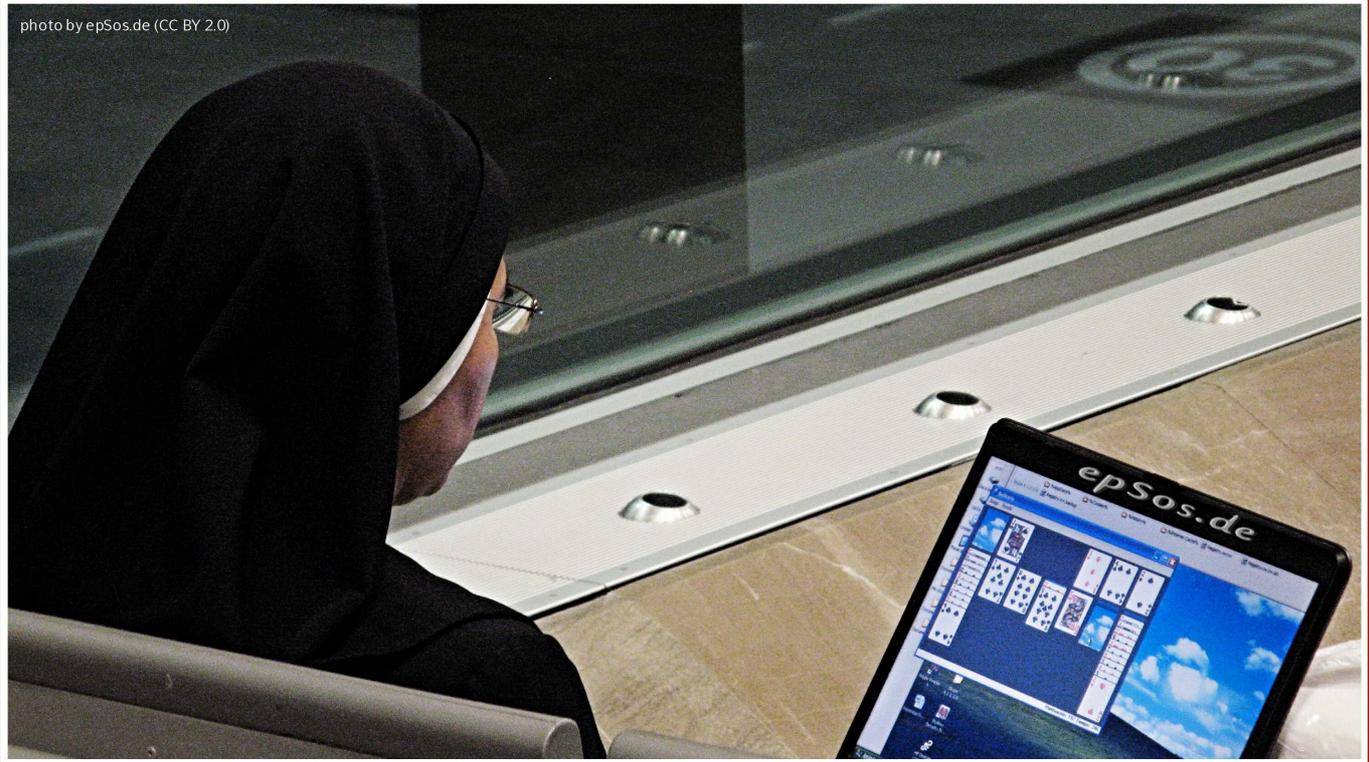




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Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, Jan Wysocki (Eds.)

Religion in Digital Games Reloaded

Immersion Into the Field

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“What would Jesus Play?”¹

Actor-Centered Perspectives on Gaming and Gamers

(In Lieu of an Introduction)

Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, Jan Wysocki

Abstract

Using the example of the US American Christian initiative *GameChurch* and their goals and activities in the context of digital games, the authors emphasize the significance of applying an actor-centered perspective on the research of digital gamers and the socio-cultural practice of ‘gaming’. While game-immanent topics might be the most obvious area of study, the focus on gamers and their in-game conduct offers exceptionally deep insights into the interconnections of in-game content with the religious disposition of the gamers. Thus, an actor-centered approach can generate important new data and perspectives for the analysis of contemporary (religious) meaning-making processes within individual and group-based pop-cultural contexts.

Keywords

Actor-centered approach, gaming culture, Christianity, *GameChurch*

1 Prelude: “Gaming is not a Crime, it’s a Culture”²

We believe that games are about more than just entertainment. They have something to say about the way we live, love, hurt, struggle, and overcome—and that is something worth talking about.³

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- 1 „What would Jesus play?“ is the title of an article on the *GameChurch.com* website (see: <http://gamechurch.com/what-would-jesus-play/>). It seems, they also have an answer to that question. See: „Ten 2014 games that Jesus loves (and why)“ (<http://gamechurch.com/ten-2014-games-jesus-loves/>) and *GameChurch* podcast episodes # 23 and # 24 (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/gamechurch/id900630285?mt=2>).
 - 2 Slogan on *GameChurch* t-shirts. See: <http://gamechurch.com/product/gaming-is-not-a-crime/>.
 - 3 <http://gamechurch.com/what-we-do/>.
-

We, the editors of this second special issue of *online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* on “Religion in Digital Games Reloaded – Immersion into the Field” wholeheartedly approve of this statement published on the website of *GameChurch* (if maybe from a different viewpoint). That is why we would like to introduce this issue in a slightly different way, making use of a research experience from recent fieldwork.

An abundance of people! Oh my! Where did these masses come from? We follow the crowd along the walkways between the stalls. – We have no choice anyway, it’s so packed. And so hot and noisy! It’s mid-August and we are in Cologne, attending the *Gamescom*, the world’s largest video games fair together with about 335.000 other visitors, more than 6.000 journalists, and about 700 exhibitors from about 90 countries.⁴ We are pursuing a quest. Quite literally.

The trade fair is traditionally used by game developers and publishers to show off their upcoming games, which offers gamers a chance to get a glimpse onto what is about to come, gamewise. And it is visited by all kinds of people, many of whom you wouldn’t expect in an environment which is often (and obviously wrongly) asserted to mainly attract the stereotypical ‘gamer’, presumably unwashed loners who spend the better of their time in front of the computer screen killing ... whatever – instead of being social in “real-life” (or so the prejudice, often enough disseminated by the media, goes). We see families, grandparents escorting their grandchildren. We see officials in suits going about their businesses. We see artistically and fancifully made up cosplayers, ‘incarnating’, ‘embodying’ ... in any case: ‘(re-)presenting’ their preferred and most admired game characters. We even now and then spot guys who seem to fit the above mentioned stereotype. But most of all we see ‘normal folk’. We can only guess the number of researchers among these crowds. But there certainly are. (There must be! Like us.) Looking at the visitors is part of our quest. We are scholars of religious studies and researchers of religion in digital games.

Suddenly we catch a glimpse of a well-known figure (at least for scholars of religion). On a huge poster we see a rather traditional depiction of Jesus – except that he holds a game pad in hands and wears a headset. Approaching the stall, we can also read the slogan that adorns the arrangement: “Jesus loves gamers. *GameChurch.com*”. We are thrilled. Naturally, we were expecting to find some kind of ‘religion’ at the *Gamescom*. But that was a real discovery!

Like our quest had succeeded!

It was epic!

But who are these guys? Is the whole stall a prank? Or is *Gamechurch* for real? Could it be? We approach the tall guy named Mikee Bridges, who is obviously the head of the small group, handing out merchandize. And ask him about what they are doing. It turns out, Bridges is a minister of *Epic Ministries*⁵ and founder of *GameChurch*. This is pretty much what he tells us:

Gamechurch does a lot of things, but our primary activity is going to videogame and nerd culture conventions across the world to tell Gamers about the love of Jesus. Typically, we purchase a 10 x 20

4 See press release on *Gamescom 2014* by the fair organizers: http://www.gamescom-cologne.com/en/gamescom/presse/presseinformationen/gc_pressinformationen.php?aktion=pfach&plid=kmpresse_gamescom_e&format=html&base=&tp=k3content&search=&pmid=kmeigen.kmpresse_1408435283&start=0&anzahl=10&channel=kmeigen&language=e&archiv=

5 epicworldmissions.org.

foot booth space in the convention expo hall and set up shop. Our booth consists of a giant banner of “gaming Jesus” (see below), two side banners, and two tables covered in free swag and our *Jesus, For the Win!* “gamer-bibles”. Nine times out of ten, people see our Jesus banner, get super confused, and walk up and ask us “what is this?”, or “are you guys for real?”. The response is universal: “we’re here to tell you that Jesus loves you, and we’ve got a bunch of free swag for you if you want.” By the time the convention is over, all or most of that swag (including the bibles) will be in the hands of the convention attendees. It’s almost painfully simple.⁶

The *GameChurch* definitely is a project we considered to be worth a second glance (and in the long run probably a thorough research) ... Because they are a great example for the importance and necessity of actor-centered research (a point we did not stretch so much yet⁷). Not that all the gamers, cosplayers, journalists, fair hosts and hostesses, ... were of no interest, because they are! – Just not as obviously. But we are jumping ahead of things.

By talking to the *GameChurch* representatives at the *Gamescom*, by looking at the *GameChurch* website and by collecting and analyzing the material available on the web, we have reconstructed the following facts: *GameChurch* in a nutshell.

2 *GameChurch* – “For the win!”

We wanted to bring a simple message of hope to the culture of gaming (...) We are all gamers and want to bring this message to our own world of nerd culture. (Mikee Bridges)⁸

According to the founder of *GameChurch*, Mikee Bridges, the multid denominational project that started working in 2010 wanted to fill a void in a huge field of popular culture, otherwise virtually deficient of churches and Christian organization.⁹ Even though they have become a cultural asset in many Euro-American and Asian countries and are constantly on the rise as a media industry, digital games and gamers are still subject to prejudice and suffer a bad reputation, partly caused by negative media attention. After a one-year research of the gaming industry at several trade fairs, *GameChurch* has set out to (according to their web site) “bridge the gap between the gospel and the gamer”¹⁰.

6 <http://gamechurch.com/what-we-do/>.

7 See: Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014.

8 <http://gamechurch.com/press/>.

9 For a detailed account of the *GameChurch* history, see: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/>

10 <http://gamechurch.com/ministry/>.

GameChurch has adopted the model of xxx.church¹¹, a non-profit Christian organization founded in 2002, mainly targeting the porn industry, performers and people struggling with pornography and porn addiction by attending porn conventions and handing out bibles featuring the slogan “Jesus loves porn stars” which has lead to considerable media attention. Ordained minister Mikee Bridges has a reputation of doing (as he himself puts it) “dirty ministry”¹². He has – in his own words “a heart for the outliers; the people on the fringes of society.”¹³

I like to go where others won't. I like to go to the forgotten places. When we think of mission fields, (...) we don't think of a music venue, a bar, or a restaurant as a mission field. (...) Imagine being in a noisy music venue and being asked about what your tattoos mean. For me it means I get to tell the story of Jesus. I love the spiritually broken and bruised people that the rest of Christianity has left behind. I love sharing a different story about Jesus than they probably have heard before, and bringing the Gospel to culture in relevant ways.¹⁴

Bridges was the owner of several music clubs in and around Portland, Oregon and is best known as founder of the *TOMfest*, an annual Christian music festival and venue for Christian worship, held between 1995 and 2009 in different locations within the US. It was famous for featuring a broad range of different music styles and bands especially of those genres usually underrepresented in mainstream festivals including hardcore, metal and folk. He was founder and front man of several bands and after moving back to his hometown in Ventura (Florida) he ran an entertainment venue including (among others) a video gaming facility. The center was later overtaken by *Epic Ministries*, of which Bridges was a board member and CEO and turned into the (currently closed down) “The Armory”¹⁵ (a 3000 square foot gaming facility). The *GameChurch* a Christian outreach program directly emanated from these activities¹⁶ and the staff quite obviously and consciously adapted the language and attitude of their target group:

We are all gamers and want to bring this message to our own world of nerd culture.

Accordingly, the gamer-bible¹⁷ features the trademark Jesus-as-gamer depiction above which the lettering “Jesus For the Win” is prominently placed. Below as a sort of description, one can read the following text:

11 <http://xxxchurch.com/>.

12 <http://gamechurch.com/press/#>.

13 <http://epicworldmissions.org/mikeebidges/>.

14 <http://epicworldmissions.org/mikeebidges/>.

15 <http://www.armoryventura.com/>.

16 <http://gamechurch.com/press/>.

17 The gamer's bible is available for download: <http://gamechurch.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/JFTW-Web.pdf>.

A little book about a guy named Jesus, his Guild, and his ultimate quest to save a land known as Earth.

What's behind it, is mainly the Gospel of John (NET Bible, New English Translation) and some additional game and nerd-culture related commentaries by *GameChurch* activists. According to the *GameChurch* website, the handing out of the bibles is the first (and often the only) contact with the visitors at trade fairs. In 2014 *GameChurch* activists have attended about 25 conventions worldwide and have (according to the *EpicMinistries* and *GameChurch* websites) given out more than 35.000 bibles¹⁸ (which sums up to 60.000 bibles altogether¹⁹), along with other merchandise.

Concerning the activities at trade fairs such as the *Gamescom* in Cologne, the goals of *GameChurch* is mainly to deliver the message that “Jesus loves you.”

We believe that those three words are the most powerful thing that a person can hear. You don't have to take a shower. You don't need to put on a nice shirt. He loves you even if you believe He doesn't.²⁰

While quite offensively taking on and playing with some of the most prominent prejudices against gamers, the *GameChurch* activists are aware of the limitations of their short encounters at the conventions. According to Mikee Bridges:

There certainly is more to the Gospel than “Jesus loves you.” But as far as my ministry goes, I feel I am not necessarily the guy who goes there—that is not my role. I am starting conversations with people and opening doors to the Gospel. (...) Telling people Jesus loves them is a way to take a step toward that longer more in-depth conversation that we need to have about the Gospel.²¹

The reactions to the *GameChurch*'s activism seem to be quite diverse and – not surprisingly – not always positive. However, the whole design patterns (of which the gamer-bible is just one example) has a professional appearance and a clear focus on the target group.

Apart from the so-called “mission trips” to trade fairs and other gaming events²², *GameChurch* offers information and educational resources for parents and Christian religious organizations²³ and several game-related content like articles on video games and gaming, game reviews²⁴, podcast

18 <http://gamechurch.com/ministry/missions/>.

19 <http://gamechurch.com/ministry/about/>.

20 <http://gamechurch.com/ministry/about/>.

21 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/>.

22 <http://gamechurch.com/ministry/missions/>.

23 <http://gamechurch.com/ministry/education/>.

24 <http://gamechurch.com/category/articles/>.

episodes²⁵, a (not very active) “Ministry Blog”²⁶ and several *Facebook* groups²⁷ for people to chat, among other one exclusively for women gamers²⁸.

GameChurch skillfully makes use of all contemporary Social Media and additionally uses *Twitter* and runs a *YouTube* channel. All resources merge on the website *GameChurch.com*²⁹ which serves as portal and main gateway. The target group is not primarily “Christian gamers” however, “*GameChurch* is a website for everyone looking for a different perspective of gaming and to ask any question about the culture of gaming, religion, gaming addiction or story”³⁰.

If you want legitimate interviews, reviews, and news from gamers, that is us. We want to do something that is really good and if you really want to, you can talk about spiritual things. We have a doorway. There is a button on our site that says *church*. If you click on that link you will be directed to the spiritual side of our forum, and you can go on there and ask us any spiritual questions or even argue with us and tell us that we are full of crap. If you are a Christian and you want to share your testimony or do Christian things, you can go over to this page and do that kind of stuff. But essentially the site is legit news and reviews for gamers by gamers. There is not much spiritual about it.³¹

However, browsing the titles of the articles and podcast episodes, it is evident that the *GameChurch* authors do follow a specific line of argument which emphasizes the religious point of view, when e.g. “Ten 2014 Games that Jesus Loves (and Why)”³² are being selected and discussed.

A big emphasis on the activities of the interdenominational organization seem to lie on in-game activities however, e.g. via the *GameChurch Steam* community the *GameChurch Teamspeak* server and other in-game resources. Additionally, *GameChurch* has partnered with *GodModeX*, a project that has set out “to reach gamers worldwide sharing God’s love and connecting local churches”³³ by “connecting with gamers and building friendships so we can share the love of Christ through the gaming platform/industry/world”³⁴.

25 <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/gamechurch/id900630285?mt=2>.

26 <http://gamechurch.com/ministry/blog/>.

27 E.g. “GameChurch City”, “The Chapel at GameChurch City”.

28 “The Salon at GameChurch City”.

29 <http://gamechurch.com/>.

30 <http://gamechurch.com/press/#>.

31 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/>.

32 <http://gamechurch.com/ten-2014-games-jesus-loves/>.

33 <http://godmodex.com/mission/>.

34 <http://godmodex.com/mission/>.

Gamechurch's GodmodeX project goes in-game with the intention of building relationships. This is NOT a gaming community for Christians to play together! This Group is ONLY for those who want to play with non-Christian's and be a part of the GodmodeX mission.³⁵

A mission that interconnects Christianity, popular culture, and the 'nerdiness' of the digital natives of the present time it seems ... An in-depth research in the context of *GameChurch* is imminent, to be sure!

3 *GameChurch* and Actor-Centered Research of Religion in Digital Games

Why is this (rather lengthy) record of *GameChurch* relevant for the study of religion in digital games and / or for the introduction of this issue?

There is a multitude of reasons, the most obvious probably being the fact, that the existence and the activities of *GameChurch* (even though not an obvious area of research in the field of religion and digital games at first glance) are a textbook example for game-related research topics which strengthen and emphasize the need for a complementary approach which considers and respects the interdependencies of digital games, gaming as practice, and culture (the latter to be understood in a narrow sense as in "gaming culture" as well as in a wider comprehensive sense).

We are gamers. We were gamers before we started this ministry, and we will be gamers after it. We play videogames. We do it every day in our LAN center. So we are not trying to be something that we are not. We don't have to try too hard, we like games so we play them and we talk about them. (Mikee Bridges, *GameChurch*)³⁶

Adopting a constructivist and discursive approach (e.g. according to Hall 2011), the term "culture" comprises a set of shared meanings as well as a set of social practices by means of which social actors act out, construct and remodel "culture" in the broadest sense. By doing so, "culture" is to be understood as a fluid field of discourse with fuzzy borders, incessantly negotiated by the different actors and underlying continuous change, nevertheless structuring as well as controlling all personal and public forms of social interaction (see Barker 2012). Applying this approach towards digital games research, the perspectives mentioned above can fruitfully be assigned to religion as

35 Description of the "GodModeX at GameChurch City" *Facebook* group:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/576945462432803/?fref=ts>.

36 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/>.

significant part of culture in general, and on digital games within the cultural / religious spheres in particular.

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

Thus, religion can be regarded as one (of many other) factor(s) which shape(s) the processes of construction and reception of digital games (in a narrow sense) and the discourses on and about the games / the gamers as well as their impacts and repercussions on culture / religion to the point of its respective actors (in a wider and complementary sense). In order to acknowledge and adequately cover both area of discourse, we have proposed a twofold approach towards digital games (see: Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014), namely:

- the game-immanent approach, comprising of the research of narratives, the aesthetics and the game rules and mechanics as well as
- the actor-centered approach, focusing on the dimensions of the game designers and players.

Even though from a Cultural / Religious Studies perspective, a researcher needs to draw from a complementary mix of game immanent as well as actor-centered methods to live up to the complex discursive processes of reception and construction, the game-immanent approach might in most cases be the most evident course of action (depending on the focus of research). In contrast, the huge field of possible topics offered by an actor-centered research focus might often be less obvious. – However, the latter approach might nonetheless produce highly useful results especially in the context of socially relevant themes and topics (where the actual role of digital games unlike in the case of the example at hand might even be somewhat blurred and less conspicuous). Therefore an actor-centered approach towards games, gaming and gamers is a tool that allows the researcher to dive deep into an area often coined as “gaming culture” – but also beyond and above. Among others and on a larger scale, it allows for conclusions and predications in the research field of mediating religions as well as interdependencies of the history of media / mediatization and the history of religion.

In this context, the term “gaming culture” is not to be mistaken as describing a detached part of “culture” in general (or even worse; a “sub-culture” possibly in a pejorative sense), but as an organic part of everyday life. Researchers must therefore choose their research design carefully:

We must be reflexive and critical of both our object of study and our methodologies. Defining gaming culture as something distinct and separate from a constructed mainstream culture encourages us to

only study those who identify as gamers, rather than more dispersed gaming. That is, we should look at video games in culture rather than games as culture (Shaw 2010: 416).

As such, *GameChurch* is an ideal type example which amalgamates both perspectives: We can find an affirmative connotation of the actor-sided perception of “games as culture” due to the straightforward focus and on and commitment to gamers on one hand. However, in the active ‘matchmaking’ of digital games and contemporary Christian culture the comprehensive notion of “games in culture” is also clearly visible. Due to the fact, that on the *GameChurch* website a multitude of game-related reviews, podcasts and discussions are visible, we can merge a game-related approach of the games they talk about and correlate the findings with an analysis of the perspectives on in-game content discussed by *GameChurch* activists and members alike.

Thus *GameChurch* is a contemporary game-related religious initiative, tackling games as well as gamers in a broad perspective and at the same time making them a means and tool of socializing, communicating and even religious mission. As Mikee Bridges puts it:

These people we are ministering to will not go to your church. So the question for us is this: Are you going to forget about them or are you going to get involved with what they do?³⁷

The focus on games seems to be a conscious and strategic decision on many levels and can serve as a textbook example for the multi-sided interconnectivities of digital games and religion. According to the *GameChurch* website:

We don’t just want to be another Christian group telling Gamers about Jesus. You see, we are gamers ourselves, and we have just as much of a passion and love of videogames as any gamer, and we want to be a voice in the conversation about games. We believe that games are about more than just entertainment. They have something to say about the way we live, love, hurt, struggle, and overcome—and that is something worth talking about. (<http://gamechurch.com/what-we-do/>)

However, at a first glance, *GameChurch* seems to bear great resemblance to other Christian gaming communities such as e.g. *Christ Centered Gamer*³⁸, *Everyday Gamers*³⁹, *Christian Gamers Online*⁴⁰ or *3 Day Respawn*⁴¹ some of which which have already existed for many years (e.g. Schut 2013). Some of those sites are quite explicit and straightforward about their Christian commitment (Luft

37 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/>.

38 <https://www.christcenteredgamer.com/>.

39 <http://everydaygamers.com/>.

40 <http://christiangamers.net/cms/>.

41 <http://www.3dayrespawn.com/>.

2014: 154), others are somewhat more muted and toned down in communicating their religious affiliation. Additionally, many MMOs feature quite a number of Christian clans or guilds, which are listed on sites like *The Christian Gamer Alliance*⁴² or *The Christian gamers' Guild*⁴³.

