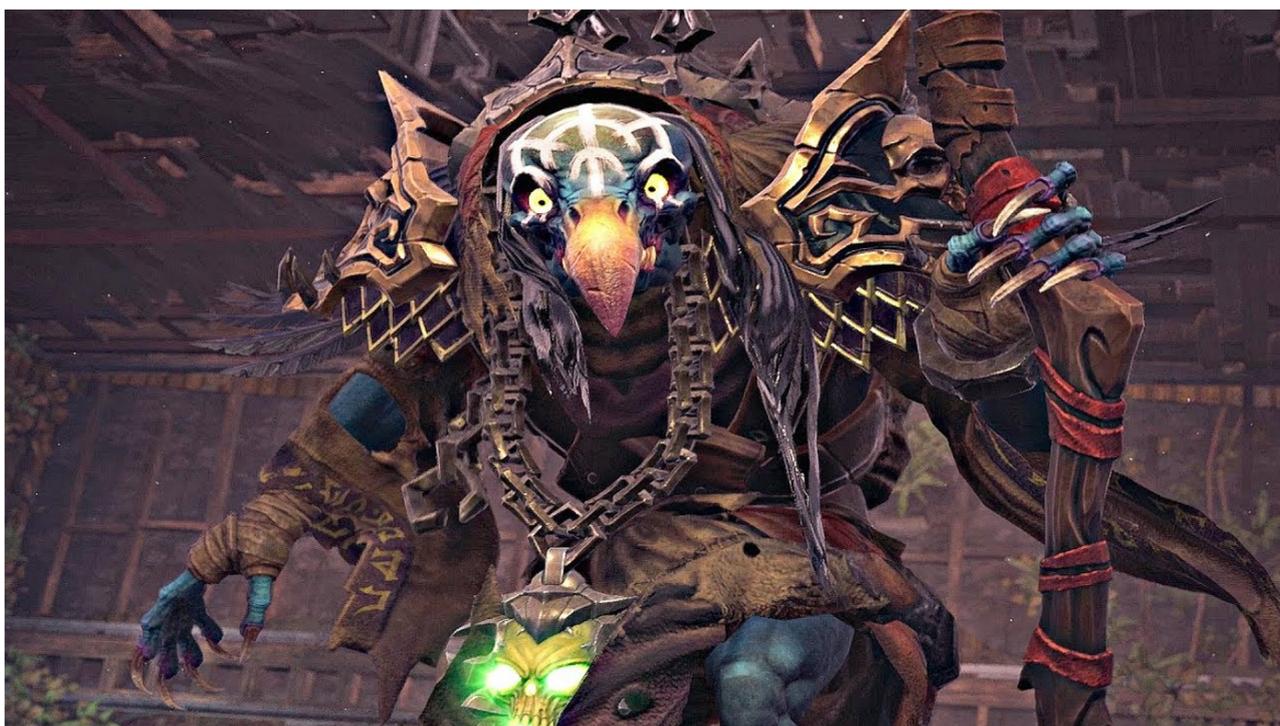

Image 4.1: In-game screenshot of Envy (in her first form).

During the short conversation between Fury and Envy, the latter claims to have a special negative attitude to humans, scorning Fury and saying that the mission the Charred Council gave her is actually about protecting 'apes crawling through dirt'. Envy mirrors Fury's disdain for the human species. Fury admits their shared view: 'Humanity is tragically overrated'.

It is clear that Envy is envious of humankind, although the reason remains unclear in this stage of the game. The possibility that Fury is (also) the one envying 'crawling apes' is equally unthinkable at this stage of the game, but will gain plausibility later on. After Fury wins her first boss-fight, she steals Envy's skull-medallion and uses it to imprison the crow-like vice. When walking away, Fury explains to the Watcher that the Seven Sins 'strike at Angels and Demons alike in their own selfish bids for power. Their hubris will lead me right to them.' Again, the Seven mirror Fury's attitude: if there is any creature overwhelmingly convinced of its own power it is Fury herself.