The open commitment to Christian mission as one of the goals and as self-conception of *GameChurch* stands out from most other Christian gamer communities however. According to *GameChurch's* representatives as well as its website's mission statement, the preachy attitude of many Christian-centered gaming sites⁴⁴ as well as the reluctant and mainly pejorative stance of most Christian institutions towards digital games are both criticized, discussed and operationalized:

With anything that is popular, the church will say it's bad for a while and then turn around and jump on the bandwagon once we figure out that it isn't actually sinful. (...) I don't think it will be very long before the church catches on that if we don't get into this vehicle, it's going to leave without us. (Mikee Bridges, *GameChurch*)⁴⁵

Consequently, *GameChurch* defines their mission as follows:

It is a call that can seem daunting, but God has positioned and empowered us to effectively preach the gospel to the gaming community. We know that gamers don't just need *fewer* videogames, they need *more* of Jesus. Our heart for gamers is that they would know that Jesus is able to meet their deepest needs. (Brian Buffon, *GameChurch*)⁴⁶

As the material presented above clearly shows, the discourses by and about the *GameChurch* represent a field within the context of "gaming culture" which can be described and analyzed by applying actor-centered focal points, e.g. by posing the following questions:

- What exactly is the self-conception of *GameChurch* members and what role does religion / Christianity actually play in the context of everyday discourse, gaming practice and the reception of in-game content?

42 <http://www.cgalliance.org/forums/>.

43 <http://www.christian-gamers-guild.org/>.

44 "A lot of 'Christian' gaming sites are morality police. I don't want to read another Christian game review of a movie or a videogame. What gamers want to know is whether a game is good or not. We are big boys. We can take care of our accountability—what we should and shouldn't be watching. On the Web site, we just write about videogames. There are a lot of Christian Web sites out there with Christian guilds and teams. It's like going to church, you meet other like-minded gamers. That is cool but that is not what we are trying to do" (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/>).

45 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2011/10/videogames-bibles-and-beer-an-interview-with-game-church/>.

46 <http://gamechurch.com/ministry/about/>.

- How do Christianity and certain Christian points of view affect and shape the line of arguments in articles, podcast episodes and other material featured on the *GameChurch's* website which discusses and reflects in-game content?
- How do religious identity construction and community building work out, especially in the context and by means of *GameChurch's* different media platforms?
- What role does the selection of games played by the members and the discussions about those games play as indicator for their religious disposition(s)?
- What are the strategies which *GameChurch* applies in order to open up the new and – from the viewpoint of Christian mission – still mainly untouched area of “gaming culture”?
- And in a broader and more comprehensive perspective: Taking the example of *GameChurch*, how do religious ideas and practices change when transferred from a “classical” into a new context, both in regard to media, to mediatized transmission as well as the popular / nerd culture?
- Can *GameChurch's* approach be put in the larger context of postmodern theology? If so, can the strands of discourse and the processes of reception be traced and originated to certain authors and church affiliations? And is theology also reflected by the reception of in-game content? If so how is theology and in-game content being interconnected and communicated?

Further and based on the specific questions(s) asked, game-immanent perspectives and research foci can (and should!) be added to complement and contextualize the findings, e.g. by actually playing and analyzing the games – their narratives, aesthetics, rules and mechanics – referred to by the players!

By presenting the material on *GameChurch* as showcase example we stumbled upon by accident, we would like to make a case for an emphasis and enhancement of actor-centered perspectives in the field of religion in digital games. We might be repeating ourselves, but

[D]ealing with religion and ‘games in culture’ means dealing with complex processes of interaction, exchange, adaption and transformation of cultural and religious practices and beliefs. It is left to researchers of religion and digital games to identify these processes and place them into the broader context of contemporary reception, negotiation and expression of individual religious identity. (Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014: 40)

Let's go for it!

4 Religion in Digital Games. Immersion into the Field

The research of religion(s) in digital games is still brand new. Therefore, all researchers immersing themselves into this fascinating field are pioneers of sorts. Luckily, more and more research is being done, works are being published, conferences⁴⁷ are being held, and journals⁴⁸ are being launched, altogether slowly but surely adding to the consolidation of the research field in the contexts of serious academia. Therefore, we are very proud to present the second special issue of *online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* on the topic of “Religion in Digital Games Reloaded. Immersion into the Field”. To be honest – we weren’t planning this issue nor was there any particular Call for Papers! Only after so many authors sent in their high-quality papers dealing with topics of digital games and gaming, the idea for a sequel was born. And here it is!

While the first special issue⁴⁹ (which was launched nearly exactly one year ago) was dedicated to reveal the huge range of possible methodical and theoretical approaches to the field (not all of which are necessarily compatible with the basic self-conception of cultural studies as academic discipline), the current issue’s focus is on the interconnectivities and interplays of game-immanent content with actor-centered receptions and responses – the implications and consequences of which are being discussed in the papers at hand.

Frank G. Bosman and **Marcel Poorthuis**’ contribution “*The Place of Man in the Ontological and Cosmological Dualism of the Diablo, Darksiders and Devil May Cry Game Series*” shows the processes of reception of certain biblical topics and narratives within the context of digital games and offers approaches towards pop-cultural mediations of the theodicy problem.

The adaption of literary narratives (but of a completely different sort) is also the subject of **Christoph Duret**’s paper. In “*Living the Phantasm of Demediation. The Priest-Kings and the Technology Prohibition in the Gorean Role-playing Games*” the author discusses, with an emphasis on the gaming practice, the adaptation of the religiously-loaded science fiction novels *The Chronicles of Gor* (by John Norman, 1966-) as online role-playing game within the virtual 3D environment *Second Life*.

Stephen Jacobs deals with the *Left Behind* multiverse. In “*Simulating the Apocalypse Theology and Structure of the Left Behind Games*” he conducts a structural analysis of the game and compares the findings with the book series and the underlying theology.

47 E.g. “Playing God” by the Dutch academic research group ‘Moving Visions’ (which focuses on the interconnections of film, religion and theology) in October 2014.

48 E.g. in late December 2014 the online journal “Gamevironments” (<http://www.gameenvironments.org/>) which is dedicated to the publication of papers on (digital?) gaming and religion.

49 Simone Heidbrink and Tobias Knoll (eds), *Religion in Digital Games. Multiperspective and Interdisciplinary Approaches. Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* Vol. 5 (2014), available: <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/religions/issue/view/1449>.

Marley-Vincent Lindseys paper “*The Politics of Pokémon Socialized Gaming, Religious Themes and the Construction of Communal Narratives*” focuses on the brand new and highly topical field of “Twitch Plays Pokémon”. In an actor-centered perspective he offers a first-hand description of the field and the multitude of religious discourses in different media contexts.

Demons in videogames is the topic of **Jonathon O’Donnells** contribution. “*A Digital Devil’s Saga. Representation(s) of the Demon in Recent Videogames*” describes the reception of demonic themes from religious and secular sources and discusses their refiguration and reinterpretation as polyvalent agents in the context of digital games.

The game *Morrowind* (Bethesda 2002) combines a ‘prophetic’ narrative with free forms of gameplay. In his paper “*Prophecy, Pre-destination, and Free-form Gameplay. The Nerevarine Prophecy in Bethesda’s ‘Morrowind’*” **Angus Slater** discusses the pluralisation of the ways in which the game’s prophetic narrative can be incorporated into individual gameplay and highlights the intersecting discourses of the theological concept with popular culture.

Our own paper “*‘Venturing into the Unknown’(?) Method(ological) Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming*” (**Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki**) focuses on the methodical and methodological implications of game-immanent and actor-centered research in the field of religions in digital games, applying the MOBA *Smite* (Hi-Rez 2014) as case study.

The second section of this issue features papers held at the conference “Playing God” which was organized by the Dutch academic media research group ‘Moving Visions’ under the leadership of Frank Bosman in October 2014. After the short introduction “*‘Playing God’. On God & Game*” by **Frank Bosman**, three conference papers are being presented: “*Beyond Belief. Playing with Pagan Spirituality in World of Warcraft*” by **Stef Aupers & Julian Schaap**, “*‘Are those the only two solutions?’ Dealing With Choice, Agency and Religion in Digital Games*” by **Tobias Knoll** and “*Revisiting Gabriel Knight. Troubled hero and unknowing servant of the King of Kings*” by **Connie Veugen**.

Two reviews of recent books dealing with religion in digital games complete the issue: Simone Heidbrink and Tobias Knoll discuss Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieves compilation *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (2014) in an extensive review, Jan Wysocki has read *Religion in Play: Games, Rituals, and Virtual Worlds* (2012), edited by Philippe Bornet and Maya Burger.

We, the editors of this special issue, hope you enjoy reading this edition. We are always happy to constructively discuss any topic related to our research and related to ‘religion(s) and/in digital media’ in general. Please contact us anytime! And – please like us on Facebook!⁵⁰ :)

50 <https://www.facebook.com/onlinehjrj>.

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Biographies

SIMONE HEIDBRINK is a junior researcher at the Institute of Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany. After majoring in Religious and Japanese Studies at the Universities of Heidelberg and Nara (Japan), she received her Master's degree in 2005. Simone is now about to finish her doctoral thesis on a Christian liturgical reform movement called „Emerging Church“ which relies heavily on Web 2.0 Internet applications to distribute their views on Christianity, theology, and the role of rituals. From 2005 to 2011 she was a member of the Collaborative Research Center 619, „Ritual Dynamics“ in the context of which she conducted also research on the virtual 3D environment Second Life. Simone's research focus is Rituals Studies, religion in museum contexts, (digital) Media Studies, the methods and theories of internet research as well as religion in digital games and gaming. With her colleague Carina Brankovic she has curated an exhibition on Religious Studies in cooperation with the University Museum Heidelberg which is currently on display. Together with Tobias Knoll and Jan Wysocki she is also planning a research project on Religious Studies and digital games and is preparing a talk and a panel discussion on religion in digital games at the *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag* (German Evangelical Church assembly), a meeting of about 200.000 lay members and clergy of the protestant church in Germany, also attended by politicians, artists and journalists.

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Nephilim: The Children of Lilith

The Place of Man in the Ontological and Cosmological Dualism of the *Diablo*, *Darksiders* and *Devil May Cry* Game Series

Frank G. Bosman & Marcel Poorthuis

Abstract

Lilith and the Nephilim are not uncommon characters in modern day pop culture at large and in video games culture specifically. In three video games, the *Diablo* series (three games, between 1996-2012), the *Darksiders* series (two games, in 2010 and 2012) and the *Devil May Cry* series (2001-2013, especially in the so called ‘reboot’ of 2013), Lilith and the Nephilim are both named and (in different ways) connected to each other within the greater narrative of the games. In this article I want to describe the three game narratives in which the Nephilim and Lilith have their place, and in what way those three narratives are connected to each other.

The central question of this article is: what have the narratives of *Diablo*, *Darksiders* and *DmC* in common regarding the Nephilim and Lilith, and what theological implications follow from this common ground? I will argue that the combination of Lilith and Nephilim in these three game narratives is key for creating a mix of ontological and cosmological dualism in relation to a more complex anthropological ‘holism’. The three narratives provide a more or less psychologically convenient explanation for the existence of evil in the world, and at the same time take into account the experience that the human beings we encounter in our everyday life appear to us as incorporating both good and bad deeds, intentions, inclinations, traits and thoughts.

Keywords

dualism, holism, videogames, Nephilim, Lilith

1 Introduction

When Death, one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, confronts the demon Lilith in his battle to free his brother War from an unjust verdict, the following dialogue unfolds. Death: “You can come out now, Lilith!” - Lilith: “Do you blame me for hiding? You are Death. Where you ride no one is safe. Not even your mother.” - Death: “You are not my mother!” - Lilith: “Did I not create Absalom, mingling dust of angels and demons? And from that first Nephilim, were not the rest formed? They were brothers to the horsemen. Yet, when the riders slaughtered the Nephilim, only you showed remorse. (...)” - Death: “You, mother, must help me stop him [Absalom].”¹

Without venturing further into the great narrative of the *Darksiders* series (1996-2012) here, we may nonetheless assert that the most intriguing part of this little dialogue is the connection that it makes between the legendary Nephilim (from Genesis 6:1-4) and the equally legendary ‘night demon’ Lilith (from Isaiah 34:14). In *Darksiders*, Lilith formed the Nephilim ‘from the dust of angels and demons’, allowing her to claim the title of ‘mother’ of her ‘children’. Death, himself one of the Nephilim, is none too pleased with his ‘mother’, nor with the other Nephilim she created. The Nephilim, under the command of their ‘first born’ Absalom, ransack multiple planes of existence in the *Darksiders* universe, including the plane which was created especially for humankind, the mythical Garden of Eden. Humankind was given Earth to live on safely until the End War only after both Eden and the Nephilim (with the exception of the Four Horsemen) had been destroyed.

Lilith is not an uncommon character in modern video games. She appears for example as a succubus in the *Darkstalkers* series (1994-2013), as a siren in the *Borderlands* series (2009-2012) and as an enemy specialized in killing her victims in their sleep in the *Final Fantasy* series (1987-2014). She appears even more frequently beyond the field of video games. The Nephilim, too, occur regularly in video games. In *El Shaddai. Ascension of the Metatron* (2011) the Nephilim are human-like creatures who occupy the Tower of Babel. In *Champions Online* (2009) the Nephilim are half-angel, half-demon enemies, headed by Therakiel. And in the *Assassin’s Creed* series (2007-2014), the Nephilim are described as ‘the Ones Who Came Before’ and as the creators of the Apple of Eden. Both characters are frequently accompanied by (other) angels and demons with names such as Metatron, Lucifer, Therakiel and Abaddon, all of which stem from Judeo-Christian mythology and folklore.

In three cases, the *Diablo* series (three games, between 1996-2012), the *Darksiders* series (two games, in 2010 and 2012) and the *Devil May Cry* series (2001-2013, especially in the 2013 ‘reboot’), Lilith and the Nephilim are mentioned and connected to each other in different ways within the greater narrative of the games. In this article we want to describe the three game

1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDOUeZhz0yg>, accessed 05-26-14.

narratives in which Lilith and the Nephilim play a role, and point out what these narratives have in common. Because both Lilith and the Nephilim arise from Judeo-Christian tradition, we will also give a short overview of the *status questionis* concerning them.

The central question of this article is the following: what common features do the narratives of *Diablo*, *Darksiders* and *DmC* have with regard to Lilith and the Nephilim, and what theological implications follow from these commonalities? We will argue that the combination of Lilith and the Nephilim in these three game narratives is key to the creation of a mix of ontological and cosmological dualism that stands in relation to a more complex anthropological ‘holism’. The three narratives provide a more or less psychologically convenient explanation for the existence of evil in the world, and at the same time take into account the experience that the human beings we encounter in everyday life appear to us as doing both good and bad deeds and incorporating both good and bad intentions, inclinations, traits and thoughts.

2 Lilith and ‘her’ Nephilim: three games

The *Diablo* series (1996-2012) is a single-player, isometric, semi-free, single-ending dungeon crawler with hack ‘n’ slash and role-playing elements that is set in a fantasy world and can be played on multiple platforms (PC, PlayStation 2). The *Darksiders* series (2010 and 2012) is a single-player, third-person, semi-free, single-ending action game with puzzle, dungeon crawling, acrobatics and role-playing elements that is set in a fantasy world and can be played on multiple platforms (PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3). *DMC: Devil May Cry* (2013) is a single-player, third-person, linear, single-ending action game with acrobatics and hack ‘n’ slash elements that is set in a contemporary world and can be played on multiple platforms (PC, Xbox, PlayStation 3). All games were published relatively recently (1996-2013), especially when the latest installments of the series are taken into account (2012-2013). All games feature thus a single player and a single ending. All games have been published for multiple platforms. The names ‘Nephilim’ and ‘Lilith’ are not spelled identically in all three game series, but the spelling has been harmonized in this article for reasons of clarity.

2.1 Diablo series: Inarius and Lilith

The mythology of the game lore in *Diablo* is the most elaborate of the three series and describes the creation of the universe in great detail. *Diablo*’s game lore is backed up by a much larger fictional

universe created by novelist Knaak (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2006, 2007a, 2007b), who also devised the universes of Blizzard's other games *Warcraft* and *Starcraft*.

Diablo's creational myth begins with a single perfect pearl in which the supreme godhead Anu resides. Anu is the sum of all things, of good and evil and light and dark. Anu then reflects upon himself, and, seeking to be totally pure and perfect, casts from himself all that is evil. The evil or 'dissonance' that is cast out becomes Tathamet, the Prime Evil. Anu and Tathamet fight each other innumerable times inside the pearl, ultimately igniting an explosion of light and matter that brings forth the universe, while killing the two gods. After his death, Anu passes on to a benevolent place beyond the universe (thus suggesting the possibility that there is a plane of existence higher than Anu himself).

The name Anu is probably derived from the Sumerian and Babylonian sky-god (Becking & Van der Horst 1999, p. 388).² 'Tathamet' is probably derived from Tiamat, the Babylonian goddess of the ocean, who was killed by the sky-god Marduk, causing heaven and earth to be formed from his body parts (DDD 867-9). The eternal struggle between Anu and Tathamet closely resembles that between Ahura Mazda and his twin brother Angra Mainyu from Zoroastrian mythology (Boyce 1975, p. 192-228).

The Eye of Anu, known as the Worldstone, remains as the centre of creation and as the foundation of everything. Anu's spine cools down and forms the Crystal Arch, the birthplace of the High Heavens and its occupants, the angels. After his destruction, the dragon-shaped Tathamet gives birth to the Seven Great Evils, each formed out of one of his seven dragon heads. Tathamet's body becomes the foundation of the Burning Hells, the dwelling place of devils and demons. Tathamet's dragon form, in combination with his association with the Babylonian goddess of the ocean, resembles the image of the 'first beast' of Revelation 13:1. The three prime evils are called Mephisto (after Goethe's famous villain), Diablo ('devil' in Spanish) and Baal, the iconic idol of the Old Testament (DDD 154-6). The four lesser evils are Andariel, Duriel (which, ironically, means 'the Lord is my house'), Belial (DDD 169-171) and Azmodan (Tobit 6:13; DDD 106-8). The archangels, gathered in the Angiris Council, represent the five divine aspects of Anu: Auriel (Hope), Imprius (Valour), Itherael (Fate), Malthael (Wisdom) and Tyrael (Justice).

The forces of the High Heavens and the demons of the Burning Hells have been caught up in a millennia-old battle called 'the Great Conflict' over possession of the Worldstone. The Worldstone changes hands a number of times, until the angel Inarius and the she-demon Lilith, weary of the ongoing battle, steal it to create a secret realm of existence called Sanctuary. Inarius and Lilith (and other angels and demons that have fled) become lovers, and from their love the Nephilim (or 'Nephalem' as it is spelled in the *Diablo* series) are born.

2 Henceforth abbreviated as: DDD.

And, alas, we are of our fathers and mothers, alike and yet opposite, one decay and the other light. Indeed, the union of angel and demon created a third essence. And we are those children. We are the nephalem. We exist as half angel and half demon, yet fully a new entity. And because of our lineage, they loved us. And because of our difference, they feared us. Within the trembling balance between love and fear is the relation of us to our fathers and mothers. (Dille 2011)

When the parents of the first generation of Nephilim see that the Nephilim are so much more powerful than either angels or demons, they fear that their offspring will alert the High Heavens and the Burning Hells. Their unholy unions would be considered blasphemous and they would be destroyed when detected. Some of the renegades call for the Nephilim to be destroyed, while others believe they should be spared. Lilith is driven mad by the threat of her children's extinction and she murders all of her fellow renegades except Inarius. Eventually Inarius sends his lover to the Void and attunes the Worldstone so that its power over the Nephilim will diminish over time, and therefore slowly diminishing the supernatural powers of the Nephilim.

The Nephilim thus become weaker with every generation, eventually turning into humankind, which colonizes Sanctuary and slowly forgets its glorious past. Humans possess the ability to choose between good and evil, an ability that causes many angels and demons to fear them. Both angels and demons try to lure humankind into their domain (known as the 'Sin Wars'), using two different forms of religion: the Cult of the Triune (demons) and the Cathedral of Light (Angels). Eventually a truce is established between Heaven and Hell, allowing humans to choose for themselves.

The 'Cult of the Triune' is most likely a (hostile) reference to the Christian dogma of the Triune God, suggesting that Christianity is actually a false religion in the service of the dark powers of this universe.

2.2 *Darksiders* serie: the Four Horsemen

The *Darksiders* universe is not as elaborate as the *Diablo* universe (Marmell 2012). There is a universal belief in the existence of the unknown and unnamed Creator. The Creator is believed to have made the three 'kingdoms' that exist in the universe: Heaven, Hell and Earth. The Creator is constantly seeking to find and establish balance in the universe, but to no avail. He is never seen or heard from in the series, and some characters (such as Absalom) claim that the Creator has left the universe out of sadness and frustration.

Amidst the ongoing battle between the forces of Heaven and Hell, a mysterious force rises from the chaos: the Charred Council. This Council fulfils a kind of mediating role and was formed (by someone unknown, perhaps the Creator himself) to keep the balance of the universe. Both

realms seem to submit to the Council's verdicts. The Council itself is depicted as consisting of three demonically shaped, talking volcanoes or fire pits. While they are referred to as a single entity (singular form), each of the three councillors has his own particular character: the first is harsh and accusatory, the second questions everything and the third is slow and wise.

When a third kingdom arises from the ashes of eternal chaos – the kingdom of man (again it is not explained at whose behest) – the Charred Council – certain that humans will be very significant in maintaining the cosmic balance – gives to humankind the world of Eden. The Council proclaims that humankind must be left alone by the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of hell. Only when humankind will have become strong enough, will the End War (or Apocalypse) start, setting the cosmic balance once and for all. The beginning of the End War is bound with seven seals (a reference to the seals of the Biblical book of Revelation).

But humankind does not actually receive Eden, as the Council had proclaimed. Created from the mixed dust of angels and demons, the she-demon Lilith creates a new race, the Nephilim, to offer to her devilish master Lucifer, securing for him an enormously powerful fighting force. Lucifer ('light carrier') is traditionally the leader of the 'Fallen Angels' (DDD 246). The Nephilim soon run out of control and ransack multiple planes of existence, killing all of the inhabitants. When the Nephilim, under the command of their first born Absalom (DDD 230), hear that humankind is being given a realm of its own, they become jealous because no 'home' is being provided for them. The angels defend Eden, but defeat is imminent.

The Charred Council then strikes a deal with four of the Nephilim who are weary of the ongoing slaughter and disruption of the cosmic balance. In exchange for incredible power these four Nephilim, known from this point on as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – War, Strife, Fury and Death – execute all of their kin, thus saving humanity. Traditionally the nameless horsemen of Revelation 6:1-8 have been identified with conquest, war, famine and death. Strife and Fury are not commonly used to describe two of them. At the end of the game, Death, the most powerful of the Four Horsemen, kills Absalom, the leader of the Nephilim. The Four Horsemen now become a part of the seven seals with which the Charred Council has bound the unleashing of the End War.

2.3 *Devil May Cry*: Sparda and Lilith

The mythology of *Devil May Cry* series is not derived from any novels. All clues concerning narrativity are in-game, and the game includes more than two and a half hours of cinematography. The latest installment of the *Devil May Cry* series (2001-2013), *DmC: Devil May Cry* (2013), is in fact what is called a 'reboot' of the series as a whole. Capcom gave Ninja Theory the order for the

reboot, thus switching from an Oriental to a Western context of narrativity. For present purposes we will examine the 2013 reboot.

The game narrative revolves around two Nephilim, the twin brothers Dante and Vergil (both references to Dante's famous work, the *Divine Comedy*). Later on in the game the wise Vergil (spelled 'Virgil' in the game) explains the story of their common origin to his brother Dante, who does not know it. Vergil and Dante were born from an 'unnatural' union between the demon Sparda (possibly a reference to the famous Roman renegade slave Spartacus) and an angel called Eve. Sparda's former boss and blood brother, the demon king Mundus (Latin for 'world'), is so enraged by this union of heaven and hell, that he rips out Eve's heart and enslaves Sparda in eternal torture. The boy Dante (and probably Vergil) witness this gruesome event and is shown holding his dead mother in his arms, while angels are depicted almost in Renaissance style. It is an inverted instance of the famous pietà scene from Christian tradition, of which Michelangelo's is the most famous example. In the classic pietà Mother Mary carries her dead son Jesus; in *DmC* it is the son who carries the mother. The proportions are grotesque: mother Eve is much too heavy to be carried by a ten-year old child. But many of the traditional pietàs are also deformed: the figure of Jesus is usually shrunk to 'fit' onto Mary's lap.

The game narrative of *DmC* has countless references to the Christian tradition. The names of both Dante and Vergil have been taken from the famous medieval masterpiece of the *Divine Comedy*: Dante is the name of its author and main character, whereas Vergil, although not a Christian, was said to have predicted the rise of Christianity because he wrote the fourth *Ecloga* predicting the golden age of a royal child. Hence Vergil became Dante's guide through the circles of hell. The angelic mother Eve takes her name from the biblical narrative of Eden, chapters 1 through 3. The half-demonic, half-angelic family enjoys a time of relative peace in a mansion called 'Paradise'. Lilith also appears, this time as Mundus's demonic girlfriend and the bearer of his child, the son who is eventually killed by is eventually killed by Dante. Dante and Vergil are both called 'Nephilim', angel and demon in one. There even seems to have been a whole race of Nephilim, but they were slain by Mundus.

Because they incorporate both angelic and demonic traits, the Nephilim are the only ones capable of destroying the demon king Mundus. Mundus, presented as a trillion-dollar investment banker, effectually rules the entire world through debt. As an international super-banker he controls the financial system and everyone is indebted to him. Everyone has to pay him a large or a small sum. This is not only a poignant allusion to the financial crisis, but also a theological reference. Mundus does not control humankind by financial debt alone, but also by moral debt (sin). The notion of sin is closely tied to debt in this game narrative. Mundus is the 'Lord of the World', the biblical Mammon, a godhead associated in Christian tradition with money and wealth (DDD 542-3).

Just as in many works of fiction, philosophy and religion, the world as we know it is not the real world. In the case of *DmC* the ‘real’ world is the world of Limbo. In Limbo, reality as we know it is distorted, a circumstance that has invited all kinds of amazing level design. Ninja Theory has created a credible excuse to mould buildings, bridges, towers, streets, rocks and even music into a psychedelic and chaotic world where the eternal battle between heaven and hell is being fought out. Dante is dragged into Limbo many times to fight the legions of Mundus. Limbo, of course, is a reference to the theological notion of the *limbo infantium*, the ‘limbo of the children’. Many games feature their own interpretation of Limbo, such as *Limbo* (2011) and *Master Reboot* (2010).

As has been said before, Dante and Vergil are Nephilim, incorporating both angelic and demonic traits. This is mirrored in the weapons the player can use when controlling Dante, and in two kinds of grappling hooks, instruments that are unavoidable in any game that involves some serious acrobatics. The first kind of grappling hook is a ‘Demon’s grab’, the second an ‘Angel’s grab’. The first hook pulls something (walls, etc.) or someone (enemies) towards the player, while the second propels the player’s avatar towards something or someone. These names are not without theological significance. The demonic ‘grab’ is egocentric, centred on the self, making the self the centre of the world to which everything and everyone must come. The angelic ‘grab’ pushes towards ‘the other’, is directed towards the outside world, involves movement of ‘the self’.

Eventually Mundus is killed by Dante and Vergil. Vergil then proclaims himself the new master of humankind, hinting at a new dictatorial era in which the last two Nephilim rule together. Dante refuses to take the place of the slain Mundus, and after an epic battle between the two brothers, Vergil is defeated (but not killed). When Dante leaves the battleground his eyes glow red, suggesting some sort of dominance of his evil side.

2.4 Short summary

The historical sources for Lilith and the Nephilim as described above are very clearly traceable in the narratives and game lore of the *Diablo*, *Darksiders* and *DmC* series. In all three game narratives, Lilith is clearly a demoness, although with varying degrees of evilness. In the *Diablo* series Lilith is initially a demoness weary of the Eternal Conflict between Heaven and Hell, which she flees alongside the renegade angel Inarius. The Nephilim are born from their sexual union, gradually degrading into humans. It is not until the Nephilim become a threat to the cosmic balance that she murders all her fellow renegades. In the *Darksiders* series, Lilith is depicted as an evil spirit from the start: she creates the Nephilim from the dust of angels and demons in order to produce a super army for her demon lover Lucifer. The wickedness of her deed is reinforced by an implicit reference to the procedure God used to form human beings (‘from dust’) in the Genesis narrative. Lilith comes off worst in *DmC*: she is depicted as the evil, lustful ‘girlfriend’ of the demon lord Mundus,

and mother of his unholy child. She is the polar opposite of Dante's and Vergil's angelic mother Eve. Eve is depicted as loving and gentle. She sacrifices herself so that her children might have life. Lilith, on the contrary, is strongly associated with wild and demonic sexual acts. The child growing in her womb is a horrific demon, much larger than she is in his real form. Lilith is associated with evil, demonic powers, lust and sex.

All Nephilim are created by the mingling of angelic and demonic traits. Sometimes this union comes about through love (*DmC* and *Diablo*), sometimes it is abusive (*Darksiders*). In *Diablo* and *Darksiders* Lilith is indeed the 'mother' of the Nephilim, in *DmC* she is not. In *Darksiders* Lilith is only one of the many mothers of the race of the Nephilim, as Eve is in *DmC*. In *Diablo* Lilith is the single 'mother' (in the sense of an alchemistic creational process) of all the Nephilim. In all three cases the Nephilim are very powerful, capable of destroying the cosmic balance in the universe (*Diablo* and *Darksiders*) or, conversely, to regain that same balance (*DmC*). In one game (*Diablo*) the Nephilim are directly connected to humanity: human beings are just the weaker offspring of the godlike Nephilim. In *Darksiders* the only four remaining Nephilim, the Four Horsemen, are bound to protect humankind (and the cosmic balance) as part of the seven 'seals of the Apocalypse'. In *DmC* Nephilim and human beings look very similar, but no explicit connection is made. In all three cases the Nephilim must be destroyed: because of the threat they pose to the cosmic balance (in *Darksiders* this threat is actual, in *Diablo* it is only potential) or in order to restore it (*DmC*).

3 Lilith and the Nephilim in the Bible and tradition³

Lilith is described in the three game series mentioned above as a powerful she-demon and (in two cases) as the mother of the Nephilim. The Nephilim themselves are depicted as powerful hybrids of angels and demons, capable of disrupting the cosmic balance between good and evil. Both characters, Lilith and the Nephilim, derive from the Old Testament and were later reworked several times in Judeo-Christian folklore.

3.1 Lilith: demon and bird?

The word 'Lilith' occurs only once in the Bible, in Isaiah 34:14. The thirty-fourth chapter of Isaiah describes the desolation of the territory of Edom. 'Lilith' is named in a list of eight unclean animals, some of them associated with demonic powers, living in the ruins of Edom, indicating the level of

3 We would like to express our gratitude to our colleague Dr Archibald van Wieringen for his commentary on this paragraph.

desolation (Blair 2012, p. 68-73). The translation of the *hapax legomenon* ‘lilith’ has troubled translators for thousands of years. The Septuagint has *onokentauros*, a mythical creature, half-man, half-ass, borrowed from Greek mythology. The Vulgate translates it as ‘lamia’, also a mythical semi-deity from Greek and Roman mythology, associated with snakes and crimes such as the devouring of children (DDD 521). Other examples of problematic translations are: ‘lamya’ (Wyclif, 1395), ‘schrice owl’ (Geneva, 1587), ‘screech owl’ (King James, 1611), ‘night owl’ (Young, 1898), ‘night monster’ (Good News, 1992), ‘vampires’ (Moffatt, 1922), ‘night hag’ (Revised Standard Version, 1947), ‘night jar’ (New World, 1984) and finally ‘night bird’ (English Standard Version, 2001).

‘Lilith’ is associated with *layil* (Hebrew), *layl* (Arabic), both meaning ‘night’. And ‘Lilith’ is also connected with the Accadian word *lili* (singular) and *lilitu* (plural), meaning ‘spirit(s)’, also meaning ‘night’, especially in combination with the word *lilu* (Blair 2012, p. 26). Some scholars believe that Lilith is also mentioned in the epic poem of *Gilgamesh and the Huluppu-Tree* (2000 BCE), although her name is rendered there as ‘Lilake’. In this narrative a wandering goddess named Inanna nurtures a *huluppu*-tree. But a dragon, a bird and a demoness ‘Lilake’ claim the tree to live in it. When Gilgamesh hears of Inanna’s distress, he recaptures the tree for her, driving Lilake to the desert (Kramer 1938).

The Burney relief (which also dates from the second millennium BCE) has also been associated with the Biblical Lilith. This relief has a representation of a beautiful naked woman with wings and the feet of a bird, standing on two lions and flanked by two owls (Patai 1967, p. 208). However, no inscription has been found to make such a link plausible (Blair 2012, p. 28). Jacobsen has argued that the figure must rather be interpreted as depicting the Inanna mentioned above (Jacobsen 1997, p. 1-24). The same applies to the limestone plaque discovered at Arslan Tash (seventh or eighth century BCE). Some scholars believe that this plaque was displayed in houses to protect pregnant women against demons, but other non-demonic interpretations are also possible (DDD 521). Others have suggested that Lilith is named as a demon of the night in the Dead Sea scrolls IQIsa, 4Q510 and possibly 4Q184 (Blair 2012, p. 29), but again other interpretations are equally possible (Baumgarten 1991-92, p. 138).

In Jewish folklore, the apocryphal work *The Testament of Solomon* (first to fourth century CE) features a female demon, sometimes associated with the Biblical Lilith. This night demoness has many names and is particularly feared because she strangles newborn babies (Schwartz 1987, p. 343). The same image surfaces in Aramaic incantation texts found in Nippur, Babylonia, 600 CE (Patai, p. 211-7). Lilith is mentioned three times in the Babylonian Talmud. ‘Rab Judah citing Samuel ruled: If an abortion had the likeness of Lilith its mother is unclean by reason of the birth, for it is a child but it has wings.’ (Nidda 24b) ‘In a Baraita it was taught: She grows long hair like Lilith, sits when making water like a beast, and serves as a bolster for her husband.’ (Eruvin 100b)

‘R. Hanina said: One may not sleep in a house alone, and whoever sleeps in a house alone is seized by Lilith.’ (Shabbath 151b)⁴ The Talmudic Lilith appears to be a bird-like, long-haired night demon, trying to force herself sexually upon defenceless men (Gaines 2001, p. 16).

The image of Lilith as Adam’s first wife, so popular in our modern age, first appears in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* (eighth century CE). Some critics regard *The Alphabet* as a kind of parody on Talmud and Midrash (Bronznik 1990). The content of the Lilith narrative is admittedly a little bizarre. The idea that Adam in fact had two different wives derives from the dual creation accounts in Genesis: it seems as if God made woman twice (1:27 and 2:22). The first female, Lilith, was (according the *The Alphabet*) formed from the earth, like Adam before her. Lilith and Adam immediately began to fight with each other, because Lilith refused to ‘lay beneath’ Adam.

Depending on the perspective of the reader, Lilith’s motive is ideological (she refuses to submit to a man, because both were created in the same way) or sexual (the text of *The Alphabet* is often almost pornographic). When Lilith flees her dominant husband, Adam prays God for help. And God sends his angels to fetch her, but to no avail. She agrees to have a hundred of her children die every day, implying that she is the mother of many (or perhaps all) demons. Later Lilith is mentioned in Jewish mysticism (for example in the *Zohar*) and modern occultism (appearing as a succubus in Aleister Crowley’s *De Arte Magica*).

A decisive development in the portrayal of Lilith occurred at the beginning of the thirteenth century, when the rise of Kabbalah took place in Europe. Until that time Lilith had no counterpart and it could therefore be thought that Adam and all men after him had been haunted by Lilith, but what about Eve? The Rabbinic interpretation knew the story of Satan riding upon a snake like a camel (the snake still had legs, because he had not yet been cursed to crawl on his belly). Satan, here called Samael, knew how to mislead Eve and, according to some texts, infused his poison in her. He begat Cain, who is said to have been conceived not by human means (Genesis 4:1). The problem of Cain’s being ‘from the Lord / heaven’ could be solved by emphasizing his demonic origins: he was begotten by Samael, whose name can mean the ‘blind god’, or the ‘poisonous god’.

These two traditions, that of Lilith and that of Samael, were combined in what must be regarded as the most aggressive and demonic layer of Kabbalah: that of the *Treatise of the Left Emanation* (Dan, 1995). It is this combination of Lilith and Samael that led to a wholesale demonization of the universe and even of human relations, such as that between men and women. This combination has also been used by games such as the ones described above. When only Lilith is mentioned, the older tradition of Lilith as haunting male persons at night is used, but when Lilith and her lover (i.c. Inarius) are mentioned, this demonic union between Lilith and Samael is alluded

4 The statement by Hanina may be connected to the idea that nocturnal emissions of semen generate demons, as can be found in Eruvin 18b.

to. The following excerpt gives an impression of this thirteenth-century Castilian Kabbalah, devised by Isaac the Blind:

In answer to your question concerning Lilith, I shall explain to you the essence of the matter. Concerning this point there is a received tradition from the ancient Sages who made use of the Secret Knowledge of the Lesser Palaces, which is the manipulation of demons and a ladder by which one ascends to the prophetic levels. In this tradition it is made clear that Samael and Lilith were born as one, similar to the form of Adam and Eve who were also born as one, reflecting what is above. This is the account of Lilith which was received by the Sages in the Secret Knowledge of the Palaces. The Matron Lilith is the mate of Samael. Both of them were born at the same hour in the image of Adam and Eve, intertwined in each other. Asmodeus the great king of the demons has as a mate the Lesser (younger) Lilith, daughter of the king whose name is Qafsefoni. The name of his mate is Mehetabel daughter of Matred, and their daughter is Lilith.

Note that there is a parallel between the unholy union of Samael and Lilith, of Asmodeus (featuring in the *Dibalo* series as Azmodan) and the lesser Lilith (daughter of Lilith), and of Adam and Eve, paralleled on the divine level by the conjunction of the male and female in God. The demonic Lilith and the lesser Lilith are constantly at war because of Samael's jealousy of Asmodeus and his lesser and younger Lilith.

In an extremely complicated digression the *Treatise of the Left Emanation* explains the relationship between these demonic pairs (from 'the left') through a reference to the Sefiroth tree. It may suffice here to point out that the upper Sefiroth contain the names of Sabiel, Peli'iel, Zequiel and Sagsagel. (old man). The suffix - el refers to a theophoric name. In a peculiar way, the existence of mythological creatures such as Leviathan is combined with the union of Samael and Lilith, not unlike the way the videogames described above combines Sumerian mythology with Biblical and post-Biblical demonology.

3.2 Nephilim: giants or demigods?

The Nephilim occur only twice in the Bible. The first occurrence is just before the story of the Great Flood.

When human beings began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose. Then the Lord said, 'My Spirit will not contend with humans forever, for they are mortal; their days will be a hundred and twenty years.' The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also

afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of humans and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown. The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. (Genesis 6:1-5)⁵

The interpretation of this unusual passage is problematic (Hendel 2004). Who are the ‘sons of God’ (*bene ha elohim*) and what is their business with the ‘daughters of humans’? God decreases the lifespan of human beings, but a connection between the deeds of ‘son of God’ is not clear. Is it a punishment? And if it is, for what crime? The children born from the union of the ‘sons of God’ and the ‘daughters of humans’, must probably be identified with the ‘Nephilim’, and with the ‘heroes of old’ (DDD 618). Then God sees the sins of humankind and prepares to destroy the world with the Great Flood, including – so it seems – the Nephilim. This leaves three (of perhaps four) groups that cannot be clearly identified: the ‘sons of God’, the ‘daughters of humans’, the Nephilim and the ‘old heroes’ (who may well be the same group as the Nephilim).

The second occurrence of the Nephilim in the Bible does not make things any clearer. When the Israelites are planning their invasion of Canaan, they send out twelve spies to explore the land and to assess the amount of resistance they will encounter (Numbers 13).

When the spies return, they report: ‘We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.’ And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, ‘The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.’ (31b-33)

The reference to the Nephilim in Numbers supports the identification of the ‘heroes of old’ with the Nephilim in the Genesis passage, but it gives no further information. Some passages from the New Testament are frequently held to refer to the Nephilim: Luke 10:18; 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6, suggesting that the ‘mythology’ of the Nephilim was strong in the first century CE (DDD 619).

The etymology of ‘Nephilim’ is also far from certain. The word is probably derived from *npl*, ‘to fall’. Robert Baker Girdlestone has argued that it is derived from the Hiphil or causative form of *naphal*, ‘those that cause others to fall down’ (Girdlestone 2000, p. 54). Girdlestone therefore suggests that *Nephilim* should be translated as ‘tyrants’. Ronald Hendel takes a different stance, interpreting *nephilim* as a passive adjectival construction, literally meaning ‘ones who have fallen’ (Hendel 2004, p. 21-2). In the Bible the term ‘fallen one’ is used for those who died in battle (2 Samuel 1:19,25 and 27 or Ezekiel 23:37). The Septuagint, Targum and Vulgate translate *Nephilim*

5 All quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version.

with ‘giants’. The Septuagint also translates the phrase ‘warriors of old’ with ‘giants of old’. All of these translations are speculations and therefore very precarious. Most modern translations, such as the New International Standard, have provided a reasonable solution by not translating the word, but just rendering it phonetically.

Traditionally there have been two different interpretations of the Nephilim, both directly connected to the identity of their ‘fathers’, the *bene ha elohim*. Either the Nephilim are the offspring of the sons of Seth (the third son of Adam and Eve) or of the ‘fallen angels’. In his *Chronography*, preserved by Syncellus, the church father Julius Africanus (third century CE) explains the two options in detail:

When mankind became numerous upon the earth, the angels of heaven came together with the daughters of men. (...) Now it is recounted, as I believe, about Seth [that his descendants] are called sons of God by the spirit [the Bible]. (...) The descendants of Cain it designates as human seed, having nothing divine on account of the wickedness of their race and the dissimilarity of their nature. So that when they intermingled [the sons of Seth and the daughters of Cain] they caused God vexation. But if we take this to mean ‘angels’, we would conclude that it refers to those who transmitted knowledge about magic and sorcery, as well as motion of numbers and astronomical phenomena, to women, from whom they produced the giants; because of their wickedness came into being and God decided to obliterate the whole faithless race of living beings in the deluge. (translation quoted in: Stroumsa 1984, p. 126)

Dexinger and Klijn have concluded that Africanus was the first to mention the ‘Sethite’ interpretation (Dexinger 1966; Klijn 1977), but it is not clear if Julius’s sources were Jewish or Christian. In early Syrian Christian tradition this interpretation was held by numerous authors, such as Aphrahat and Ephrem the Syrian. Ephrem strongly rejected the notion that the ‘sons of God’ were angels, an idea that – he claimed – was very popular among Manichaeans. According to Ephrem, the children of Seth lived a pure and continent life on a mountain just outside the limits of paradise until they descended in order to unite with the Cainite women (Klijn 1977, p. 74).

The *Cave of Treasures* is most interesting in this respect. This work was probably not redacted before the fifth or sixth century, but it incorporates older material (Stroumsa 1984, p. 128). The *Cave* tells about the offspring of Seth, living near the walls of Eden on the Mount of Victories, who were seduced by the music and the ‘sex-appeal’ of the daughters of Cain. They came down ‘from on high’ to mingle with the Cainite women, and this led to the birth of the giants. When God sent the Flood to punish them for their abominations, they fled to Noah and begged him to let them onto the ark. Noah refused. And thus the era of the Nephilim ended.

Another, much older interpretation of the ‘sons of God’ stems from the book of Enoch which identifies them with the ‘fallen angels’. This story is widely known in the Christian tradition, although it is considered an apocryphal book (except by the Ethiopian church which counts it among the canonical books). This book, which claims to have been written by Enoch, Noah’s great-grandfather, describes the events prior to the Flood (Bamberger 2006, p. 16-18).

The angels, the children of heaven, see the beauty of mortal women. But the chief angel Semyaza (DDD 84) fears that his fellow angels will not dare to do what they are intending to do and binds them on oath. Two hundred angels then take wives and teach them charms and enchantments, root cutting and knowledge of plants. From these unions giants are born, who consume all the possessions of humankind, eventually turning to cannibalism. The earth cries out to God, who sends Uriel (DDD 885-6) to warn Noah of the impending flood, and Raphael (DDD 688) to bind Azazel, one of Semyaza’s accomplices (DDD 128-31), and imprison him in the desert place Dudael, to await eternal judgment, at which time he will be cast into the fire. The whole earth is corrupted by the works which the fallen angels taught. Gabriel (DDD 338-9) is directed to incite the giants to mutual slaughter, in spite of their father’s prayers that they might live for five hundred years. Michael (DDD 569-71) is ordered to bind Semyaza and his companions. After their children (the Nephilim) are slain, they (the corrupted angels) are imprisoned in the valleys of the earth for seventy generations. When the final judgment comes, they will be led off to the abyss of everlasting fire.

This story would find his way into the collective memory and imagination of the Christian West, helped by a number of New Testament references to 1 Enoch. The authors of the Epistle of Jude quote from 1 Enoch (1:14-15), and the authors of the First and Second Epistle of Peter allude to it (1 Peter 3:19-20; 2 Peter 2:4-5). The figure of the archangel Michael in the Biblical book of Revelation (12:7-9) fits nicely into the Enoch story, with Michael the leader of the angelic hosts, fighting a cosmic battle against the demons (traditionally associated with the notion of the fallen angels). In fact, even the Qur’an knows of the descent of the angels, there called Harut and Marut (2:102). The Nephilim also appear in the apocryphal *Book of Jubilees* (7:21–25), as giants, constituting the main reason for God to send the Deluge. Even in modern times the story of the fallen angels is used in popular culture, such as Karl Ove Knausgård’s novel *En tid for alt* (2004) or the *Axe* commercial called ‘Fallen’.