The second Sin Fury meets, is Wrath, although she does not slay him then and there (see image #4.2). His appearance is that of a huge demon, either wearing decorated armour with roaring faces and runes, or on fire. Every time, one of his opponents becomes more angry, Wrath grows in strength and violence, effectively making every adversary fight against itself.
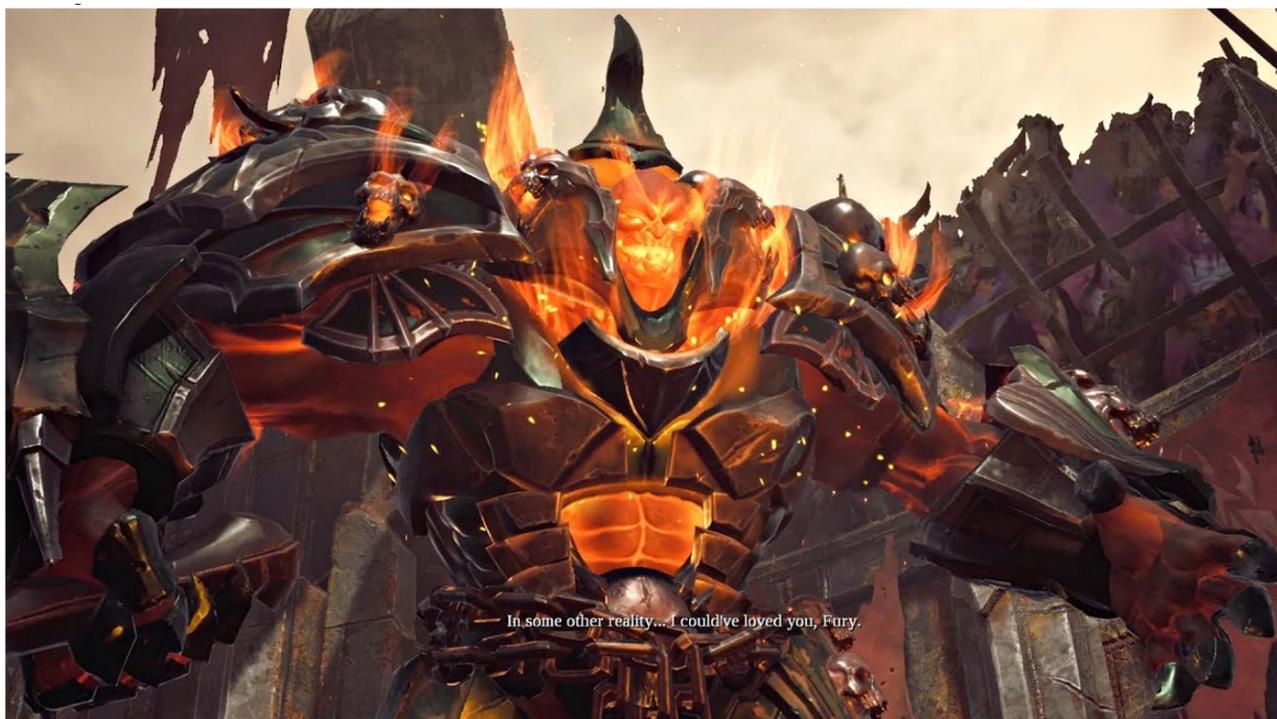

Image 4.2: In-game screenshot of Wrath.

Wrath scorns Fury as 'the dumb one' invoking a huge amount of anger in the Horseman. 'I'll tear you apart,' Fury screams at her adversary, just before she is confronted with her horse, the only creature she seems to genuinely love, mortally wounded by what appear to be angelic weapons. This induces incredible feelings of wrath and revenge inside Fury, but it also gives Wrath the opportunity to knock his opponent down. A definitive fight between the two will have to wait until much later in the game.

Fury re-awakens on another plane of existence, in the realm of the Lord of the Hollows (see image #4.3). Originally a demon chosen to be a member of the Charred Council, he is now an independent entity with the power to release both angels and demons from the cycle of life, that is, eternal death and rebirth in the Well of Souls. The former demon left the Council when he realized that it was too absorbed in managing the conflict between heaven and hell to maintain true balance in all of the universe. He is a towering, skeleton figure, wearing black and gold armour, equipped

with a large iron staff and carrying on his back a huge version of the Ark of the Covenant, including the two angels on top of it.

Image 4.3: In-game screenshot of the Lord of the Hollows (r), conversing with Fury (l).

Maybe this chest is connected to his name: when the Romans pillaged the Temple of Jerusalem, the supposed resting place of the real Ark, they reported they had found the Holy of Holies, the cultic centre of the Temple, an empty space (Gonen 2003:73). One could formulate that the Temple was 'hollow', because its Lord – the God of Israel – does not take on material form like the gods of the ancient Greeks and Romans, an essential part of the strict monotheism of Judaic (and Christian) traditions (Horbury 2004).