The reason why the Enochic view of the mingling of the *bene Elohim* (sons of God) with the daughters of man proved so attractive is the same as why it was rejected in some Christian traditions: it leads to a hybridization of beings. The giants are the result of an unholy union between angelic and human beings. The mingling of Adam with Lilith produces demons (Poorthuis 2003). There is a clear influence of Greek mythology – in which gods freely mingle with humans and animals – upon this hybridization: the resulting mixed races appeal to the postmodern bending of

gender and of identity. This crossing over of identities may also explain the bizarre manner in which divine and demonic identities feature in some forms of Gnosticism, probably from an Alexandrian background:

The chief archon seduced Eve and he begot two sons: Elohim, who has a bear face and Yave, who has a cat face. (Apocryphon of John II, 1, 24)

Likewise, the Testament of Solomon refers to demons with animal-like traits such as wings and tails, and dragonheads. Rape and prostitution are the violent actions that result in these mixed breeds. A fusion between these demonic identities and modern science fiction with its postmodern (and sometimes feministic) gender bending, as well as crossovers between man and machine results in the incredible universe of *Diablo*. Simultaneously, the hybridization of races prevents too strict an opposition between good and evil, which would lead to a probably quite boring story of how the good ultimately triumphs.

4 'You are not my mother'. Theological reflections

As has become clear by now, the images of Lilith and the Nephilim in the three game narratives were drawn from a very rich reservoir of images provided by Jewish and Christian tradition and folklore. If we compare the genotext of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the phenotext of the three game series as an intertextual relationship, there is more to be said about their connection than simply that they share certain features (Kristeva 1984; Toth 2010, p. 40). The game narratives about Lilith and the Nephilim (phenotext) derive from what is commonly found in Judeo-Christian tradition (phenotext) in a very interesting way: as a curious a curious mixture of dualism and holism.

4.1 Ontological and cosmological dualism

The three narratives provide a complete mythology of the games' cosmoses, some elaborately (*Diablo*), others only briefly (*DmC*). All three game universes feature one or more forms of dualism, either ontological or cosmological, or a combination of the two (Van Schaik 2004).

At the beginning of *DmC*'s third mission, Vergil takes Dante to the playground to which their mother Eve used to bring them. Vergil tries to revive Dante's memory, which has been clouded by

their father Sparda in order to save and secure the lives of the two young Nephilim. Vergil explains the universe of *DmC* in some brief sentences .

Some things have always been. There have always been angels; there have always been demons. And they've always been at war.

Fundamentally, the *DmC* universe is divided into two different realms or powers: one angelic (good), the other demonic (evil). The creator of the angels and demons (if there is such a creator) is not named, nor is his absence remarked on. The conflict between good and evil is eternal, as are the two races themselves. And humankind is crushed between the two warring forces. *DmC* features both an ontological and a cosmological dualism in the strictest sense of the word. *DmC*'s universe is ontologically dualistic, because of the absence of any unifying principle (God, Creator, et cetera), and is cosmologically dualistic because of the eternal battle between entirely good angels and entirely evil demons.

The *Darksiders*' universe also features a cosmological dualism, as the two oldest kingdoms, Heaven and Hell, wage an eternal conflict against each other, in such a brutal manner that a neutral force (the Charred Council) must ensure the continuing balance of the universe. While the *cosmos* may be divided into two opposing forces who fight each other in an everlasting conflict, there is one unifying principle: the Creator. In the narrative of *Darksiders* all beings believe in the existence of the Creator, who is responsible for the creation of the three kingdoms and their inhabitants and the mysterious 'Old Ones'. These 'Old Ones' (giants in their appearance) have constructed the realm into which the kingdoms subsides. In this respect they resemble the old notion of the 'демиург', who forges the material world while looking to the world of ideas for inspiration. The Creator seems to have vanished, because he is not seen or heard from in the entire series. Nevertheless this concept of the Creator prevents the *Darksiders* universe from espousing an ontological dualism. There may be two cosmological forces, but they have been created by a single source.

As has been stated before, the cosmology of *Diablo* is the most elaborate of the three. The *Diablo* universe is halfway between ontological and cosmological dualism. There is one unifying creature, Anu, by whom all beings are created, both angels and demons. But at the same time this single godhead is split into two different beings, Anu and Tathamet, representing all that is good and all that is evil respectively. From Anu the High Heavens and the Angelic Council are born, and from Tathamet the Prime Evils and the Burning Hells. Cosmologically, the *Diablo* universe is dualistic, but ontologically this is far from clear. Ultimately, the ontological dimension is the strongest, because there is no higher unifying principle left after the split between Anu and Tathamet.

The ontological and (or) cosmological dualism of the three game narratives is used for a more or less 'convenient' separation of good and evil which 'solves' the problem of the existence of

evil. Dualism in all its many forms is a solution for the age-old problem of the theodicy, a problem that is particularly painful for monotheistic religions. If God is good and all-powerful (as all monotheistic religions, including Christianity, claim), how could evil have come into existence? If God cannot prevent evil or – even worse – does not care about the evil in the world, is He worth of been called God after all? Already traceable in the intertestamental book of Enoch, the idea of dualism has been very popular in multiple religious movements, such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Catharism, and even – in a milder form – in orthodox Christianity (Hanegraaf 2005, p. 244).⁶ Both cosmological dualism and the stronger ontological dualism are capable of constructing a very ‘simple’ universe divided into two fractions – good and evil; one of the oldest, most frequently used and most rewarding narratives of Western culture.

4.2 Anthropological holism

In *Diablo*, *Darksiders* and *DmC* the notion of ontological and cosmological dualism is mixed with a more complex anthropology which could be identified as ‘holistic’.

The Nephilim Vergil and Dante (*DmC*) are ‘hybrids’, a fusion of the demon Sparda and the angel Eve. Therefore, they incorporate both angelic and demonic powers, traits and dispositions. As has been seen before, Dante (and probably Vergil, but the game does not make this explicit), has the possibility of using both ‘blue’ weapons (associated with Eve, angels and good) and ‘red’ weapons (associated with Sparda, demons, evil) and two grappling hooks with the same associations. When Dante faces another wave of enemies, his eyes glow red, indicating some kind of demonic ‘possession’ or the (temporary) domination of the demonic powers over his being.

While the two Nephilim seem to be destined to overthrow the rule of the demon king Mundus, their motivation for doing so is not entirely unambiguous. *DmC* follows Dante’s journey through Limbo, hinting both at egoistic and at altruistic motivations. Dante wants to free enslaved humanity from Mundus’s bonds and, at the same time, to take revenge on Mundus for his mother Eve’s death of and his father Sparda’s eternal damnation.

Almost throughout the entire game Vergil seems to be the morally superior of the two. His eyes do not glow red when he is in danger, his voice is softer, his behaviour more sophisticated, his motivations more noble. Vergil wears a blue necklace, representing the angelic side, whereas Dante wears a red necklace, representing the demonic side. Dante lived his life prior to the events of *DmC*

⁶The body-soul dualism characteristic of these forms of Gnostic esoterism cannot, however, be found in the three game narratives. The distinction between body and soul is made in *DmC* and the *Darksiders* series, but they are not opposed to each other.

in a decadent, hedonistic fashion, while Vergil worked tirelessly planning to overthrow Mundus's empire. Dante seems more prone to the 'dark side', while Vergil appears serene and almost 'holy'.

This almost dualistic distinction between 'the good one' (Vergil) and the 'bad one' (Dante) is subverted at the end of the game, when Vergil reveals that his ultimate motivation for the destruction of Mundus was not to free humanity (as Dante had thought), but to take over Mundus's kingdom and power together with his brother. Vergil turns out to be no better than Mundus and his demons. It is subsequently Dante who fights his brother in an epic battle to preserve the freedom of humankind. The game makes it very clear that 'good' and 'evil' are not distributed according to appearance. Both Dante and Vergil have demonic and angelic traits, and it is up to their own free will to use their powers for good or evil.

In *Darksiders* the Nephilim are initially described as purely evil: they ransack multiple planes of existence and try to conquer Eden, which had been given to humanity as a place to live. The Four Horsemen are equally evil, because they betray their fellow Nephilim in exchange for enormous power in the service of the Charred Council. While War and Death in particular speak frequently about 'keeping the cosmic balance' (that has been instigated by the Council), it is very clear that acquiring power is a very important (maybe the most important) reason for their actions.

In the first installment of the series, however, War is driven by honour to redeem the fact that his deeds annihilated humankind by unwillingly triggering the Apocalypse on Earth. Honour, of course, is a virtue. But more importantly, his brother Death, in the second installment of the series, risks everything (his enormous power and even his life) to redeem the name of his brother, who has been falsely accused by the Council of setting off the End War. Friendship, brotherhood and self-sacrifice are usually regarded as good.

As the story of the second installment unfolds, it becomes clear that Death was not all evil even earlier in his life. When he and his three brothers killed their fellow Nephilim, Death kept the souls of the slain Nephilim in a green amulet around his neck. He shows signs of remorse for the slaying of his brothers by preserving their souls; he has hopes of reviving them again. He is kept from doing so by his fear not only of their wrath, but also of the threat they would pose to humankind and consequently to the balance of the universe. Remorse also is a virtue.

And at the end of the second installment, Death sacrifices himself and the souls of his fellow Nephilim (with the exception of Fury, War and Strife) in the Well of Souls so that humankind can be revived. Again, sacrifice is seen as a virtue. In the *Darksiders* series, as in *DmC*, the main characters show signs of having both good and evil traits, standing halfway between the two universal forces from which they were created. The Nephilim refuse to be 'pinned down' by the dualistic nature of their universe. Both heaven and hell try to lure humankind to its side (the Sin Wars of *Diablo*),

using two different forms of religion: the Cult of the Triune (of the demons) and the Cathedral of Light (of the angels). But to no avail: humankind keeps a middle road between the two.

These Nephilim are holistic in the sense that good and evil are intertwined in every individual. The Nephilim are an expression of everyday human experience. While we are living our lives, we encounter innumerable individuals (like ourselves), whom we experience and think of as morally mixed. Every human being does good and bad deeds and incorporates good and bad intentions, inclinations, traits and thoughts. Some individuals may have a greater inclination to either good or evil than other people, but most people appear to us as somewhere in between, as good and evil at the same time.

This anthropologically holistic idea can be found in many narratives of Western culture (Campbell 2004). The prototypical hero, from Spiderman to Harry Potter, from Luke Skywalker to Bilbo Baggins, has both good and evil traits. The typical hero has to overcome his own weaknesses and bad habits to become the real hero he already is *in nucleo*. The real battle to be won is to obtain victory over the self; this is necessary to defeat the (external) proverbial ‘bad guy’.

4.3 Humanity as the ‘third kingdom’

In *Darksiders* humankind is called ‘the third kingdom’, which lies somewhere between Heaven and Hell. And in the *Diablo* series humankind, as the degraded offspring of the Nephilim, occupies the same place in between the angelic and demonic forces. In *DmC* humanity is more or less the ‘battleground’ where the universal battle between demons and Nephilim is fought out. The Nephilim are the progenitors of humanity in *Diablo* and *Darksiders*. They are the forefathers of humankind, and themselves are some kind of prototypical humans or ‘supermen’, even in the somewhat less elaborate narrative of *DmC*.

In some respects the Nephilim of the three game narratives have a similar cognitive function as the angels in medieval philosophy and theology (Perler 2008). Angels were appropriate subjects of thought for medieval philosophers because the latter were themselves believing Christians, and because the angels could bridge the gap between heaven and earth. Most importantly, however, angels helped to explain the specific status of humankind. Angels are almost like humans, but not entirely. And this small difference enabled medieval thinkers to identify what it is to be truly human.

Surprisingly enough, the angels of the three game series do not have this kind of cognitive function. This role has been transferred to the Nephilim. Because the angels in the game narratives are part of ontological or cosmological dualism, they cannot function as a cognitive mirror for human beings, as they did in the Middle Ages. This is probably because the rigorous righteousness

of the angels in the game does not appeal to postmodern humankind anymore. We are more comfortable with the anthropologically mixed Nephilim, who incorporate – as we do – both good and evil traits.

Everything that has been said in this article about the Nephilim can therefore be applied in a theological sense to humans themselves, to us. ‘Born from angels and demons’ expresses our own experience that we have both good and evil inclinations, between which we can choose more or less freely. The motherly figure of Lilith indicates our postmodern (esoteric) fascination with the idea that humans have a divine origin. The Nephilim revolted against their parents, just as postmodern humankind is revolting against the idea of a transcendent reality. This revolution brings forth the idea of more individual freedom, but at the cost of losing the foundation of human morality. The horrors of the Nephilim of the *Darksiders* simply mirror the monstrosities of modern history, of which the Holocaust was one of the worst.

Lilith and ‘her’ Nephilim in the *Darksiders*, *Diablo* and *DmC* symbolize the morally and anthropologically mixed *condition humaine*, against the backdrop of a cosmologically, or even ontologically, highly dualistic universe. This has two advantages. First, this combination is rooted in the human experience of a morally and anthropologically mixed everyday reality, while, secondly, maintaining a highly differentiated universe as the perfect background for the game narratives. The Nephilim of the three game narratives are mirrors of human beings themselves, both in their desire for freedom and domination, and in suffering the loss of transcendence. ‘You are not my mother,’ Death told Lilith, but he is, whether he wishes it or not.

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Living the Phantasm of Demediation

The Priest-Kings and the Technology Prohibition in the Gorean Role-playing Games

Christophe Duret

Abstract

This article will cover the Gorean games – online role-playing games designed by and for the players in a participatory logic (Jenkins, 2006) - in the Second Life virtual multi-user environment. This is the gaming adaptation of the science fiction novels “The Chronicles of Gor”, which depict a religion whose consequences are both diegetic and ludic.

The inhabitants of the planet Gor are artificially maintained in a pre-modern state of civilization through religious prohibition preventing technological development, decreed by the Priest-Kings, their gods. The result is a society in which the mechanisms of evolution are unrestrained. The law of natural order underlying these mechanisms is inspired by a Darwinian doctrinal intertext (Suleiman, 1983). It promotes the emergence of a race of warriors and widespread slavery. This law also structures the gaming community into two antagonistic subcultures, one of which is the defender and the other, the detractor. Their clashes take place both at the diegetic level as well as at the level of designing the game mechanics.

Keywords

Heterotopias, neomedievalism, non-places, participatory culture, participatory role-playing games in virtual environment, phantasm of demediation, PRPG-VEs, religion, sociocriticism.

1 Introduction

Video games, *massively multiplayer online games* and participatory role-playing games in virtual environment (henceforth “PRPG-VEs”) that proceed from neomedievalist culture, from *The Elder Scrolls* to *World of Warcraft*, and passing through *Dark Age of Camelot*, along with the related

literary and film productions, testify to the public taste for a Medieval Age perceived as being both more authentic, less complex and closer to nature than the contemporary world. These games that become, if not utopias, at least heterotopias¹ for the players, are crossed by what we call the “phantasm of demediation”, a desire to have an experience that is free from filters and dehumanizing intermediaries (over-mediation) of over-modernism (technology, media, intangible economy...) able to drive the consumption of neomedievalist type media content.

This phantasm of demediation underlies Gorean role-playing games – online role-playing games designed by and for the players in a participatory logic (Jenkins, 2006) - in the Second Life virtual multi-user environment. The Gorean role-playing games are gaming adaptation of the science fiction novels “The Chronicles of Gor”, which depict a religion whose consequences are both diegetic and ludic.

The inhabitants of the planet Gor are artificially maintained in a pre-modern state of civilization through religious prohibition preventing technological development, decreed by the Priest-Kings, their gods. The result is a society in which the mechanisms of evolution are unrestrained. The law of natural order underlying these mechanisms is inspired by a Darwinian doctrinal intertext (Suleiman, 1983). It promotes the emergence of a race of warriors and widespread slavery. This law also structures the gaming community into two antagonistic subcultures, one of which is the defender and the other, the detractor. Their clashes take place both at the diegetic level as well as at the level of the formal structure.

Using such a framework, we will put forward a perspective of sociocriticism (Duchet & Maurus, 2011) – which seeks to understand the inclusion of sociality² in the formal structure of the games by analyzing their text – in order to analyze the ways of subverting the technology prohibition and the natural order. We reach the conclusion that this subversion occurs when the diegesis of Gorean games as heterotopias is contaminated by its formal structure as non-places.

As most of the analyses in the field of *game studies* focus on the social representations involved in the games as values, ideologies, and stereotypes (Aldred & Greenspan, 2011) (Brand, Knight & Majewski, 2003) (Crogan, 2011) (Dill, Gentile, Richter & Dill, 2005) (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter 2009) (Ketchum & Peck, 2010) (Langman & Lukacs, 2010) (Mou & Peng, 2009), they tend to omit the mediations between their social context and their text; this results in somewhat mechanical sociological perspectives. In addition, these analyses focus on elements of content without questioning the inclusion of sociality in the formal structure of the games (its rules and socio-technical devices). Finally, they neglect the way the player interacts with the values and

1 See 5.1. “The Gorean PRPG-VEs as heterotopias” for a definition.

2 According to Duchet, sociality is “a way of organization of the social or a socialized form of the reality” (cited in Duchet & Maurus, 2011, p. 19).

sociality of the games, and in doing so, how the player themselves may introduce them. However, sociocriticism of video games is able to fill the above gaps.

We based our analysis on documents produced by members of the *Second Life* Gorean community that indirectly reflects their gaming practice. We have predominantly worked from a corpus of nearly 5,000 notes taken from 70 threads posted on the *The Gorean Forums* and *Gor-SL* discussion forums. We have also analyzed player blogs, screenshots, video captures of game sessions, online encyclopedias, amateur journals devoted to Gorean PRPG-VEs as well as *The Chronicles of Gor* novels.

This paper is divided into four parts. Firstly, we will give a short description of the Gorean role-playing games. Secondly, we will portray the religion of Gor and what do the Priest-Kings represent for the characters of the players. Thirdly, we will describe the phantasm of demediation as it appears in the neomedievalist culture as well as in the Gorean role-playing games. Fourthly, we will analyze the depiction of space in the Gorean role-playing games in a sociocritical way.

2 A short description of the Gorean role-playing games

The Gorean role-playing games are participatory role-playing games in virtual environment (PRPG-VEs) organized on *Second Life* and inspired by the fictional universe of the science fiction novels *The Chronicles of Gor* by John Norman. The setting for these games is the planet Gor which was summed up by Tjarda Sixma (2009) as a “barbaric planet [...] where men are bold masters and women are either frigid mistresses or sexual slaves” (p. 5).

The PRPG-VEs are multiplayer role playing games in which players take on a role through an avatar in multi-user virtual environments (MUVE) which may or may not have been specifically designed for such activities. The PRPG-VEs are representative of the participatory culture, as understood by Henry Jenkins (2006), insofar as the players contribute to the development of the avatar scripts³ and accessories as well as the game mechanics, the virtual environment, the rules of the game and the game world (the diegetic frame) of the role-play⁴.

3 In *Second Life*, the scripts are lines of programming that achieve certain effects: changing the appearance of an object, how it moves, its interaction and exchanges with avatars, etc... (Second Life Wiki, 2009).

4 “The diegesis” writes Gérard Genette (1972), “is the spatiotemporal universe designated by the narrative” (p. 280) or, in the context of role play, the space-time universe in which the characters move. Markus Montola (2003) defines the diegesis as the amount of information in the game world, the laws that govern its fictional reality, the verbalizations of the players and game masters during the game, as well as their thoughts, their emotions and their actions. Diegesis thus represents the elements of the game world.

According to the site statistics for the Gorean Meter Support Portal (2012a; 2012b), dated July 15, 2013, there were 9,516 active avatars in 250 Gorean sims⁵ between July 2 and 15, 2013.

The Gorean community includes two types of players characterized by their position with respect to the reading of *The Chronicles of Gor*, which is either literal or distanced (Duret, 2014). On the one hand, we find players who want to remain faithful to the novels of Norman in their role play (literal reading position). They call themselves “By the Books” or “BtB”. On the other hand, there are players who distance themselves from the content of the novels to introduce outside elements into Gorean role-playing games. These are the “Gor Evolved” or “GE”. As mentioned in the Gorean game manual *A Brief Guide to Gorean Roleplay in Second Life* (Ghiardie, 2010), the conflict between the two groups mainly concerns the role of women in Gorean role-playing games. The “BtB” say that in the context of the planet Gor, women are not equal to men and cannot be permitted to carry weapons. The “GE” instead state that it is realistic to imagine that the Goreans may have evolved socially to the point where women are considered equal to men and are thus considered capable of fighting alongside them. This view is contrary to that of the author, who writes:

There are no 'female warriors' on Gor. Gor is on the whole an honest, male-dominated realistic world [...] There are panther girls and talunas on Gor. They are unhappy, frustrated, disturbed women, half alienated from their sex. They tend to run in dangerous feline packs. Once captured and subdued it is said they make excellent slaves. 'Bring me into the collar if you can!' Amazon women/Mrs. Conan the Barbarian does not belong in the Gorean world. (Norman, 2001, non-paginated document)

2.1 Description of the game as subverted doctrine

The Chronicles of Gor assume the specific characteristics of *romans à thèse* (thesis novels), which Susan Rubin Suleiman (1983) defined as a type of novel which explicitly puts forth “recognized body of doctrine or system of ideas” (p. 1) and which has an “unambiguous dualistic system of values [...] rules of action addressed to the reader [and a] doctrinal intertext” (p. 54).

The doctrine defended by Norman is the law of natural order. The law of natural order carries the evolutionary paradigm in a broader sense. It is the justification for why slavery is prevalent in Gorean society. In the framework of Gorean role-playing games, the law of natural order both structures the ludic experience for the players and also divides the community. Indeed, the “BtB” players defend the law of natural order, or at least its validity in the context of the world of Gor,

⁵ A “sim” or “simulator” in *Second Life* is a three-dimensional virtual space hosted on a server. The “sims” are leased to users who may develop and administer them.

while the “GE” question the accuracy and relevance of this doctrine. They challenge it by playing the roles of female warriors grouped into clans: the Panthers and the Talunas.

The Darwinian considerations that dot the novels of Norman echo a more general intertext: that of the outcomes of the evolutionary paradigm and its manifestations such as social Darwinism and evolutionary psychology. What is an intertext? On this subject, Julia Kristeva (1980) writes that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (p. 66). This is called “intertextuality” (“the transposition of a system of signs into another system of signs”, p. 15) and the texts cited constitute “intertexts”. Interviews with Norman on the complementarity of the sexes also raise that of intertextuality. For example, Norman (quoted in Smith 1996) speaks of slavery which he depicts in his novels as “a celebration of the glory of nature and the reality of dimorphic sexuality [...] Ultimately, of course, the male is the master, and the female is the slave” (non-paginated document).

The evolutionist intertext is clearly illustrated in *Tarnsman of Gor*, in which Tarl Cabot writes:

For whatever reason, the larl will always prefer ruining a hunt, even one involving a quarry of several animals, to allowing a given animal to move past it to freedom. Though I suppose this is purely instinctive on the larl’s part, it does have the effect, over a series of generations, of weeding out animals which, if they survived, might transmit their intelligence, or perhaps their erratic running patterns, to their offspring. (Norman, 1966, p. 149)

Or in this quotes from *Priest-Kings of Gor*:

The resemblance [between larl and jungle cat] is, I suppose, due to the mechanics of convergent evolution, both animals having been shaped by the exigencies of the chase, the stealth of the approach and the sudden charge, and by the requirement of the swift and devastating kill. If there is an optimum configuration for a land predator, I suppose on my old world the palm must go to the Bengal tiger; but on Gor the prize belongs indisputably to the mountain larl; (Norman, 1968, p. 21)

3 The Priest-Kings

The planet Gor, also known as “Counter-Earth”, is on the other side of the Sun from Earth, which is why it has never been discovered by earthly astronomers. It was transported from star system to star system until it reached ours by an overevolved species of giant anthropomorphic insects called “Priest-Kings”, that live in a nest in the heart of the Sardar Mountains, a sacred place where humans

are not permitted. The Priest-Kings have populated Gor with species from different planets, including Earth. Through “Voyages of Acquisition”, they abduct people from Earth and transport them to Gor by spaceship, as is the case of Tarl Cabot, the main character and narrator of several of the Chronicles of Gor novels.

The Goreans equate the Priest-Kings to gods and worship them through priests called “Initiates”. With few exceptions, Goreans know neither their nature nor their appearance. They are described by the narrator in the following manner:

In its way it was very beautiful, golden and tall [...] It was not more than a yard wide but its head nearly touched the top of the portal and so I would judged that, standing as it did, it must have been nearly eighteen feet high. It had six legs and a great head like a globe of gold with eyes like vast luminous disks. (Norman, 1968, p.75-76)

The divine origin of the Priest-Kings is questioned by some characters, taking the form of a scientific discourse that relegates this pseudo-deity to mere superstition and equates their powers to technological superiority. Matthew Cabot, the father of the narrator, suspected that

the Priest-Kings are indeed men-men much as we, or humanoid organisms of some type who possess a science and technology as far beyond our normal ken as that of our own twentieth century would be to the alchemists and astrologers of the medieval universities. (Norman, 1966, p. 29)

The train of events will demonstrate the latter, as the Priest-Kings will prove to be fallible mortals. In fact, they belong to an evolutionary continuum extending from unicellular organisms to their own species, the Goreans finding themselves in the middle. This is suggested by this Nietzschean intertext, from the mouth of the Mother of the Priest-Kings, the female of the nest, evoking in parallel both the paradoxical mixture of barbarism and subtlety that is the human being: “‘Strange is your kind’, she said. ‘Half larl, half Priest-King.’” (Norman, 1968, p. 195). It is the evolutionary refinement of their species, of their intelligence that ensures their dominance over Gor and their status as gods in the Gorean Pantheon.

Ironically, while they are revered by Goreans, the Priest-Kings are atheists. Life after death is a matter of survival of the species and consciousness is only an evolutionary benefit:

‘Do Priest-Kings believe in life after death?’ I asked.

‘Of course,’ said Misk, ‘for after one dies the Nest continues.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I mean individual life.’

‘Consciousness,’ said Misk, ‘seems to be a function of the ganglionic net.’ (Norman, 1968, p. 121)

However, if one believes in this other Nietzschean intertext, they live according to the philosophy of eternal recurrence:

“I do not know what we did,” said Misk. “But I think I would now choose to do that action which I would be willing that I should do again and again with each turning of the wheel. I would choose so to live that I might be willing that I should live that life a thousand times, even forever. I would choose to live that I might stand boldly with my deed without regret throughout eternity.” (Norman, 1968, p. 450-451)

The Priest-Kings rarely intervene in Gorean affairs. However, they forbid the technological development of weapons:

incredibly enough, weapon technology is controlled to the point where the most powerful devices of war are the crossbow and lance. Further, there is no mechanized transportation or communication equipment or detection devices such as the radar and sonar equipment so much in evidence in the military establishments of your world. - “On the other hand,” he said, “you will learn that in lighting, shelter, agricultural techniques, and medicine, for example, the Mortals, or the Men Below the Mountains, are relatively advanced.” (Norman, 1966, p. 24)

Offenders are destroyed by the Flame Death of the Priest-Kings. Why this prohibition on technology? The hypothesis of the narrator falls, once again, into the evolutionary paradigm. Beyond (genuine) considerations for their safety, by limiting the scope of arms, the Priest-Kings ensure control over the mechanisms of evolution, promoting the emergence of mighty warriors over the generations. For example, to explain the ban on wearing armor Cabot suggests:

A possible hypothesis to explain this is that the Priest-Kings may have wished war to be a biologically selective process in which the weaker and slower perish and fail to reproduce themselves. This might account for the relatively primitive weapons allowed to the Men Below the Mountains. On Gor it was not the case that a cavern-chested toothpick could close a switch and devastate an army. (Norman, 1966, p. 48)

Hit by the selective technology prohibition imposed by the Priest-Kings, as well as by the weight of its traditions, the Gorean civilization remains frozen in a time equivalent to that of Antiquity and the Middle Ages of Earth.

3.1 What do the Priest-Kings represent for the characters of the players?

The relationship of the characters with the sacred is variable in the Gorean PRPG-VEs, as it is in the novels of Norman, which reflect alternative beliefs, such as worship of the sun or the Norse religion. This relationship varies according to caste, level of education, place where the character lives and personal experience. For example, the player JackoS plays two characters who do not devote themselves to the religion of the Priest-Kings, a Paravacci (nomad) and a Torvie (Nordic). He writes:

one was born in the plains, is Paravacci and worships the sky and the clouds... the other is torvie and has delusions of grandeur, he thinks he descends from Odin.” (The Gorean Forums, 2014) (Wed Sep 03, 2014 5:46 pm)

This is also the case of the characters played by Selina, who do not believe in the Priest-Kings:

Well personally, in any of the characters I've played (tuchuk and bond⁶) the PK's [Priest-Kings] were just a myth. Tuchuks worship the sun and the sky, the earth while the Torvies worship the Gods, Odin and Thor, there by disrespecting all that the PK's respresented. (Gorean Shores, 2014) (02 September 2014, 16:06).

The player Ugurusu played the characters of two Initiates and a merchant. The first Initiate actually met the Priest-Kings. He has no memory of the first encounter, his memory was erased, and he went insane after the second meeting. The second Initiate denounces those who equate the Priest-Kings to insects as heretics. The merchant, for his part, has never met them, but he “FIRMLY believes that the Priest-Kings are divine and formless” (Gor-SL, 2012) (02 December 2012, 08:15:48).

Sometimes the relationship with the sacred is dictated not through diegetic reasons, but by specific roleplaying characteristics. This is the case when the player, by virtue of metagaming⁷, transmits or does not transmit to their character that they know the Priest-Kings through having read the *Chronicles* or other documents relating to the novels. This is, according to the player Syndel Daviau, the reason why the characters know the insectile nature of the Priest-Kings: “For the same reason they address you by name without having received that information: bad roleplay skills.” (Gor-SL, 2012) (17 November 2012, 22:54:15).

The cult of the Priest-Kings, while dominant on Gor, is not monopolistic. Moreover, it fits in such a way that it is both diegetic and ludic in the Gorean PRPG-VEs. However, even if individuals

⁶ Tuchuks are nomads. Bond-maids are slaves and live in Torvaldsland.

⁷ According to Chapman, Hughes, Hughes, MacLean & Simpson (n.d.), a metagamer is a “gamer who uses outside knowledge or rules knowledge to game” (non-paginated document).

adopt the principles of the law of natural order in their own lives, as in the case of members of the Kaotians sect (The Northern Echo, 2006), none however, as far as we know, takes seriously the worship of the Priest-Kings outside the diegesis of Gor. Yet we see that from a diegetic perspective, the Priest-Kings, by means of the technology prohibition, make the formation of heterotopic spaces possible (the Goreans PRPG-VEs) through which players can experience “demediation”. Indeed, these games are crossed by what we call the “phantasm of demediation”, a desire to have an experience that is free from filters and dehumanizing intermediaries (over-mediation). The “phantasm of demediation” underlies video games, *massively multiplayer online games* and PRPG-VEs that proceed from neomedievalist culture.

So now we will look at the relationship between neomedievalism and the phantasm of demediation, and then we shall see how the Gorean PRPG-VEs promote an experience of demediation to, finally, describe the Gorean PRPG-VEs as heterotopias.

4 Demediation: a neomedievalist seduction

In “Dreaming of the Middle Ages”, Umberto Eco (1986) notes a renewed interest in the Middle Ages in contemporary Western culture that manifests itself as “a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination” (p. 63). According to Kim Selling (2004), (neo)medievalism “can be described as both an interest in the Middle Ages and a type of social movement characterised by an adoption or recreation of particular aspects of the medieval world” (p. 211).

Anne Larue (2010) approximates neomedievalism to a form of resistance against the disenchantment caused by the backlash that began in the 1980s, a conservative, misogynist and neoliberal movement born as a reaction against the cultural values of the 60s and 70s. This neomedievalism takes two forms: a nostalgic conservatism pinning a fantasy of social stability on its representation of the Middle Ages and a vision of the Middle Ages as an era that was more authentic, spiritual and closer to nature. This vision carries a counter-speech denouncing the ideology resulting from the backlash and projects an alternative world where community and country life are possible, as opposed to an urban, inhuman and mechanized life. Honegger (2010) declared the figure of the knight the perfect incarnation of the Middle Ages, seducing the public and authors of modern fantasy for many reasons:

1. He is a contradictory mixture of barbarism and refined courtesy;
2. He is a non-alienated male whose actions have a direct and observable impact on the world, as opposed to the modern male, who feels the effects of unbridled industrialization;
3. He is closer to nature;
4. He is a member of a society whose laws and government are tangible and based on personal relationships, as opposed to modern laws and regulations which are abstract in nature;
5. He belongs to a society perceived as orderly, harmonious and authentic.

According to Cawelti (cited in Selling, 2004), the neomedievalist vision leads, in fantasy, to the “construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the limitations of the world of our ‘experience’” (p. 213). It plays on a “nostalgic longing for a pastoral past and the simpler world of childhood” (Selling, 2004, p. 213), an idyllic past opposed to a deteriorated present, the Middle Ages offered “primitive aspects [...] [that] became positive values, connoting liberty, simplicity, and authenticity of lifestyle and emotion, vigor, and spirit, and the Middle Ages were held up as a yardstick against which modernity was found wanting” (p. 213-214).

4.1 The phantasm of demediation

The direct relationship between medieval man and nature, the observable effect of his actions on the world, the personal relationship between him and society and close friendly ties with his immediate neighbor, on one side. Alienated relationship of modern man to a complex, ambiguous, abstract, technological, dehumanized environment over which he has no influence, on the other. The neomedievalist culture present in literature, cinema and video games contrasts the taste of its creators and its receptors for an idyllic past and the rejection of a dystopian present. This polarization reflects a phenomenon we refer to as the “phantasm of demediation” that carries a critique of contemporary “overmediation.” Here “mediation” is used to signify “that which is an intermediary”, that which intervenes therefore between A and B. In our context, mediation does not serve a facilitator function, contrary to the suggestion of one of its regular meanings, which performs arbitration or conciliation. Instead, it acts as a filter, as an obstacle to a direct relationship between A and B. We thus define the phantasm of demediation as the search for an “demediated” experience of the world, in other words one that is closer to nature, less filtered through symbolic and technological ideas and over which the individual has made a choice. This fantasy acts as both a reaction to the consequences of excesses of overmodernity (Augé, 1992) and to the sense of alienation felt, firstly, to the increasing complexity and abstraction of social organization and its

constitutive dimensions (political, economic, legal, media, technological, etc.) and, secondly, to the intermediaries who stand between individuals in their interpersonal relationships, and between individuals and their environment (media and communicational devices, administrators, law, urban planning, infrastructure, etc.).

The phantasm of demediation is based on the concept of “*médiance*” defined by Augustin Berque (2000) as “the relationship of a society to its environment” (p. 128). It refers to an asymmetric ontological structure that consists of “the bipartition of our being into two unequal ‘halves’, one invested in the environment through the technical and symbolic, the other made up of our animal body” (p. 128). Of these halves, “one internal, one external, one physiologically individualized ([...] our animal body), the other diffused in the medium ([...] our ‘*médial*’ body)” (p. 128) indicates a dynamic identity, but also “an irreducible incompleteness” (p. 128).

Our hypothesis is that the phantasm of demediation comes from the asymmetric structure of the being, from the ever increasing suppression of the animal body in its relation to the environment, benefitting the technical and symbolic intermediaries that give the “*médial*” body a greater salience. This technical and symbolic increase can be attributed to modernity and continues into overmodernity.

4.2 *Gorean PRPG-VEs and phantasm of demediation*

The current popularity of online role-playing games in the *fantasy* genre such as *World of Warcraft* and *Dark Age of Camelot* confirms contemporary interest in the Middle Ages and the neomedievalist vision associated with it. We are entitled to assume that the proven desire of gamers to play a character in the Gorean sims is also accompanied by the phantasm of demediation. At least the text of the Gorean PRPG-VEs translates into a demediated view of the world likely to attract the player.

The technology prohibition of the Priest-Kings makes a civilization that is closer to nature possible. Halting the development of weapons forces warriors into hand-to-hand combat, unlike the soldier of the twentieth century who presses a button to kill from a distance, and this has the effect of giving free rein to a natural selection based on physical strength and naturalizes the human being, which technology and civilization have alienated from their animal relationship with the environment. The means of transport and of modern and over-modern communications contribute to the control of territory by man and of its condensation. In contrast, the Gorean premodern man cannot generally understand the world without entering it, without being subject to natural forces and risking his life.

In Gorean PRPG-VEs, there is an intimate interpenetration of nature and the Gorean habitat. The village is preferred and the city remains on a human scale, retaining modest proportions. Nature is represented in an idealized idyllic manner. The intimate relationship between Goreans and nature is also reflected in the formal structure of the games: For the purpose of the role-playing games, players can equip their avatar with a system called *Nutri Life System*, which makes it dependent on its environment. For the avatar to stay healthy it must be nourished properly. To do this, it picks plants and hunts wild animals unless it is engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry. The *Gorean Meter Craft Hud*, meanwhile, is a system which enables an avatar to manufacture objects using traditional artifacts (weapons, wine, tools...) from raw materials and to improve their skills in this area by doing so. Both systems illustrate the direct relationship between Goreans and nature: they draw the resources necessary for their survival from the environment, which they process directly through the skills they develop through their contact with it.

Gorean society is governed by three principles: the law of natural order, the caste system and the Homestone. We have already described the first principle. The Homestone defines the bond between Goreans and their territory; it symbolizes sovereignty, established by force, and underpins a hierarchical organization of the territory (men have a duty to protect the Homestone, but also their village or city). These three principles reflect a single, stable, predictable and hierarchical social structure. In this structure, the position of each and the nature of the relationship they share with others are explicit - which protects the player from a complex and ambiguous societal state - as well as relations between the genders and the links to the territory and the environment (the law of natural order, based on survival of the fittest, implies the sanction of the environment through natural selection).

All dimensions of the PRPG-VEs described above correspond to neomedievalist representations of the Middle Ages and are likely to feed the phantasm of demediation.

5 The Gorean PRPG-VEs: heterotopias or non-places?

5.1 The Gorean PRPG-VEs as heterotopias

As part of his theory of social discourse, Marc Angenot (1989) refers to the marginal discursive practices of a given society which “while contemporary, are not only antagonistic but [...] the products of incompatible perspectives, manifesting within an illusory existence the contemporaneity of non-contemporary discourses” (p 107).

Some of these discourses – that Ernst Bloch (1977) calls “Ungleichzeitigkeit” (“non-simultaneity”)- while they remain peripheral in terms of social discourse, today they have the opportunity to become the dominant discourse thanks to the MMOGs, MUVes and the PRPG-VEs, and to direct these societies through the values that underlie them. This is what we found when we studied the Gorean PRPG-VEs. These MUVes therefore act as heterotopias. This concept, which we owe to Foucault, is defined in parallel with the term of utopias:

Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form [...] There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault, 1984, p. 3-4)

The Gorean PRPG-VEs are heterotopic from several angles. They challenge contemporary social space. On the one hand, they offer themselves as places to achieve non-contemporary counter-speech: complementarity rather than equality of the sexes, explanation of the female psyche in terms of evolutionary psychology, biological justification for gender inequality that obscures the possibility of a social construction of genders. On the other hand, and in a manner entirely consistent with the Gorean biologizing counter-speech, the Gorean PRPG-VEs are intended as places of demediation while they challenge a real “overmediated” contemporary existence alienated from nature in which the animal body of the being is muzzled. They both therefore have critical and challenging value vis-à-vis the social space within which they operate. In this sense, they resemble the heterotopias of compensation, in which the space is intended to be “as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.” (p. 8). Indeed, in our case they compensate for the excesses and disorders of overmodernity.

5.2 *The Gorean PRPG-VEs as non-places*

The “demediating” and heterotopic character of Gorean PRPG-VEs occurs only in the diegetic dimension. But, as role playing games, the PRPG-VEs are bifid, consisting of a diegetic structure and a formal structure. The formal structure produces, consumes and organizes verbal signs and forms of expression, similarly to how it produces sequences of events when the player interacts with

it. This structure is the instance that simulates the world of Gor and the events that occur through it. It is a set of rules and parameters that govern the actions of the players and simulate the game world, giving it consistency and playability (Dormans 2006) (Fine 1983) (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2003). The formal structure of Gorean PRPG-VEs carries cognitive patterns in the diegesis specific to an overmediated contemporary society. This occurs by reconfiguring the space of the Gorean sims and by dematerializing the body of the characters.

The atopic dimension of the formal structure responds to the heterotopic quality of the diegesis. Non-places (or atopias) were defined by Augé (1992) as non-identity, non-relational and non-historical places. They are avatars of overmodernity, a time (ours) of factual, spatial and individualistic overabundance in which our world is “surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral” (p. 118). As Mario Bédard (2002) points out, non-places “operate [...] across the greater whole and serve a system and an idea” (p. 60). In a more recent text, Augé (2010) returns to the concept of non-places and articulates it more closely to an expansion of communication networks, when he writes:

We thus witness a triple “shift”.

Large cities are defined primarily by their ability to import or export men, products, images and messages [...] In the home itself, [...], the television and computer now occupy the place of the traditional hearth [...] Finally, the individual, in turn, is somehow shifted within themselves. They are equipped with devices that keep them in constant contact with the furthest corner of the outside world [...] The individual may singularly live in a intellectual, musical or visual environment completely independent of their immediate physical environment (p. 171-172).

Non-places are representative of a system that promotes the free movement of men, goods and information flows, a system characteristic of the encompassing phenomenon that Armand Mattelart (2008) refers to as the “globalization of information”, characterized by

[the] widespread interconnection of economies and societies [...] [that] gradually expands the sphere of circulation of people as well as material and symbolic goods [...] [Within it] the communications devices hastened the incorporation of particular societies into larger and larger sets, and have been constantly moving the physical, intellectual and mental borders (p. 3).

Reticular non-places on a global scale are based on an increasingly intimate relationship with information technology: on the one hand, the consequence of this spatial transformation emphasizes the ontological imbalance between the animal and environmental body by multiplying the filters between the individual and their environment while leading to hypertrophy of their technological and symbolic extensions. On the other hand, there is a link connected to what Paul Virilio calls

“non-place of speed”. As Sylvie Douzou (2009) reminds us, in the second half of the nineteenth century a new way to communicate appeared, thanks to the invention of the electric telegraph. This innovation was noted, firstly, for the separation of two formerly indivisible realities, communication and transportation, and, secondly, by the joining of distance and immediacy. Information now travels at the speed with which electrical impulses are transmitted. On an earthly level and in consideration of the limits of human perception, it travels instantaneously from point A to point B, compressing and dechronologizing distances. This new way of communication has led to a series of technologies in which today’s telecommunication networks fit:

The time *that passes* of the chronology and the history is thus succeeded by a time which is *revealed instantly* [...] Thanks to the invisible substance of the cathode ray tube, the dimensions of the space become inseparable from their rate of transmission. Unity of place without unity of time, the City thus disappears into the heterogeneity of the temporality regime of the advanced technologies (Virilio 1984, p. 15).

It is in this sense that we speak of reticular non-places. But to fully understand the relationship between the network, the non-place and the globalization of information, we will call upon Foucault again. In *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, Foucault (1984) writes: “It was this complete hierarchy, this opposition, this intersection of places that constituted what could very roughly be called medieval space: the space of emplacement. This space of emplacement was opened up by the Galilean revolution, resulting in the space of extension. After this, the philosopher tells us,

the site has been substituted for extension which itself had replaced emplacement. The site is defined by relations of proximity between points or elements; formally, we can describe these relations as series, trees, or grids (p. 2).

The contemporary conception of space thus also appears here as a reticular form, as a set of interconnected coordinates. But there's more, Foucault tells us: “the importance of the site as a problem in contemporary technical work is well known: the storage of data” (p. 2). So not only has communication dechronologized the space, it has despatialized it. Of course, the phrase is somewhat excessive. It would be better to say that the space is compressed to the extreme, since it coexists in the same repository as the coordinates allowing two physically distant points to be instantly joined. Thus, “the instantaneousness of ubiquity results in the atopia of a single interface. After the distances of space and time, it is the *distance-speed* that comes to abolish the notion of physical dimension” (Virilio, 1984, p. 19). Obviously, despatialization of the space, as well as its dechronologization, applies only to the communication of information and not the movement of the body and the goods. However, when the space is only informational in nature, as is the case for the

Gorean PRPG-VEs virtual environments, the despatialization of the space has serious consequences.

We will illustrate the overmediation and atopic scope of the formal structure of the PRPG-VEs through the example of teleportation portals. There are not only information flows that circulate in the reticular non-places of the formal Gorean structure, but also (virtually) the characters. Here, we refer to the teleportation portals facilitating the transport of avatars from one Gorean sim to another. There is one sim, the *Gor Hub*, which is part of the formal structure of Gorean PRPG-VEs and which, in *Second Life*, allows players to join all the sims that constitute the game. Its teleportation portal allows others sims to be saved when the corresponding option in an interactive map is clicked on. The network of portals thus covers all Gorean PRPG-VEs. This network presents itself as an exaggerated and reifying form of non-place. The movement of people (avatars) has become instant, their bodies reduced to an information flow. The integrity of the Gorean heterotopias is questioned because of their contamination by a double atopic and reticular logic destroying the hierarchy and the stability of the space of emplacement for the benefit of the site. Furthermore, contamination of the Gor world by the formal structure and its spatial schemes reflect the continued and parallel presence of a disruptive gaming logic, which confuses and subverts the diegetic logic of the PRPG-VEs. Finally, the dematerialized body of the character, transported in a network where space is despatialized and where time is dechronologized, is given the privilege of ubiquity, allowing it to compete with the Priest-Kings. In doing so, there is a subversion of the technology prohibition. The Gorean society, a vast genetic laboratory, is undermined and the characters are being equipped, within the diegetic boundaries of the game, with technological extensions that make them posthumans, defined as beings “whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to no longer be unambiguously human by our current standards.” (Garreau, 2005, p. 231-232).