The Lord of the Hollows provides Fury with different abilities, opening up formerly unreachable parts of the world map, but he is also the one actively trying to induce moral reflection in Fury. After the showdown with Wrath, the Lord warns the furious Horseman:

> You are so quick to combat, your whip ready to crack. True righteousness requires true insight. If this was a test, you have failed. To resist a call to raw impulse is a different type of strength. (...) You must open your eyes to much more than that which gazes back at you from the mirror.

The Lord's words suggest an already hinted upon connection between the seven external Sins Fury has to fight versus the ones inside of her.

Avarice is one of the Sins least applicable to Fury's character, like Gluttony later on in the game. Avarice (see image #4.4) is depicted as a kind of giant goblin, who carries all his possessions in a huge sack upon his back. His legs and back are bent by the weight of the random items he carries around, among which are swords, angel wings, gold, and demon limbs. After the battle commences, Fury is transported back to the realm of the Lord of the Hollows who comments: 'Your battle with Avarice proved you value your mission above material possessions', although Fury actually never seemed to attach particular value to material things.

Image 4.4: In-game screenshot of Avarice.

This is different with the next sin, Sloth, depicted as a giant green insect with a blown-up belly full of black stings and red outgrowths (see image #4.5). In the first phase of the meeting with Fury, Sloth remains sitting on his filth-built throne, carried around by his minions. In the second phase, he engages Fury in person, but not before trying to tempt the Horseman in embracing a life without worries and responsibilities:

> My sole concern is comfort. (...) And as you can see, I have my many minions for that. It's all they live for. You should try it. I'll spot you a few slaves if you'll just relax. (…) Let them [the other six sins] stand or fall. It matters not to me. You understand, don't you, Horseman. The futility of it? Why not join me, take a load off and enjoy the nothingness? I bet you'd take to it quite easily. (…)

Sweetheart, I let slaves wipe my ass with the wings of angels while I enjoy a morning tea. Dignity is a myth, like the Balance you fight for. Aren't you exhausted?

Schaubild 1: Image 4.5: In-game screenshot of Sloth (r), conversing with Fury (l).

Initially, Fury seems to be tempted: she bends over backwards, letting herself fall into the arms of Sloth's minions, ready to wander off to the land of the careless. Interestingly enough, it is Sloth who identifies Fury's mission (and thus the game *Darksiders III*) as a modern version of a 'wee morality play': suggesting what the reader/player already knows: that Fury's adversaries are personalised vices battling in and over the soul of the individual.

Next on the list is Pride, an angelic being, clad in golden armour, whose face is covered with a mask (see image #4.6). All the Deadly Sins mock Fury, but Pride is especially apt at doing so, refusing initially to fight with Fury:

To think that this is the best the Council has to offer. Of the fabled four Horsemen, they send the lowliest, the most pathetic of all. (...) Perhaps when I am the only Sin left on this sad little rock, you will be worthy of an audience with me.

Image 4.6: In-game screenshot of Pride.

Since pride is unquestionably a very definitive character trait of Fury, the confrontation has to be a tough one, although it is postponed until later on in the game. First, Lust, has to be addressed (see image #4.7). Lust in the *Darksiders* series is not specifically the sexual or erotic kind of lust – as it is often thought of – but a broader and more general desire of such a magnitude that it consumes all other things in one's life. Lust appears as an androgynous warrior wearing high heels and lipstick.

Image: 4.7: In-game screenshot of Lust (r), conversing with Fury (l).

She tries to persuade Fury to switch sides using her smooth-talking abilities:

> Come now, Fury. I'm no barbarian like the others. No, we need not meet as enemies a second time. (...) I tell you, Queen of the Horsemen, powerful, armed with the Flame Hollow, a crossblade, your fabled whip.

Lust questions Fury's real motives: the only female Horseman is not so much interested in restoring the balance, but in out-ranking her three brothers.

> You don't even know why you fight, do you? Do you fight for your brothers? Oh, of course not. Your antagonism towards them is well-known. Do you seek to achieve some sort of balance? Oh, you never believed in the greater good until it suited you. No, no, no, what I see in your actions is a lust all your own, a lust for power and privilege and protection from the Nephilim's inevitable fall.

Then, to Fury's great surprise, her three brothers enter upon the stage. They expose the conspiracy between heaven and hell, and tell her that the Charred Council has decreed – for her 'unwavering loyalty to the cause' – she should be the leader of the Horsemen from now on. All three kneel before Fury, pledging their loyalty and submission to her. War even invokes the famous line from the

Lord's Prayer as he concludes: 'Set aside the past, sister. Today, we live in service to you. Thy will be done.'