6 Conclusion

The co-presence of the diegesis and the formal structure within the RPGs is rarely smooth and often becomes the place of tension of spatial configurations and of antithetical and incompatible social representations. If both constitute the essential dimensions of the video game experience of the player, their problematic coexistence remains disruptive for it because of the inconsistency that this coupling causes. However, what the game loses in coherence, it makes up for textually, in richness and in depth, being entirely penetrated by sociality. This richness and textual depth are themselves

what prevent any analysis of the sacred aspect within the games, which would be confined to a mere analysis of content, a mechanical reading of social representations.

What we propose here, and which is still at the construction stage, is a sociocritical study of video games. That is to say, an analysis of ways that social representations are embedded and subverted in video games that is not exclusively textualist, but which incorporates their social dynamics and formal characteristics as well as the gaming experience of the player in a global model. In doing so, we try to respond to the approach called for by the wishes of Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll and Jan Wysocki (2014), “a ‘two sided’ view and approach to this issue: a “game-immanent” approach on the one side and an “actor-centered” approach on the other side” (p. 41).

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Biography

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“Venturing into the Unknown”¹(?)

Method(olog)ical Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming

Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, Jan Wysocki

Abstract

Digital games research has finally been accepted in ‘serious academia’ as the multitude of new scientific publications clearly show. There is an abundance of case studies whereas thorough methodological and methodical groundwork is hardly to be found. A void that is reflected by some (from an academic viewpoint) rather disputable practical approaches. This article is trying to fill that void by offering some methodical considerations, striving for starting up methodical discussions in academia.

Derived directly from the ‘digital fieldwork’ in different game spheres and from the perspective of cultural studies, the authors give a practical and basic introduction into methods applicable for researching different aspects and occurrences of religion in digital games, gamers and the practice of digital gaming. The methodical discussion is illustrated by examples derived from a case study on *Smite*, a multiplayer online battle arena game published by Hi-Rez in 2014 and are preceded by a short summary on theoretical and methodological preconditions and considerations.

Keywords

religion, digital games research, method, methodology, *Smite*, actor-centered research, game-immanent research

1 Quote from the “lore” of Janus, the *Smite* “god of portals”. See: <http://smite.gamepedia.com/Janus>.

1 Introduction

‘Thor, as famous as he is bold, is God of the thundering sky. Yet his hammer, Mjolnir is nearly as famous as he is, and Thor will not be parted from it.’² By a mighty blow of Mjolnir, Thor crushes his adversaries’ ‘minions’. With his wild red mane, beard and his piercing blue eyes, Thor is indeed an impressive appearance. His chest is muscle-bound. He is clad in a shining blue metal armour and his huge hammer makes an awe-inspiring and lethal weapon. He is big and overshadows most men and gods. While he is overcome by ‘warrior’s madness’ or when he spins his hammer in a ‘berserker’s barrage’, there is virtually nothing that can sustain his assault. When Thor throws his hammer or leaps into the air to come crushing down on his adversaries, his trademark attacks ‘Mjolnir’s attunement’ and ‘anvil of dawn’ drive his enemies back – or leaves them dead on the battleground. With him is Fenrir ‘the Unbound’, a monstrous black wolf whose eyes and mouth seem to be on fire. He is foretold to slay the great god Odin when Ragnarok has come, the final destiny of the gods is being decided and the world as we know it will cease to exist. Fenrir is a fierce creature, a wolf-weapon unchained who haunts Norse legends as being the one to devour earth and sky. Yet Thor and Fenrir stand united, two assassins shoulder to shoulder against mutual enemies. Finally one of the combatants emerges. Ra, the Egyptian sun god in his traditional incarnation as a human figure with the beak of a hawk, a solar disk above his brow. He is clad in traditional Egyptian vesture and carries a long staff with the all seeing eye on top. He may be the creator of life in Egyptian myth, now as a ‘mage’, he deploys the power of the sun to bring agony and destruction to his opponents. Not only can he move with the ‘speed of light’, he also is able to summon a ‘celestial beam’ to cause harm and a blast of heat to induce ‘searing pain’, incinerating those unlucky enough to be close by. When Thor slams his hammer to bring forth a ‘tectonic rift’ to slow Ra down, his antagonist has already conjured the ‘divine light’ that instantly blinds his adversaries. Will Thor be able to sustain? Or will Ra be victorious in the end?

Theomachy, the ‘battle of the gods’ is a landmark theme in Norse mythology. According to legend however, the divine warfare back then was limited to the gods of the Norse pantheon. These confinements have now been invalidated when in March 2014 the third person multiplayer online battle arena videogame³ *Smite* was newly released by Hi-Rez Studios⁴. In the game, players take on the role of a god and participate in arena combat, either against other player-controlled gods or against NPCs. The aim is to capture the opponents’ base, en route destroying several obstacles and finally defeating an epic boss opponent who guards the hostile fortress. Players choose a god according to their preferences of class and fighting style. They can pick a ‘melee fighter’ who engages in close combat, a long-distance fighter or a supporter whose main task is to help the others in combat. Each character of choice features one basic attack and four spells with varying effects, such as ‘area of effect’ (AOE) damages or spells on multiple targets within a certain area, crowd

2 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1779>.

3 Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) is a mixture of real-time strategy (RTS) games and action games where usually two teams compete, each player controlling one character. The emphasis of MOBA games lies on cooperative team-play with the objective to destroy the opponents’ main base. Famous MOBA games (and predecessors of *Smite*) are e.g. *Defence of the Ancients* (<http://www.playdota.com/>) and *League of Legends* (<http://euw.leagueoflegends.com/>).

4 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/>.

control (CC) like movement or action modifiers that actively stun or slow the opponents down as well as a multitude of other special moves and buffs.

2 Religion and Digital Games, Gaming and Gamers

Religion and religious elements frequently appear in the context of videogames (like the example of *Smite* clearly shows). As subjects to study, they can serve as indicators for the multitude and variety of negotiation processes of religious topics in different socio-cultural settings as well as the construction of fictional religious worlds, the justification and constitution of religious conflicts or even as instrument for the visualization of (mostly) subliminal social discourses.

The theoretical research backgrounds have been extensively discussed before (e.g. Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014), so we give only a brief overview. The main focus of our paper is an introduction into method and methodology from the perspective of cultural studies, which is (among others) also suitable for students' use in the classroom. So please join us, on our quest, "(...) deviating from a path of safety and certainty into something unexpected"⁵: the research of religion and digital games, gamers and gaming!

2.1 Game Narratives and Visuals / Aesthetics

The reason why *Smite* is so appealing to scholars of Religious Studies is its application of religious content from different settings and contexts, namely from Greek, Egyptian, Norse, Chinese, Hindu, Roman and Mayan mythology and its transfer into a (seemingly) 'profane' game environment.⁶ The topic of theomachy has by the game designers been turned into a unique feature that distinguishes *Smite* from other MOBA games whereas the gameplay and game mechanics are roughly the same. Consequently, the individual gods seem to have been designed and shaped with consideration, taking into account their religious features, mythological background stories and regional flavors of the setting they are derived from. In-game as well as on the game's website the gods are thoroughly explained, their features, their abilities in battle and a version of their story (according to the designers) is being told, often accompanied by video clips introducing their character and showing their art of war.⁷ But it is not only historical and mythological influences and small bits of (back-)story that add to the construction of a god character. It is also modern media, namely

5 Quote from the "lore" of Janus, the *Smite* "god of portals". See: <http://smite.gamepedia.com/Janus>.

6 For the role and function of 'myth' in computer games, see: Krzywinska 2005, 2006.

7 For Thor see the Hi-Rez' 'god reveal' on YouTube <http://youtu.be/cR5Q2onmbCU>. For Fenrir see: <http://youtu.be/wqsf3ThdGRE>.

literature (most often fantasy and scifi), film and television, as well as earlier videogames that merge into the reception, reconstruction and reproduction of a figure by generating a consecutive (if not always perfectly coherent) narrative. ‘Game designers don’t simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces,’ as Henry Jenkins puts it (Jenkins 2004: 121).

The already mentioned ‘thunder god’ Thor e.g. resembles in many aspects the figures described in Norse mythology and recorded in the Norse sagas, e.g. his characteristics (as recounted in the game), his fighting moves, ‘Mjolnir’, his weapon. However, many features of the visual/aesthetical design of the god seem to have been taken from the 2011 action movie⁸ based on the even earlier Marvel comic character⁹ of the same name. This blending of interwoven motifs and discourses that constitute the notion of Thor by both the game designers as well as the recipients (who most often recognize the character without any deeper knowledge of Norse Literature) can be denoted as ‘thick text’¹⁰. The term refers to the intertextual contexts, the multitude of references, allusions and connotations within as well as across media genres. Even though the concept was originally focusing on blockbuster movies, it can be nicely applied to explain the various strands of narrative and iconographical references in videogames (and has in fact been used by various scholars) (Krzywinska 2006: 383). The processes of creating and composing ‘thick text’ can be described as applying the concepts of ‘transmedia storytelling’ and ‘remediation’. ‘Transmedia storytelling’ according to Media Scholar Henry Jenkins¹¹ emphasizes narratives and storylines and describes the processes of narratives being transferred and transmitted by a multitude of media platforms, thereby reverting to topics from earlier media forms, e.g. literature or other popular or traditional strands of discourse. Bolter and Grusin’s approach of ‘remediation’ however focuses on the processes of mediatization themselves (Bolter & Grusin 2000). Retracing the refashioning of earlier media like visual art, film, television, literature etc. by new digital media, they state that the digital means of communication do not merely substitute its predecessors, but incorporate them and only through this gain cultural significance (p. 20 ff).

In the area of videogame research, the remediation of textual and intertextual elements derived from a multitude of preexisting media genres such as orally transmitted myth, literature, fantasy tale, comic and movie merge into the narrative, plot, setting, gameplay and/or mechanics of the digital game – or into the creation of a singular character as we have already demonstrated

8 See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0800369/>.

9 See: http://marvel.wikia.com/Thor_%28Thor_Odinson%29.

10 The concept of ‘thick text’ most probably goes back to the term ‘thick description’, coined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). It has since then been widely used and adapted. Even though the media critic Roz Kaveney in her conception of ‘thick text’ does not openly refer to Geertz, the references are quite obvious and have also been applied and adapted by other Media Scholars for the description of videogame narratives and iconography. See Kaveney 2005: 5; Krzywinska 2006: 383.

11 For a general explanation of the concept ‘transmedia storytelling’ see Jenkins 2006. For an application on videogames, see Jenkins 2004.

taking the example of Thor. The complexity of reception and (re-)construction processes that take place during the design procedure of a videogame or game elements are most probably not accidental and can nicely be traced using the example of the new god character of ‘Janus’ in *Smite*. On the occasion of his new release in May 2014, an official making-of film¹² was publicized apart from the official ‘god reveal’ video clip¹³, explaining in detail the different steps the designers took in the making of the character. This is indeed a lucky strike. Even though the level of the design is very interesting for the research of religion in digital games it mostly remains a “blind alley” since in most cases the design studios do not communicate or cooperate with scholars.

2.2 Gameworld and Gameplay

Another area of in-game research is the videogame as a whole, its general appearance, its topography (representing the ‘gameworld’) and its modes of play (the ‘gameplay’). We have already looked at the narratives and aesthetics both of which considerably affect the look and “feel” of the game. But instead of looking at certain and marked-off aspects within the game setting, we enter a higher level of complexity which constitutes the ‘worldness’¹⁴ of the game as ‘invented universe’ (Klastrup 2008: 2), be it a scifi scenario in outer space, a modern-day or futuristic city, a medieval town or a Tolkienesque fantasy world.

A gameworld represents the result of a game’s aesthetics, its narrative and its possibilities in the communication between the player and the game. It is this combined effort of the underlying mechanics and elements that constitute a gameworld that can be experienced by the player. (...) Thereby aesthetics are complemented with narratives and thus form the groundwork of the gameworld. (...) So the gameworld can be seen as a nexus in which all the strands of aesthetics and narratives merge together and are interwoven with the option of the player to interact with those elements. (Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014: 26)

Thus the gameworld indicates the larger experience of the game which comprises its mechanics, its plot, its storyline(s), its objects, its characters, its spaces etc. Within the gameworld, the gameplay takes place, pointing to the levels of interaction by the (human) players in the course of the game, mainly in regard to choice, interactivity and agency¹⁵ (see 28 ff). Together with the constitution of a (coherent) gameworld, the gameplay shapes and steers the ‘ludic experience’ (Rodriguez 2006) and the players’ ‘immersion’ (see Murray 1997: 38; Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014), i.e. the feeling of

12 See: <http://youtu.be/ZtsGe5EYID4>.

13 See: <http://youtu.be/9US7evaihQM>.

14 For a detailed account on ‘worldness’ in digital games, see Klastrup 2008: 1; Krzywinska 2006: 386.

15 For a discussion of the term ‘agency’ see e.g. Barker 2005: 233-238.

‘being drawn into a world’ (see Klastrop 2008: 4). ‘Doing something in a world, participating in its ruleset, to get involved in its world through exploration and/or through the repertoire of action of the player’s avatar lets the player become part of the gameworld.’ (Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014: 31).

At the point where gameworld and (aspects of) gameplay interconnect, we often find reference to religion in many different forms and shapes, even though in many cases not as obvious as in *Smite*¹⁶, where the whole setting, the players’ characters to the point of the name and description of the various attacks and fighting styles conveys the leitmotif of ‘theomachy’ or ‘battle of the gods’ even though in a contemporary layout.

2.3 Gaming Culture and Beyond

Beside the discourses around the design process and an in-game analysis of religious elements (like narratives, aesthetics, gameworld and gameplay), the gamers’ receptions of the game context play an important role. The gamer’s notion of the game contents and their correlating and negotiating of those religious discourses within and outside their own religious disposition is an excellent diagnostic tool which enables insights into their very own and individual religiousness in a qualitative perspective.

An example for religiously based discussions that largely exceed the limits of the game itself and even the gaming community is the debate on the appropriation of Hindu deities in *Smite*. A fact that has led to much criticism, namely by Hindu leaders like Rajan Zed, president of the Universal Society of Hinduism. He claims that putting the deities under player control ‘trivializes’ them and additionally denounces the alleged ‘pornographic’ depiction of the goddess Kali as inappropriate.¹⁷ The conflicting positions within the debate are thanks to the internet easy to trace and allow insight into the (otherwise often concealed) area of personal as well as institutionalized religion.¹⁸ During the discussion, the *Smite* developers confirmed their refusal to remove the Hindu gods – and at the

16 For a multitude of different examples see Heidbrink, Knoll, Wysocki 2014: 26 ff.

17 <http://www.gamespot.com/articles/deity-based-moba-smite-will-not-use-jewish-christian-islamic-figures/1100-6384974/>.

18 See e.g. <http://www.rtsguru.com/game/451/article/3378/Hindu-Leaders-Unhappy-With-Smite-Hi-Rez-Responds.html>, <http://www.rtsguru.com/game/451/article/3419/Controversy-Over-Hindu-Gods-in-Smite-Not-Over.html>, <http://www.cinemablend.com/games/SMITE-Offends-Hindus-Catholics-Jews-With-Porno-Style-Depiction-Kali-44645.html> and <http://www.change.org/petitions/stop-denigration-of-hindu-gods-in-video-games-boycott-smite>. The Universal Society of Hinduism did a similar protest against *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* the first entirely India-developed digital console game (published for PS2 in 2009), as Xenia Zeiler’s analysis reveals. She identifies the discourses as mediatized negotiations of religious authority within global diaspora settings. See: Zeiler 2014: 66-87.

same time declared their rejection of ever integrating characters from Abrahamic religions like Judaism, Islam or Christianity, allegedly for gameplay reasons:

‘From [the] perspective of a video game, the key Abrahamic figures--Adam, Noah, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, are not that interesting in character design or gameplay. They are all human. They never overlapped or interacted with one another. They certainly never fought each other in dramatic fashion with unique abilities. They are all peaceful--at best they would be support characters,’ as Todd Harris, Hi-Rez Studios’ chief operating officer is quoted.¹⁹

This substantially unequal treatment of characters from different religious background generates many interesting research questions and would therefore make an interesting field for religious studies beyond the perspective of the game itself.

In summary, the recounted aspects constitute why videogames (in the same way as other means of popular culture) represent an outstanding field of research for the shaping, the transmission and the (re-)construction of religious discourse in the present age. It is mainly the accessibility and transparency of the discourses in and on videogames (via the multitude of digital media) that make videogames an excellent source of information. However, in order to being able to conduct a thorough research in this field it is necessary to wisely choose the appropriate method(s), a basic selection of which will be explained in detail in the following section.

3 Methods for the Research of Religion and Digital Games

Digital games are – to differing degrees – complex constructions of visuals, sound, architecture world-building, narrative, rules and game mechanics.²⁰ As we have already described elsewhere (see Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014), we have to turn to each of these elements (when present) while hoping to unravel the usually complex and multidimensional relationships between religion and games. At first glance, some of these elements may be approached through means of “more established” disciplines. Especially game aesthetics, narratives and world-building seem to be predestined for an analysis by film and literary studies.

Without dipping too much into the ‘narratology-vs-ludology’ debate²¹, it is worth mentioning that purely narrative and aesthetics based approaches to game research can pose their own issues,

19 <http://www.gamespot.com/articles/deity-based-moba-smite-will-not-use-jewish-christian-islamic-figures/1100-6384974/>. For more information on the background see also <http://www.gamebreaker.tv/pc-games/playing-god/>.

20 For further details see e.g. Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014: 18 ff.

21 See e.g. Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014: 11 ff.

most of which relate to the unique structure and properties of games as a distinct form of media – or perhaps “media conglomeration” (see eg. Aarseth 2004: 46). As scholars of religion we are interested in the processes of reception and discourse involved in the constitution of religious beliefs and identity, which also involves reception of media like movies, books, comics and – of course – games. But to understand these processes of reception, to be able to ask the ‘proper’ questions and make sense out of the answers returned to us, we need to understand the context and circumstances under which reception takes place. In the case of a videogame which features religious elements this context consists of

- a) social, cultural and peer related knowledge of the player including his knowledge related to religion as well as games and other media – in short: his or her (religious) lifeworld – and
- b) the act of playing itself and all the choices, involvement and experiences but also the mechanical, rule- and design-related restrictions this may encompass.

Accordingly, the following sections are split up into two main parts. The first will be focused on a ‘game-immanent’ approach, advocating and describing playing as a method of research as well as sharpening the view for the identification and analysis of religious elements inside digital games. The second section will be focused on a more actor-centered approach, drawing on methods of the social sciences and mainly qualitative research and gaming-related online community research.

In the summary of this chapter, we will then try to amalgamate both approaches. We will try to further illustrate that both game-immanent as well as actor-centered methods may not be seen as exclusive but rather as complementary approaches.

1.1 Playing Research? The Game-Immanent Approach

The title of this section was taken from Espen Aarseth’s article ‘Playing Research: Methodological approaches to game analysis’ (2003). ‘Playing research’ is a rather skillful play on words, as it encompasses various issues with game research methods still prevalent to this day. There is of course the most obvious and simple reading of

- a) the research and analysis of games and play. But reading a little further into the contexts and struggles of game research – especially at the time of publication of Aarseth’s article – one could also read the title as “playing” – as in “make believe” – research, enforcing the notion of

b) game research as something not to be taken as seriously as “proper” research in other fields of study²².

Of course, Espen Aarseth – himself an early supporter of game research (see e.g. Aarseth 1997) – had no intention of implying such a sentiment (quite the contrary, actually). Therefore the most significant way of reading the title of his article – and this section, while we’re at it – is the notion of “playing as means of research”. Aarseth himself expresses three ways through which knowledge about games can be acquired:

Firstly, we can study the design, rules and mechanics of the game, insofar as these are available to us, e.g. by talking to the developers of the game. Secondly, we can observe others play, or read their reports and reviews, and hope that their knowledge is representative and their play competent.²³ Thirdly, we can play the game ourselves. While all methods are valid, the third way is clearly the best, especially if combined or reinforced by the other two. (Aarseth 2003: 3)

All of these approaches (as well as their issues) will be discussed throughout the following paragraphs. The main purpose of this section however is to expand on the idea of playing as a method of research as well as the importance of a game-immanent perspective. But before we go into more detail on how a ‘game(r)-scholar’ should approach playing as method, let us elaborate on why we think this perspective is essential for the understanding of games, play and gamers as well as – to stay on topic – their relation to religion.

Playing vs. Watching vs. Reading

First, it should be made clear that while we support the view that playing is an integral part for comprehending games and gaming, this does not mean other sources of information can or should be devalued or even ignored. The option of using the numerous gaming-related online communities and video platforms like *YouTube* or *Twitch* for actor-centered research will be discussed in one of the following sections.²⁴ But even when taking a game-immanent approach, external sources can prove a very useful tool.

One of the perks of doing extensive game research is the fact that the communities of some games or game series can be very productive in providing fellow fans, interested readers and

22 See e.g. <http://criticalreligion.org/2013/10/21/here-be-dragons-the-quest-for-academic-credibility/>.

23 The question of competence will be addressed in sections *Playing with method – Playing as method* and *The actor-centered approach* in this chapter.

24 Espen Aarseth provides a more extensive list of sources for what he calls ‘non-playing analysis’. Namely these are ‘previous knowledge of genre, previous knowledge of game-system, other player’s reports, reviews, walkthroughs, discussions, observing others play, interviewing players, game documentation, playtesting reports, interviews with game developers’ (Aarseth 2003: 6). Some of these will be discussed in the following sections.

watchers and – in our case – researchers with large amounts of information and material. This information is usually stored in so called ‘gaming wikis’ or community fansites, a few examples for *Smite* being *Smitefire* and the *Smite*-wikis hosted by *wikia.com* and *gamepedia.com*. Everything available on these sites was collected and reviewed by active community members and players of *Smite*. The collection includes detailed rundowns and guides of every god available in the game. What makes these wikis especially useful is not only the fact that they provide the interested researcher with easily accessible data otherwise only available by starting up the game – hereby adding some convenience. They also feature additional tools like a ‘history’ and a ‘comment’ function through which changes made to the entries can be tracked back and easily reconstructed.