For a moment Fury gives in to the lust for power and domination, but then she realizes that this cannot be possible ('you should not have made them kneel'). She defeats Lust as she did with the other prior deadly sins. Afterwards, Fury is – again – transported to the Lord of the Hollows, who shows surprise at her growing moral awareness:

> Curious, very curious indeed. With each new challenge, you show more depth. (...) You are coming into greater awareness of the flaws that kept you in chains.

Then Fury seems to relapse for a second, asking rhetorically: 'Flaws?' But when the Lord proposes to list them, she refuses humbly: 'No, thank you. I've seen enough recently to know they are many.' This is the first time in the game Fury is explicitly shown as really aware of her own vices.

As Avarice before, Gluttony is not a vice to which Fury is very prone. Gluttony is depicted as a massive octopus-like monstrosity with multiple mouths including long teeth (see image #4.8). Before it begins the fight with Fury, it spits out the head of Fury's horse. The Horseman is of course not amused with this reminder of her beloved horse's violent death, but she is not consumed with rage as with Wrath earlier on in the game.

Image 4.8: In-game screenshot of Gluttony.

After Gluttony, Fury faces Wrath for the second time. Because Fury is now in control of her emotions, Wrath cannot draw energy from her rage, making him vulnerable but certainly no easy foe. Wrath expresses an unanswered love-interest in Fury, suggesting the passionate connection between Fury and the anger raging inside of her:

> Do you know how beautiful you are? Especially when you're this angry? In some other reality, I could've loved you, Fury. (...) Where is your anger? How can you fight without anger?

Having defeated the other six deadly Sins, Fury returns to confront Pride for the second time. In character, Pride offers Fury a place beside her: 'We could be greatness'. The temptation however, is not working anymore, as Fury indicates when she refuses Pride's offer:

> At one time, that speech might've worked on me. But that was when I did not understand how ugly pride could be. Thank you for your 'generous offer', but if this world is to be fixed, neither of us will be the ones to do it.

With Pride defeated, Fury appears to have concluded her mission successfully. However, the Watcher, who was always close to her mistress, identifies herself as the real Envy, revealing the bird-like version of the beginning of the game to be an impersonation. The real Envy is a green four-armed female humanoid wearing imitations of the Four Horsemen's attire: Death's mask, War's purple cowl, Strife's armour and Fury's accessories (see image #4.9).

Image 4.9: In-game screenshot of Envy (in her second form).

Fury is defeated by the new Envy, who takes away her medallion in which all the six former slain Sins were held captive, thus combining the power of all seven. Eventually, and with the help of a human called Jones (see below), Fury returns to the Charred Council, which is in open battle with Envy. Although Envy seems to be stronger than the Council's volcanic attacks, Fury manages to defeat her in the end, Envy's last words being: 'No, it was mine. All of it was mine. I deserved it. I had it. Mine.'

Fury now refuses to yield to the Council's authority, since she finally understands the machinations of the Council in the pre-emptive triggering of the Apocalypse, hitting humanity most of all. During her travels , Fury's attitude against humankind has been radically changed. In the beginning she despised humans for their weakness and was envious of their supposed importance to the cosmic balance. Stimulated by a 'Maker' (a giant with ancient, arcane powers), she saves the lives of the humans she comes across when battling the Seven Deadly Sins.

Initially, Fury assisted the Makers in their efforts to save the last remnants of humankind out of selfish motives – the Maker promised her to improve her weaponry in exchange for her services – but later on she develops a special care for them. This is shown explicitly when Fury is defeated by Envy, thrown down to the earth, where she is rescued and cared for by a human called Jones. The first time she met Jones was in the beginning of the game, in the Maker's care. He was the only one brave enough to rebuke her for her racism.

After Fury called humanity 'a tribe of useless, hairless simians, whose greatest talent was inventing new ways to divide and destroy one another', Jones replies boldly and with contempt for death: 'What are you even fighting for? Tell me!' Fury is impressed with his bravery and lets him off the hook: 'I like this one.' Now, after Envy has defeated her, Fury is depressed and confesses her sins to Jones.

Fury: I have learned that I am weak.

Jones: Well, maybe now you finally understand how all humans feel.

Fury: I strayed from the path. I have been jealous. I have been wrathful. I have been lazy. Worse and more. All the things the Seven Sins stand for and I have paid dearly for it.

Jones: So in other words, you have lived.

Fury: Yes.

Jones: Good then. You are finally alive. And with life, there is always hope.

After her confessions, Fury not only successfully challenges Envy, but also the Charred Council. After defeating the first and repudiating the second, she returns to the Makers' home where humanity's remnants are fighting for their life against a heavy, hellish attack. Fury pledges herself to the cause of saving humankind, taking on the role of their 'protector'. After all, being human, she leaves the Makers' home through a portal to an unknown, but probably safe location. In the last instance, she sees Jones fighting against the hordes of hell, suddenly recognizing him as her third brother, the fourth Horseman, Strife. As said before, this is a clear hint to a possible fourth instalment of the *Darksiders* series, yet to be announced.

6 Synthesis

In the four case studies described above, the Seven Deadly Sins were depicted in multiple ways. In as far as the process of essential personalisation is concerned – the Sins are presented aesthetically in such a way that their appearance mirrors the sin they are representing – the developers of the four games choose different approaches.

In *Diablo III*, the Seven Deadly Sins, are clearly personalisations of their vicious essence, except for pride that seems to have been omitted, and for Zaboul, Lord of Wrath, who is only

mentioned in the game. Lust is depicted as a dangerous and sexually aggressive female demon (Cydaea), while gluttony is bursting out of its own skin (Ghom). Envy is a black demon, initially wanting to look like humans, but eventually trying to kill them (Vidian). Sloth is also fat, but also very naked (Bholem), while Greed is the incarnation of a gold-loving scrooge.

In *The Binding of Isaac*, the personalisation of the Seven Deadly Sins is only partially present. While the aesthetics of (Super) Sloth, (Super) Gluttony, (Super) Lust, and (Super/Ultra) Greed are more or less stereotypical - green-coloured and with bad teeth from neglecting oneself, fat-bellied, covered in wounds inflicted by STD's, and stigmatized by financial symbols respectively - the representation of (Super) Wrath as Bomberman is unclear in purpose and meaning. Although, one could argue that the bomb-placing hero of the series with the same name is representative of being overtly angry towards the world, aesthetically and narratologically Bomberman is – on the contrary – very calm and introvert.

Envy, Greed, Pride, and their Super and Ultra forms are more elaborate in their essential personalisation. Normal Pride, normal Envy, and Super Envy share references to different internet memes, associated with internet trolling and feelings of being alone, all quite applicable for a postmodern representation of these vices. Super Pride's reference to the LHBT-community is a tricky one, since it does not seem to represent the community as morally wrong, but those who criticize that community as such. Ultra Pride is perhaps the most interesting of the essential personalisations, in view of its references to Frankenstein and to both game developers as indulging in this vice, by virtue of the very creation of the game representing them as such.

In *Dante's Inferno*, the developers choose a different approach to the essential personalisations of the Seven Deadly Sins. Because of their focus on the explicit characeral personalisation (see below), the aesthetical depiction of the Seven Deadly Sins is more inspired by Dante's Poem and Bosch's paintings than by a creative rendering by the game's developers. Of course, the aesthetics of the inhabitants of the nine circles of hell are connected to the punishments they receive, which are – in their turn – connected to the crimes and sins they are punished for. The essential personalisation is therefore minimalized, at least in our postmodern eyes, since the cultural references Dante uses in his poems are usually lost to the uninitiated.

Darksiders III performs the best out of the four case studies as far as the essential personalisation is concerned. All Seven Deadly Sins physically (and often psychologically in this case) match the vice they represent. Envy as a looting crow; Wrath as a super-soldier feeding off Fury's anger; Avarice as a super-hoarder carrying his possessions as a physical burden; Sloth as a fat insect carried around by his minions offering Fury the same luxurious but empty life; Pride as a beautiful angel feeling superior to all other living things; Lust as a beautiful androgynous being

trying to seduce Fury by tapping into the Horseman's craving for power; and Gluttony as an all-consuming toothed monster.

The next level of personalisation of the seven deadly sins, is that of characteral personalisation. The Sins represent – aesthetically, rhetorically, and psychologically - the game protagonist's negative character traits. While in *Diablo*, this level of personalisation is virtually absent, in the other three games multiple examples of this characteral kind of personalisation can be found.