Throughout their life cycle, games – like many creative products – go through numerous iterations before they are – at least on paper – considered finished or “released”. And even then, the design process may never really stop until the game is completely abandoned – by players and designers alike – and considered to be no longer economically feasible. As Roz Kaveney phrases it:

We have to learn again that all works of art are to some extent provisional – in that they are abandoned rather than ever completed, and in that they are always one particular stage in a notional process which may be picked up again two decades later. (Ridley Scott’s 2003 re-edit of *Alien* is a case in point here.) (Kaveney 2005: 5)

This is even more relevant for multi-player games like *Smite*²⁵ which has gone through an extended beta test phase²⁶. Throughout this test phase of over two years – during which the game was already open and playable for the public – the gameplay, aesthetics and especially the god roster of *Smite* changed in a way that makes the first versions of the game barely recognisable when compared to the current iteration. And the changes and additions haven’t stopped with the official release on march 25th 2014. In order to keep the game “fresh” and interesting for the players as well as attractive for the ever growing competitive gaming scene²⁷, constant changes are being made to the game. This ranges from small mechanical modifications on single gods to make them more ‘balanced’ with respect to the other gods to complete aesthetics and gameplay related overhauls of unpopular gods²⁸. Additionally, a new god is added to the roster every month and now and then a

25 There are also examples for remakes and “Director’s Cuts” of singleplayer games like the *Age of Mythology Extended Edition* (<http://www.ageofempires.com/AoM.aspx>) or the *Deus Ex: Human Revolution Director’s Cut* (<http://www.deusex.com/directorscut>).

26 ‘Beta phase’ is a term derived from software development and testing. A beta version of a game is usually ‘feature complete’ but has not yet reached final release status. (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Software_release_life_cycle#Beta).

27 For examples see section *The actor-centered approach* in this chapter or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic_sports.

28 The popularity of a god in *Smite* can be based on different factors. For example, he or she may be perceived by the players as not viable or strong enough or just boring to play when compared to the other gods. Or the god might be

whole new game mode (e.g. in May 2014 the so-called ‘Siege Mode’) with its own rules is being released. Online resources like wikis (and their history functions) but also video resources like ‘Let’s Plays’, game trailers, reviews or first impression videos can be a great tool when trying to track back, compare and document changes made to a game over time.

Of course this is not the only use for “game external” sources. With a little online research for example, one might be able to find collections of in-game texts²⁹, dialogue transcripts³⁰ and gameplay walkthroughs for many games. While these tools can prove exceptionally useful when planning and documenting one’s own gaming research, they should never be used as a substitute for actual play. First, there is always the possibility of errors or missing elements in third party sources. Secondly, “watching” (via *Twitch* or a ‘Let’s Play’) or “reading” (through guides and wikis) a game provides the game(r)-researcher with a limited view and experience of a game, seen only through the eyes of another player. This deprives the researcher of all agency when choosing what to do, what to see and what to take a closer look at. Of course, the perspective of other players becomes extremely important when turning to the actor-centered approach, but until then the ambition of a “regular” player is not necessarily the same as the ambition of the researcher, the latter of which should be aiming for an impression of the game which is as comprehensive and detailed as possible.

The Language of Digital Games

There are many different arguments one could use to advocate a more “hands-on” approach to game research. Many of these points seem rather universal and obvious³¹ while others are mostly related to the unique properties of games as a deeply involving and interactive medium³². But let’s stick to a perhaps more relatable – to non-gamers – example to make our point.

Proper communication is an essential element of many competitive and cooperative multiplayer games. *Smite*, being attributed to the ‘multiplayer online battle arena’ (MOBA³³) genre, uses a distinct ‘quick chat’ feature (called VGS³⁴) to simplify communication during the usually rather bustling matches. The pressing of certain key combinations (up to 3 keys in a row) triggers pre-

perceived as as not fitting with regards to his or her mythological (and pop cultural) background. See e.g. the rework of the god Sun Wukong based on community feedback (<http://www.vault4.com/threads/smite-sun-wukong-massive-change-and-new-god.1799/>).

29 See e.g. <http://www.imperial-library.info/books/skyrim/by-category> for a collection of all in-game lore books from *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*.

30 See e.g. http://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/1c6nb1/all_of_the_dialogue_in_skyrim_use_for_modding/ for a full dialogue transcript for *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*.

31 Like the ‘first hand’ vs ‘second hand’ knowledge argument made by Espen Aarseth (Aarseth 2003: 6) and the fact that most scholars would probably not dare writing about a book or a movie without having read or watched it.

32 See for example Markku Eskelinen, who refers to the ‘configurative’ nature of games, compared to the ‘interpretative’ nature of literature, film and theater (Eskelinen 2001: Gaming as configurative practice, para. 5).

33 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/what-is-smite->

34 This system is taken directly from *Tribes: Ascend* (<http://www.hirezstudios.com/tribesascend/home>). Another multiplayer game developed and published by Hi-Rez Studios but otherwise very different from *Smite*.

defined voice messages only audible by team mates of the player. Unfortunately, many of these messages seem rather cryptic – if not incomprehensible – when heard out of context:

‘Attack Left Lane!’

‘Gank Middle Lane!’

‘Enemy missing right!’

Readers who are familiar with *Smite* will perhaps understand these short sentences. Players of other games of the MOBA genre might also recognise them but notice a few subtle differences to their own gaming related experience. Everyone else might at best guess what they “could” mean but otherwise fail to grasp their whole message. This is of course due to the differing degrees of context provided and present at this point.

Many games – especially those which involve strong communicative aspects like multi-player games – or rather their players have developed their very own distinct vocabulary of terms, abbreviations and designations. Various lists and guides with possible “translations” can be found throughout the internet³⁵, but what makes this “gaming language” particularly hard to grasp for those unfamiliar with the corresponding game, is that its terminology is usually closely tied to certain aspects of gameplay. Imagine trying to translate a word from an (unfamiliar) foreign language which designates an item or action which is equally unfamiliar to you. Of course, this comparison can only hold to a certain degree as most terms from “gaming lingua” derive from the English vocabulary and carry some of their “original” meaning with them.³⁶ Still, to be able to grasp these kinds of terms and phrases used by many gamers – not only inside the games but also “outside”³⁷ – comprehensive knowledge of the underlying gameplay mechanics, rules and structures is needed.

This brings us back to the examples at the beginning of this section. The given phrases are actually already more “beginner friendly” versions of phrases which are used since the emergence

35 For example <http://thecircular.org/the-language-of-gamers/>, <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/9.390989-A-Friendly-MOBA-Primer-A-How-To-Guide> or http://smite.gamepedia.com/Common_Terms.

36 For example ‘gank’ in the example above, which in the context of multiplayer games refers to a combined and oftentimes surprising attack or ambush on a player of the opposite team. (http://smite.gamepedia.com/Common_Terms) Another example would be ‘tank’, used in many MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* but also sometimes used in *Smite* and meaning a player character role which focuses on being able to sustain large amounts of damage while keeping enemies away from more fragile teammates. ([http://www.wowwiki.com/Tank_\(game_term\)](http://www.wowwiki.com/Tank_(game_term))).

37 For example when discussing about the game and their experiences with it but also to extending degrees in their everyday conversations not necessarily related to games.

of the MOBA genre with the original *Warcraft III* modification *Defence of the Ancients (DotA)*.³⁸ They are used to ask teammates for assistance, notify them of possible dangers, declare own intentions or initiate combined actions and strategies. But even with this information, the full meaning of each phrase (and the right way to act upon it) can only be deciphered on the basis of further knowledge about the game and its structure, namely:

- The most popular ‘map’ on which matches in *Smite* take place is divided into three main routes (called the ‘left’, ‘middle’ and ‘right lanes’, respective to their position from the player’s perspective).³⁹
- The game is played in two teams of five gods, each god is controlled by a player
- The teams start on opposite sites of the map, their starting points (‘bases’) connected by the three lanes.
- The main aim of the game is to stay alive and kill enough enemy gods and their minions to gain an advantage, enter their base at the opposite end of the battlefield and kill their ‘titan’.
- The lanes are connected to each other by a labyrinth of paths with multiple entry and exit points
- This area is called the ‘jungle’ and is populated by neutral monsters which can be fought for extra gold and experience rewards as well as temporary improvements (‘buffs’).
- Usually players are assigned (by their team) to one of the ‘lanes’ or the ‘jungle’ as their main operational area. But using the paths through the ‘jungle’ allows players to traverse from one ‘lane’ to another and possibly emerge behind enemy players and attack or ambush (or ‘gank’) them.
- This is possible because players are only able to see enemy gods which are in their ‘field of view’, meaning directly in front of them and not obstructed by walls or other obstacles.
- To avoid being surprised by such a ‘gank’, players try to keep each other up to date on the position of enemy gods by using the ‘enemy missing’ command as soon as they lose vision of an enemy god, suspecting he or she might be trying to ‘gank’ another lane.

Hopefully, this information – while by far not complete – will suffice for making clear, how much knowledge of a game is necessary to grasp the basic and regular communication between players throughout a play session. The VGS system of *Smite* is a rather simple example, as the pre-defined voice messages are comparatively well phrased. But not every *Smite* player may use the built in VGS command system. Many type out the respective messages by use of the regular text chat

38 Some might even track back the origin of the MOBA genre to the *Starcraft* Modification *Aeon of Strife*. ([http://starcraft.wikia.com/wiki/Aeon_of_Strife_\(map\)](http://starcraft.wikia.com/wiki/Aeon_of_Strife_(map))).

39 See e.g. <http://www.smitenews.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/azg6gRF.jpg>.

interface. This is often an old habit translated from past experiences with other games of the genre and may result in even more cryptic communication. A common (and fully acceptable) chat message during a regular match of *Smite* might then look like this: ‘ss mid, care bot ra inc’. This could be translated into: ‘Enemy god is missing from the middle lane, be careful everyone on the bottom lane, the enemy god Ra is heading towards you!’⁴⁰ Easy, isn’t it?

So, to sum up this already quite extensive section: An integral part of learning the language of games and gamers – which is again a useful tool to access and figure out social structures among gamers – is understanding the underlying game mechanics as well as the overall structure of the game. This can be achieved most reliably and comprehensively by actual playing combined with research based on external resources like – in this case – guides on terminology and abbreviations.

Playing with Method – Playing as Method

We hopefully have been able to make a point for the importance of playing as part of researching games and gamers by now. But even though we addressed the question of ‘why’ the question of ‘how’ still stands. While a definitive answer cannot be given – as it heavily depends on the context and interest of the given research – we would like to provide some general suggestions and key points on how playing research could be approached.⁴¹

Modes of Play

When playing a digital game as a researcher, we first of all have to reflect on and be clear about our own agency, intentions and context. This is in many respects essential: First, we have to be aware that playing research is not the same as playing a game “for fun”, the way most regular players would approach a game. This makes us more perceptive of the elements of a game we are aiming to analyse. But it also distances us from the players’ perspective who might not see and play the game in the way we – quite intentionally – see and play it. This can hardly be avoided but somewhat alleviated by incorporating the experiences of other players into our own research.⁴² Additionally, a game could be played several times in different “modes” with varying goals and intentions. For example, the first time a game is played you could follow a more “explorative” approach⁴³, based

40 In other games of the genre like *Defence of the Ancients* or *League of Legends*, the game map is arranged more diagonally, so the right lane is often referred to as ‘bottom’ lane and the left lane as ‘top’ lane. (See http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/Summoner's_Rift).

41 These suggestions are based on our own experiences when researching religion in digital games and should be considered in this context. However, they could also prove useful in other research scenarios, given sufficient reflection and – where appropriate and necessary – additions in methods and focus.

42 See also section *The actor-centered approach* in this chapter.

43 Of course, even then one has to reflect on the own “playing style”. For example, Richard Bartle identifies four types of players: socializers, killers, achievers and explorers (Bartle 1996) with ‘cheaters’ added by Espen Aarseth as a 5th mode of play. (Aarseth 2003: 4). Nick Yee expands on this classification and names ‘Socializing and Role-Playing’, ‘Achieving and Competing’, ‘The Explorer Type’ and ‘Immersion’ as main motivations for playing MMORPGs (Yee 2007).

on the intention of experiencing the gameplay and gathering some first impressions, while the second playing session could then encompass a more analytical approach which focusses on detail, analysis and documentation.⁴⁴

Secondly, we have to reflect on our own background i.e. the prior knowledge we bring to the table. This encompasses both our own gaming experience and knowledge of genre – the typical mechanics and conventions plus narrative and aesthetic tropes derived from other games and media – as well as our experience and knowledge as scholars of religion.

Thirdly, in case of research in and on multiplayer games and especially the complex social structures of MMORPGs, we have to reflect on the effect we – as researchers – have on people we talk to. The world of MMORPGs is at a first glance a rather anonymous one, as players chose their own in-game names and are normally addressed by these. But a) as researchers we have to adhere to certain ethic principles which includes disclosure of our research intent. b) We are obliged to anonymize “personal” information derived from the games in order to protect our informants. This refers especially to their names, be it the “real” ones or the ones they have chosen for their player characters. And c) even seemingly minor things like our choice of player avatar or character class may change the way other players perceive and react towards us.⁴⁵

How much should I play?

This question regularly arises when facing the sometimes enormous task of doing research on a videogame. Even a single playthrough of a linear game with a fixed ending – be it narrative or through sequential levels which have to be completed to “finish” the game – can take up to several dozen hours of play time⁴⁶. Non-linear and open-world games even may take several hundred hours to see and experience “everything” (including multiple playthroughs). And then there are competitive multiplayer games which feature completely different means of progression through the game. For example, to be able to play all gods in *Smite*, the player either has to pay for them in real currency or “unlock” them spending an in-game currency earned by playing matches. This approach may take dozens of hours to unlock a single god and several hundred hours to unlock all of them. Furthermore, a player’s individual skill at playing the game is automatically measured throughout matches so that he or she can be placed against players of similar skill. “Progression” through the game – and its ‘league’⁴⁷ system – is therefore closely linked to the player’s aptitude at playing the game and mastering its systems and the underlying strategies, a task which requires extensive experience and sometimes even external research or guidance by other players.

44 In some games, especially those with multiple endings or complex decision making systems and branching narratives, multiple playthroughs are even unavoidable.

45 This is for instance described by T.L. Taylor in *Play Between Worlds* (2006: 11ff).

46 The website <http://www.gamelengths.com/> features average game lengths for many games, provided by players.

47 See <http://smite.gamepedia.com/League>.

The actual amount of time which has to be invested in playing, however, has to be decided on the basis of one's own research interests and the games in question. To access the core communities of multiplayer games may require large investments of time to gain the required knowledge, skill or even 'reputation' (Taylor 2006: 43ff) among them to be taken seriously. A researcher with a level 1 character in an MMORPG will be perceived in a wholly different way than a much more experienced one but access to groups of high level players may also bring additional and even more time-intensive 'responsibilities' with them (Taylor 2006: 47ff). Thus the researcher has to reflect on his or her own intentions, goals and research questions to weigh play time against external research.

Documentation and Thick Description

As with any serious research endeavour, proper documentation is key when doing research on digital games and applies of course also to playing research. The extent and type of this documentation is mainly dependent on the focus of research. Games offer several layers of visual, auditive and narrative elements as well as modes of interaction and configuration, all of which can – contain religious elements.⁴⁸ For each of these layers, there are different and overlapping possibilities of documentation including:

- Textual documentation
- Screenshots
- Video recordings
- Audio recordings

These work best in conjunction with one another and their application should be decided on a case to case basis.⁴⁹

One especially useful and important means of recording game content is the method of 'thick description', coined by 20th century anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 3-30). According to his methodical approach, doing ethnography includes not only the behaviour of the subjects of his research but also heavily relies on the context and environment in order to make their demeanour plausible to outsiders (p. 6 f). An example of a 'thick description' in the context of a videogame is the introduction of this chapter.

The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement-what manner of men

48 See e.g. Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014, section 4 „In Search of Religion(s) in Games: What to Study?“, pp. 18ff.

49 As was stated before, especially in multiplayer games, proper anonymisation of player names should also be considered.

are these? – to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise. (p. 16)

Thus, ‘thick description’ which is supposed to ‘take us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation’ (p. 18) may also be applied when doing (ethnographic) research in virtual environments⁵⁰ – especially in videogames – in order to convey the basic appearance and the course of moves and actions. In certain cases the analogy of ‘alien cultures’ fits exceptionally well, since the rules of the gameworld, the language which is spoken in-game and the behaviour of the “natives”, the tech-savvy “inhabitants” of the “foreign” environment remains obscure to the unskilled outsider. It is therefore necessary for the researcher to do fieldwork in order to explore and get familiar with the surroundings. ‘The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighbourhoods ...); they study *in* villages.’ (p. 22) That is – basically – what a scholar of (religion in) videogames is supposed to do. In the process it is indispensable to note that ‘what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to’ (p. 9) – and to reflect on it.

1.2 The Actor-Centered Approach

Throughout the prior sections on ‘playing as method’ and the ‘game-immanent approach’ it has already become apparent that without a more actor-centered view the outcome of any playing research can be somewhat limited with regards to actual reception and processes of construction by the players and designers⁵¹ of a videogame. Citing Robert Jauss:

In the triangle of author, work and reading public the latter is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but even history-making energy. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its audience. For it is only through the process of its communication that the work reaches the changing horizon of experience in a continuity in which the continual change occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production which surpasses them. (Jauss & Benzinger 1970: 8)

Adapting this statement to the area of games and religion one might come to the conclusion that only these processes of reception and discourse convey the real relevance of researching religious

50 For a general account on ethnography in internet research see e.g. Hine 2000, 2005; Horst and Miller 2012.

51 The people behind the production of a game (i.e. the producers, designers, developers, artists, animator, writers etc.) are of course also a part of the reception process and can prove extremely valuable as sources or even interview partners. Unfortunately however, the highly competitive nature of the game industry can make it difficult to approach these actors except through interviews published in gaming magazines and on online news portals like e.g. <http://www.pcgamer.com/>.

elements in digital games. Therefore, while ‘playing research’ and game-immanent analysis are necessary approaches to identify and describe these elements it is also important to acknowledge the perspectives of the players and designers. This can be achieved through various means which will be in part discussed in the following paragraphs.

Of course, when dealing with players and processes of reception and construction as main focus of research, most methods of qualitative social research apply. While it should be stated that knowledge and experience acquired through playing can prove very useful when e.g. contacting players (or designers) and conducting interviews, these methods have been and still are extensively discussed elsewhere⁵². So the main focus of this section will be on approaches specific for analysing digital games which might prove advantageous when planning, preparing and conducting further qualitative research on games, gaming and gamers with focus on religion.

Digital gamers have a tendency to communicate about the games they play, be it in-game or off-game. This is mirrored by the multitude of options offered to loquacious players like community forums, social networks and in-game social features. The official website of the game *Smite* e.g. offers discussion forums⁵³, a chat room⁵⁴ and a wiki⁵⁵ for the players to communicate and contribute. Additionally, external sources like popular social networking sites Facebook⁵⁶ or Reddit⁵⁷ also offer bulletin boards, groups and fan pages. Those are means of communication where in-game content often merge with personal opinion and in many cases also religious discourse. The afore mentioned debate on whether characters from Abrahamic religions should be included into the game can – from the players’ perspectives – be nicely traced, allowing glimpses into the personal religiousness of the actors involved.⁵⁸ An analysis of the game(r) communities therefore presents an excellent means of carving out contemporary religion and the tracing of religious discourse in a qualitative perspective.

Further, there are even more game-specific sources ready to be tapped by interested researchers of games (and religion). Already in 2003, Espen Aarseth mentioned ‘observe others play’ as a viable research method when studying games (p. 3). At the time he meant actually watching a gamer playing a game by ‘looking over his or her shoulder’ – which is of course still

52 See e.g. Flick, Kardorff and Steinke 2004.

53 See: <http://forums.smitegame.com/>.

54 See: <http://smite.boards.net/page/chatroom>.

55 See: http://smite.gamepedia.com/Smite_Wiki.

56 See: <https://www.facebook.com/smitegame> or <https://www.facebook.com/groups/SmiteGroup/?fref=ts>.

57 See: <http://www.reddit.com/r/Smite>.

58 See <http://smite.boards.net/thread/1755/adding-more-gods-religions>. As a side topic an interesting discussion evolved on what constitutes an “actual” god, clearly showing the high potential of reflection in reference to the religious biography and socio-cultural localization in the disputants who are by no means only consuming game content.

possible. But since then the rise of online video platforms like *YouTube*⁵⁹ and screen capture software like *Fraps*⁶⁰, *Xsplit*⁶¹ and *Open Broadcaster*⁶² has made way for huge numbers of freely accessible so called ‘Let’s Play’ and ‘First Impression’ videos. In these videos, players share their own experiences and impressions by recording their gameplay sessions – oftentimes spanning over dozens of episodes and featuring whole playthroughs of a game – and providing commentary. While these ‘Let’s Plays’⁶³ can prove rather static and feature only one sided communication, streaming platforms like *Twitch*⁶⁴ even allow players to actively interact with their audience – including possibly the researcher – while live streaming their gameplay experience. The usefulness of such platforms and tools seems obvious and the interactive nature of live streaming even possesses the potential for specifically constructed research scenarios

Last, there is a multitude of ‘game and geek culture’⁶⁵ related conventions⁶⁶ LAN parties⁶⁷ and e-sport events⁶⁸ where players meet on a regular basis and which in many cases feature speeches, talks and panels by game developers, journalists and game companies⁶⁹. These events provide great opportunities to get in touch with players and game developers alike and to get rare insights into the game development process.

59 See: <http://www.youtube.com/>.

60 See: <http://www.fraps.com/>.

61 See: <https://www.xsplit.com/>.

62 See: <https://obsproject.com/>.

63 The relevance of ‘Let’s Plays’ in general and the context of videogames (‘gamevironments’) for the research of religion in digital games has just recently been emphasized by Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe & Zeiler 2014 who offer a new approach to this field of research.

64 See: <http://www.twitch.tv/>.

65 For a comprehensive discussion of ‘gaming culture’ and the issues of the term see Shaw 2010 and Heidbrink et al 2014, 36ff. Another indicator that videogame culture has become mainstream is the film *Video Games: The Movie* (2014), a documentary released in July 2014 offering a chronology of videogames technology and industry, featuring interviews with important representatives of game design, marketing and game and geek culture. As such, the documentary might very well provide an interesting research focus in itself.

66 See e.g. the PAX Prime in Seattle, USA (<http://prime.paxsite.com/>), the gamescom in Cologne, Germany (<http://www.gamescom.de/de/gamescom/home/index.php>) or the Comic-con in San Diego, USA (<http://www.comic-con.org/>).

67 For example. the DreamHack in Jönköping, Sweden (<http://dreamhack.se/>).

68 For example the International DotA2 Championships in Seattle, USA (<http://www.dota2.com/international/announcement/>).

69 For example the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, USA (<http://www.gdconf.com/>).

2 Conclusion

Many fear change. Venturing into the unknown. Deviating from a path of safety and certainty into something unexpected. But life is change; a journey through doorways both physical and emotional, with every moment a passage to something new (...) ⁷⁰

This phrase most probably sounds like a profound insight into the entanglements of life (as such). But it certainly also rings true for scholars who enter a new field of research – like religion in videogames. In the previous sections, we have – by the example of the fairly new MOBA *Smite* – looked into the many different areas where religious topics might appear in video games. We have broached the theoretical concept and considerations indispensable for analysing religion in videogames. And we have discussed the different hands-on approaches and perspectives a researcher can take on in the course of an actual research project.

However, what looked like an aphorism on worldly wisdom judged by the first few words turns out to be a quote from *Hi-Rez's* website on *Smite's* new god 'Janus' if you continue reading.