To start with *The Binding of Isaac*, all Sins – in their normal, super or ultra form – are explicit characteral representations of Isaac, both aesthetically and narratologically, but only in so far as it is from Isaac's self-perspective (that is why the x's are marked in table #2). Since Isaac understands himself being the reason for his parents' (violent) divorce, and strengthened in such thoughts by his naive interpretation of several Biblical stories he is so familiar with thanks to his religious upbringing, he thinks of himself as the very incarnation of all (deadly) sins. All the sins appear therefore – since the whole game is (naratolgically) the imagination of Isaac, who wants to conjure up a context in which he can cope with the violence of his parents and the consequential 'strange' behaviour of his mother – as variations of Isaac's physical shape.

In *Dante's Inferno*, the sins represented in the nine circles of hell are largely of a characteral kind, with the exception of Limbo, where no 'real' sinners are housed, and heresy, a sin not brought into connection with Dante's biography (already discussed above). The game makes special efforts to underline the idea that Dante, and his direct family, are all nothing but the very incarnation of the seven deadly sins.

Bella, Dante's mother, killed herself, because she was not able to resist Alighiero's negative character traits. Alighiero, Dante's father, was all too prone to lust, gluttony, greed, wrath, and violence. Examples of such behaviour are found primarily in the in-game flashback cutscenes in which Alighiero behaves gruesomely towards his farmers, is sexually interested in his future daughter-in-law, and indulges in orgy-like parties with his friends and peers.

Francesco, Beatrice's brother, is mostly of good character, but after he is executed because of Dante's brutal actions during the Crusade (for which he refuses to take responsibility), he also falls into violence (against Dante). Beatrice's moral status is somewhat dubious: on the one hand she is presented by the game as the incarnation of trust, faith, and virtue, on the other she chooses Lucifer's side out of grief for Dante's infidelity towards her and his Christian ideals. She actually represents *tristitia*, I would argue, one of the older deadly sins described by Evagrius Ponticus, Gregory the Great, John Cassian, and Thomas Aquinas, although both in Dante's poem and the game this sin is absent.

Dante, of course, is the paramount of the characteral personalisation of the seven deadly sins. He shares in his father's gluttony and greed, while he indulges in lust, wrath, fraud, and violence when on the Crusade. The game makes it perfectly clear that Dante, while being given a terrible example by his father, is nevertheless responsible for his own immoral actions.

Especially, his unfaithfulness towards Beatrice is a prominent feature of the game's narrative, since it triggered the death of Beatrice and Alighiero, Beatrice's despair and consequential union with Lucifer, and finally Dante's own death. Alighiero, Beatrice, and Dante are violently killed by an Assassin, the husband of the woman Dante slept with during the Crusade. Their deaths are on Dante's head too. The game sums all his faults up when Dante, in the circle of despair, kneels before Beatrice to acknowledge all his sins, trying to atone for them by asking forgiveness of Beatrice. Only then, he is forgiven.

Also *Darksiders III* makes quite an effort regarding characteral personalisation, just as it does with the essential one. With the exception of gluttony and avarice, Fury is highly susceptible to all deadly sins. She envies the power of her three brothers, and the trust the Charred Council has in them. She is prone to wrath and violence, by which she tries to cope with all her problems and missions until she reaches a dead end. She is tempted by sloth, although only for a moment. She lusts for power, to become the leader of the Horsemen, the most trusted lieutenant of the Council.

And Fury is proud to a level which clouds her mind, unleashes her emotions, and blinds her to the political machinations around her. Only when she realises, during her confession with Jones/Strife, how she herself embodied those sins, does she understand what it is 'to be human': not to be unmoved by the temptation of the sins, but to fight against them and to triumph over them, battered and bruised. Fury is thus the reminder of Evagrius' very early psychological-spiritual insight: that no one can hope completely avoiding temptation, but that one may hope to be liberated from its permanent control.

The concept of the seven deadly sins started – as far as the Christian tradition is concerned – with the notion of Evagrius' eight evil thoughts. Evagrius and the other desert fathers warned the monks who trusted them to direct their mind towards the heavens, and that no one can hope to avoid the temptations these evil thoughts offer to the human psyche. The faithful have to prepare themselves for the upcoming battle, to fight the evil ruler and his lieutenants, as *Diablo III* surprisingly echoes Gregory the Great's metaphor. The deadly sins are firmly incorporated into our culture, as they have been for centuries. They do not only represent themselves, but present a mirror for the protagonist in which he/she can acknowledge that this battle does not pass him/her by .

Who is strong enough to look into it?

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