'(...) and it is Janus, God of Portals and Transitions that governs this.' ⁷¹

Smite's new god 'Janus' is a nice example to summing up and recapitulating our points. Apart from written information available on a multitude of 'official' and fandom websites ⁷², forum discussions ⁷³ and reviews, 'Let's Plays' ⁷⁴ and other clips ⁷⁵, podcast features ⁷⁶ etc., the developers have (as we have recounted before) also published a making-of video ⁷⁷ on the occasion of the new release. Thus, we have a great amount of multisided and probably partly diverse informations from different sources at our disposal. – And we can go in-game and play the character for the 'ludic experience', evaluating our own impressions compared to the different sources of information as well as other players' notions.

70 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1999>.

71 See: <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1999>.

72 See e.g. <http://www.hirezstudios.com/smite/nav/game-info/gods/god-info?god=1999>, <http://forums.smitegame.com/showthread.php?11496-May-22nd-Janus-and-Warrior-Re-purpose>, <http://smite.gamepedia.com/Janus>, <http://massively.joystiq.com/2014/05/25/smites-newest-addition-is-janus-the-god-of-portals-and-transit/>.

73 See e.g. http://www.reddit.com/r/Smite/comments/24rybn/upcoming_god_janus/.

74 See e.g. http://youtu.be/BkMn68_JAnw.

75 See e.g. <http://youtu.be/9US7evaihQM>.

76 See e.g. http://www.podtrac.com/pts/redirect.mp3/pushnc.com/OnSmite_207.mp3.

77 See: <http://youtu.be/ZtsGe5EYID4>. However, we must not forget that this clip only shows what the developers want us to see and is by no means an 'objective' or 'neutral' account! We must not forget that media producers use their agency as well as the means of the media itself to promote their opinion or attain a certain goal.

Which processes of reception (from mythological lore to modern media) have lead to the visual modelling of the *Smite* character ‘Janus’? Which discourses were dominant in the construction of ‘Janus’ story, choice of abilities and weapons? How is the introduction of ‘Janus’ being discussed by the players in terms of appearance, weaponry and lore? How is ‘Janus’ story and mythological background being recounted and discussed in forums by people both familiar and unfamiliar with Roman Religion?

Those are (among others) some topics scholars of religion and game(r)s could be interested in. Hopefully this paper on method(ological) hands-on approaches proves helpful as practical introduction towards religion in digital games research. So don’t fear change and do venture into the unknown! – It’s definitely worth it!

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Simulating the Apocalypse

Theology and Structure of the *Left Behind* Games

Stephen Jacobs

Abstract

This article is a structural analysis of *Left Behind*, a real-time strategy computer game that is loosely based on the best selling series of novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Both the books and the game are popular cultural expressions of a Christian theology that posits an apocalyptic future in which humanity will be finally judged. Drawing on both narratology and ludology, the paper suggests that the *Left Behind Game* is neither truly a narrative nor a game. Instead a maze like structure can be identified. This structure allows the player a number of choices within the game play, but only one pathway allows the player to successfully navigate the game. Furthermore, there is only a single successful resolution. The paper concludes that this game structure is homologous to the theological structure of the apocalyptic belief system.

Keywords

Computer games, narrative structure, the Rapture, dispensationalism, premillennialism

1 Introduction

Apocalyptic beliefs should not be dismissed as marginal to American culture. Amy Frykholm (2004, p.14) suggests that: “Apocalypticism shapes our stories about America itself and about the direction and meaning of the world”. Post-apocalyptic worlds abound in popular cultural forms, not least in games. Mervyn Bendle (2005, p.1) states: “Popular Culture is awash with images and narratives of the apocalypse”. Post-apocalyptic worlds or imminent apocalyptic events are popular settings for many games. The term apocalypse tends to be utilised in two senses – a broad and a narrow sense. Broadly speaking an apocalypse signifies a cataclysmic event that has or threatens to

destroy all or the majority of life. In its narrower sense, the apocalypse refers to a number of texts and passages, such as found in Jewish and Christian literature, upon which a theology of end-times is based. In the broad sense the apocalypse makes a good setting for games as there is a clear dualism between good and evil, and as Rachel Wagner (2012, p.191) suggests the gamer is invited “to see themselves as messianic agents of deliverance against evil”. Some of these games make direct use of apocalyptic texts. For example *Darksiders*, released in 2010, is a game in which the player takes the role of War – one of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. These games appropriate apocalyptic imagery for the sake of the game play. Conversely groups with a strong theological stance are not averse to appropriating popular cultural forms as a strategy for spreading their message. In this paper I will look at how a particular theological conception of end-times, known as premillennial dispensationalism, has been articulated in a real-time strategy game. This game is based on *Left Behind* – a very popular series of adventure books that is set during end-times that premillennial dispensationalists refer to as the Tribulation. In this paper I argue that the theology acts as a limitation to the openness of the game.

The significance of apocalypticism for American culture is clearly demonstrated by the phenomenal success of the *Left Behind* series of books, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. The *Left Behind* series begins with an event known as the Rapture, when good Christians are physically summoned to heaven, leaving chaos and confusion on earth. The books are founded in a belief that after the Rapture there is a seven-year period of terror known as the Tribulation. This period sees the rise of the antichrist, war, disease and the persecution of Christians. At the end of this period Christ will return to establish his millennial kingdom. LaHaye and Jenkins believe that there is a fundamental battle for hearts and minds. Whilst nothing can be done about God’s ultimate plan for creation and the end of times, believers in a forthcoming apocalypse can be instrumental in creating a context that is more conducive to their beliefs. The world is, according to LaHaye and Jenkins, dominated by the secular humanist ethos: a world in which the majority believe that they can lead their lives independent of God. In particular, secular humanists dominate the media, inculcating an antipathy towards the truth of the Christian message. LaHaye and Jenkins critique the ethos of secular humanism through a popular cultural form. As Glenn Shuck (2005, p.80) suggests:

The authors have found no better means to wage their imaginative campaigns against their humanist adversaries than through the suggestive pages of their best selling *Left Behind* novels.

The first book *Left Behind* was published in 1995, and was succeeded by eleven more. Rapture novels are not a new phenomenon. Crawford Gribben (2004) suggests that the novels of Sidney Watson, published between 1913 and 1916, establish many of the popular tropes found in subsequent popular representations of the Rapture and the Tribulation. However, none of the antecedents of the *Left Behind* novels achieved anything like the astonishing sales of the *Left*

Behind series. The last book *Glorious Appearing* (2004) claims sales in excess of 60 million for the series. The last six books in the series all reached number one in many of America's best-seller lists including the *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* (Chapman 2009, p.151). The books are readily available, not only in Christian bookstores but also from major retailers, such as Barnes and Noble and Wal-Mart. A Barna Research Group Survey suggests that almost one in nine American adults had read at least one of the *Left Behind* novels (Chapman 2009, p.151).

There were a number of spin-offs from the books including a series written for children, a radio show and three films. The novels have spawned a minor industry. In 2006 a computer game, *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, was released based on the bestselling series of books. This was followed in 2007 by the release of *Left Behind: Tribulation Forces*, and in 2010 by a third game *Left Behind: Rise of the Antichrist*. All three games are real-time strategy games, and have similar game-play. A real-time strategy game is a game that does not involve turn taking, in which the player has a bird's eye view of the game-world, and moves multiple characters around the game-world. This genre of games is often used in military strategy games. All three games can be played as a single or on-line with multiple players. The focus of this paper is on the first game. While there have been a number of academic publications about the novels (Forbes & Kilde 2004; Frykholme 2004; Shuck 2005; Chapman 2009; Gribben 2009), some literature about the films (Hendershot 2004; Wallis 2008), there is almost nothing published about the games.

The games have not proved to be such a runaway success as the books. They have been criticised by gamers for extremely poor game-play, and by many Christians for their theological and ideological content. Nonetheless, the *Left Behind Games* reveal a great deal about the relationship between a particular and significant form of American religiousness, and popular cultural formats. I argue that the apocalyptic theology not only determines the narrative elements of the game, but also the structure of game-play. The theological limitations imposed on the game-play restrict the appeal of the games in a way that does not apply to the books.

2 The ambivalence of popular culture.

Computer and video games are not only big business¹, but are now a significant aspect of popular culture. The Entertainment Software Association suggests that seventy two percent of American

1 According to John Kirriemuir (2002) the game industry generates between 18-25 billion dollars per year. According to the market research group DFC intelligence the estimated value of the world market in games in 2007 will reach 30 billion dollars. Cited in Buckingham (2006, p. 1). The Entertainment Software Association (2011) claims that the bestselling game of 2007 Halo 3 took more in revenue in its first day of sales (\$ 170 million) than the opening weekend for the Hollywood blockbuster Spiderman 3 (\$151 million).

households play video or computer games (Entertainment Software Association 2011). Many evangelical Christians perceive computer games to be morally pernicious, pointing out that many games include graphic scenes of sex and violence. In a review of the third *Grand Theft Auto* game on *Christian Answers.Net* the writer suggests that the game “is assured a place in infamy thanks to its incredibly immoral gameplay”. However, all forms of popular culture can be appropriated to further the cause.

Evangelical Christianity has an ambivalent attitude to new media forms and popular culture. As Heather Hendershot (2004, p.28) observes evangelicals are paradoxically both technophilic and technophobic. Media and popular cultural forms are the products of, and therefore promote the values of, secular society, yet evangelical Christians perceive the proselytising potential of the media. The Jimmy Swaggart Ministries’ web site (2011) proclaims that:

The Gospel presented over television is the single most effective means of bringing the message of Christ to millions of people.

In other words new media and popular cultural forms have the potential for both good and evil. Nowhere is this ambivalence more marked than in attitudes towards popular music. For example various forms of popular music are frequently characterised as the devil’s music by evangelical Christians², and yet at the same time there is a tradition of Christian popular music.

Christians have entered the musical marketplace with a vengeance, staking a claim for rock-and-roll’s wholesome potential (Hendershot 2004, p.52).

This ambivalence is marked in the *Left Behind Games* by musicians, whose special singing ability raises the ‘spirit level’ of good allies, and if powerful enough can transform an evil character. On the other hand the performance of rock music by evil musicians will revitalise other evil units, and deplete the spirit of good forces. One of the characters early in the game warns the player:

Beware the evil musicians. If you get too close they will play their screaming guitars and influence you to their side (*Left Behind: Eternal Forces* 2006).

The *Left Behind* novels and games fundamentally articulate an anxiety about the present situation rather than expressing a fear about future times. The cyber-streets of New York through which the player has to guide the characters are in fact a representation of how many evangelical Christians view the contemporary situation, and not some mythical future time. The streets of contemporary

² See for example The Devil’s Music <http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/Evils%20in%20America/devils_music_no_effect.htm> (accessed 05/04/11).

America are regarded as replete with hostile anti-Christian forces, and the only way to make the world safe for true Christians is, as in the game, to convert as many people as possible to the true path. In other words, the struggle between the forces of good and evil is happening now, and popular culture is one of the major battlegrounds for this conflict over the soul of the world.

In a message of endorsement on the *Left Behind Games* web site Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins suggest that: “you’ll find this new game a breath of fresh air and a great evangelistic tool to win our youth and gamers for Christ. We are lending our full support to this outreach and encourage everyone to join us”.³ However, as Heather Hendershot (2004, p. 31) argues, Christian popular cultural products cannot simply be perceived in terms of evangelising, but must also be considered as a means for evangelicals “of staking a claim for themselves as modern consumers”. While many evangelical Christians are alienated by secular popular culture, not to engage with popular culture may contribute to the representation of evangelical Christianity as anachronistic. Consequently, evangelicals need to engage with popular culture, but in a form that is more consonant with their beliefs.

3 The theology

The books and their various spin-offs are based on a theology sometimes referred to as premillennial dispensationalism, or simply dispensationalism. Its origins are often attributed to John Nelson Darby (1800 -1882), a Church of Ireland Priest, who became disillusioned with the Church’s close relationship with the state and became a founder member of the schismatic group the Plymouth Brethren. Many of Darby’s ideas have become “widely spread and culturally pervasive especially in the USA” (Sweetnam 2010, p.191). Darby’s ideas were not immediately popular. However, the debate about slavery and the subsequent American Civil War instigated a crisis in American society and culture, which contributed to a context where the rather pessimistic ideas of dispensationalism had greater resonance (Kilde 2004, 55-56).

The concepts underlying dispensational theology really entered mainstream America with the *The Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909 and later revised in 1917. Cyrus Scofield, a Congregationalist minister, annotated the King James Bible with explanatory notes at the bottom of each page.

3 It is difficult to see if the *Left Behind Game* will actually be an effective evangelical tool. The game has had very poor reviews in the gaming literature. For example *Gamespot* suggests ‘Don’t mock Left Behind: Eternal Forces because it’s a Christian game. Mock it because it’s a very bad game.’ (Todd, 2006) Consequently it seems unlikely that it will attract gamers.

It sold extremely well, selling over three million copies within fifty years. Michael Williams (2003, p.19) observes:

Because they appeared on the same page as the inspired word of God, Scofield's notes took on an authority second only to the words of Scripture itself for many of its readers.

While Scofield's interpretation of the Bible was not universally accepted, it did make many dispensational ideas normative amongst American evangelical Protestants. The fact that the Oxford University Press published it also gave the *Scofield Reference Bible* a certain respectability.

While on the surface dispensationalism appears to be a simple, if not simplistic doctrine, Sweetnam (2010, p.192) warns that it is more theologically nuanced than most scholars suppose. It is also "very far from being a monolithic system of belief" (Sweetnam 2010, p.193). Nonetheless we can identify certain dimensions, or what Sweetnam terms 'stresses', that characterise dispensationalism. Each of these stresses, taken on their own, is not exclusive to dispensational theology, and "none on its own constitutes Dispensationalism" (Sweetnam, 2010, p.198). Sweetnam firstly identifies dispensationalism as inherently imbricated with evangelicalism⁴. Dispensationalists also adopt a literal interpretation of the Bible. This denies that the Bible should be understood in allegorical terms. Scofield's introduction to his *Reference Bible*, referring to the Books of the Prophets, asserts that, "this portion of the Bible, nearly one-fourth of the whole, has been closed to the average reader by fanciful and allegorical schemes of interpretation" (cited in Sweetnam 2010, p.201).

Dispensationalism adopts a premillennial perspective. Premillennialism is one of the two main strands of millennial thought, the other being postmillennialism. Millennialism is a utopian vision that history will end with a thousand-years of peace and righteousness. Postmillennialism is a positive and optimistic perception, which suggests that humans are capable of self-perfection. This ability for perfection establishes a thousand years of justice and righteousness, which will precede the return of Christ. Postmillennialists perceive humanity as potential agents of change, and this perception underpinned much of the social reformist agenda of nineteenth century America. Charles Finney (1792-1875), a revivalist preacher and active abolitionist, evokes the ethos of postmillennial thinking, when he argued that, "the great business of the Church' is to 'reform individuals, communities and governments" (cited in Williams 2003, p.14).

Premillennialism is more negative, and suggests there is no possibility for human perfection without Christ's intervention. According to premillennial thought there is no point in a reformist agenda: only Christ can redeem humanity, and he will return to rid the world of evil and evildoers

4 Evangelicalism is itself problematic to define, and Sweetman (2010, p.197) refers to David Bebbington's concept that Evangelicalism has four dimensions: Biblicism, Crucicentrism, Conversion and Activism.

and to establish the millennium. Premillennialists look for “signs that society is so corrupt that Christ must surely appear soon to set things right” (Kilde 2004, p.50). Society cannot be reformed, and the only possibility is to seek one’s own personal salvation, and to spread the gospel.

Premillennial Dispensationalism suggests that God directly intervenes in history. There are different epochs, referred to as dispensations, characterised by different relationships between God and humanity. Linked to this concept of different dispensations is the idea that both Israel and the church have unique and distinct roles in the Divine plan for humanity. The Jewish people are represented as God’s earthly people, whereas Christians are represented as the heavenly people. We are currently in the church age, where God turns his attention from his chosen people – the Jews, to those who have accepted Christ. However, Darby believed that God had not finished with his earthly people, as the prophecies in the Bible have not been fulfilled. Furthermore, Darby wondered why God had not revealed the formation of the church to the Old Testament prophets. Consequently the church age, which began with the Pentecost, is regarded as a sort of hiatus in the prophetic chronology outlined in the Bible. This hiatus would end, and the prophetic chronology would restart with Christ summoning up the true church to heaven.

It is believed that the period before the second coming of Christ will be marked not only by escalating corruption, but also increasing natural disasters. Premillennialists, such as John Darby, wondered why true Christians would have to suffer the torments of end times. Darby found his answer in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, which states:

We who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

Darby interpreted this as indicating that true Christians would be literally and physically transported to heaven prior to the worst apocalyptic horrors of the end-times. Darby called this ‘the secret rapture’⁵. Darby was critical of the established church, and therefore true Christians constitute a hidden church: many of those who are formally Christians, including ministers will be left behind.⁶ While it is unclear whether Darby was the originator of this idea, it does seem that he and the early Plymouth Brethren coined the term ‘Rapture’ (Kilde 2004, p.53). Designating a name to a particular idea facilitates the dissemination of that idea, and enables it to be more readily fixed in peoples’ minds. The Rapture not only marks the restarting of the prophetic chronology, but also marks the beginning of a seven year period prior to the second coming, known as the Tribulation. This period

5 Darby derived the term from the Latin Vulgate translation of Greek text of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Where the English translation suggests ‘caught up’, is in the Latin version *rapiemur*, which is derived from the verb *rapiō*. The noun form *raptura* becomes the English word ‘rapture’ (Frykholm 2004, p.16).

6 Bruce Barnes, a major character in the earlier books, who also appears in the games, is a pastor who is not taken in the Rapture, suggesting that while he was an official within the church, he was not a true Christian.

is marked by ever increasing corruption, the rise of the Antichrist and the wrath of God in the form of plagues, earthquakes and freak weather conditions. This view is known as pre-tribulation rapture. Williams (2003, p.112) suggests that the idea of pre- tribulation rapture⁷ creates a “lifeboat mentality”.

Dispensationalists represent society as increasingly corrupt and this entails that, although ultimately destined to be saved, they consider themselves to be ever more marginalised. Consequently, this reinforces an expectation that the Rapture is imminent. However, as Darby suggested that the church age is a kind of hiatus in prophetic chronology, no specific event in the world is indicative of the actual timing of the Rapture. This avoids the cognitive dissonance of predicting an actual date for the final judgement, as with Harold Camping, the pastor who was convinced the final judgement would occur on 21st May 2011.

The *Left Behind* books and various spin offs posit a theology that is based on both premillennial dispensationalism and pre-tribulation rapture. However, LaHaye and Jenkins also add a third dimension to the theology, which is the concept that people can still be saved during the period of the tribulation. It is “this refinement of the pre-tribulationist position that allows for the dramatic story told in the *Left Behind* series” (Kilde 2004, p.60). The books are based on a series of characters who realise the truth after the Rapture, and dedicate their lives to Christ. These characters set up a group called the Tribulation Force to combat the evil of the Antichrist and provide support during the Tribulation for all those who have realised the truth.

4 The Left Behind – Eternal Forces Game

The opening animated sequence of the first *Left Behind Game* begins with an image of earth from space with streams of light emanating from the surface. A short scene of two angels carrying a body follows this image of the earth. The opening sequence clearly signifies the Rapture. The player is then shown an image based upon Michelangelo’s renowned painting of God creating Adam. In other words there is a representation of both the beginning and end of humanity. This suggests the Rapture, and the subsequent events of the tribulation are implicit in the very beginning of creation. The unfolding of history is illustrated with images of people who represent different ages and a spinning calendar.

7 Others suggest that rapture occurs in the middle of tribulation (mid-tribulation rapture) or at the end of the tribulation period (post-tribulation rapture).

The sequence continues with a portentous voice which announces:

Throughout history men and women have chosen one of three paths: to seek a relation with God, to ignore God, or to reject God.

These three distinct paths are signified by images of two people kneeling and praying, an ordinary street scene, and a group of leather-clad men with tattoos and short-cropped hair gathered under a bridge. The narrator then announces:

At some point in time, as the Prophets predict, God will come to take his people.

This is illustrated with an image of an hourglass spinning through space. Following these disappearances, the narrator suggests, will be a time of terror and confusion:

For those left behind the apocalypse has just begun.

This apocalyptic time is represented by the skylines of Paris, London and New York with palls of smoke, and a number of landmark buildings clearly in ruins (*Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, 2006)⁸. Here, in a nutshell, is a popular rendition of dispensationalist theology, with its emphasis on history, individual choice, prophecy, judgement and the approach of end times.

After the opening animation there is an introductory full motion video sequence that sets the narrative for the game itself. There are a number of short scenes with actors illustrating the shock and chaos that people experience as true Christians literally disappear before their eyes. Of course very few people really know what has happened. Eighteen months later the player is informed, in a scene that portrays a newscast, that Nicolae Carpathia⁹ has risen to power, and restored peace to the world with his Global Community Peacekeepers, a clear allusion to the United Nations. The newscaster informs the player that Carpathia “has freed us from the bondage of religion”. There is then a short scene in which a small group of people at prayer are rounded up by the heavily armed Global Community Peacekeepers. This is followed by a shot of Nicolae Carpathia, who looks at the camera and declares: “This is my time”(*Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, 2006). The implication is obvious: Nicolae Carpathia is not all he seems, and readers of the series know of course that he is the antichrist.

8 This opening animated sequence can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZGmSUO8M4g>.

9 Carpathia is represented in the novels as the business person par excellence, who personifies the capitalist spirit that denies God, and is therefore aligned with Satan (Shuck, 2005, p.101).

The game-play begins with Leonard, who knows the reason behind the disappearances, and has just returned to New York. The player is informed that Leonard wants to tell friends and neighbours the truth, and is told that they have to guide Leonard through the city to talk about the disappearances. There are three types of characters: those like Leonard who know the truth (the Tribulation Force), those on the side of Nicolae Carpathia (the Global Community Peacekeepers), and finally neutral characters. The player can only control those characters who are on, or have been converted to, the side of the Tribulation Force¹⁰, described in the *Left Behind Game* as “formed by worldwide believers who unite their efforts in the struggle against the Antichrist”. The player therefore has a godlike control over those who know the truth. The aim of the game is to successfully complete a number of missions entailing avoiding defeat by the Global Community forces, building up resources such as housing, money and food to sustain the Tribulation Forces, and to recruit both neutral characters and hostile characters to the cause. The game manual explicitly states that the goal is to:

Save as many people from the clutches of the antichrist as possible. Your purpose is absolutely NOT to wipe out the enemy forces! Remember those are PEOPLE he has deceived and can be recruited (*Left Behind: Eternal Forces Manual* 2006, p.26).

The player has, or can transform characters under his/her control into, recruiters. Recruiters have the ability to persuade neutral and hostile characters to join the Tribulation Force, or in the words of the manual – ‘combat the lies of the antichrist with God’s truth’. To do this the recruiter has an icon in the command panel, which the player clicks on when the recruiter character is in the vicinity of a neutral or evil character. A representation of a shaft of light descending on the character turns him/her from evil red or neutral grey, to good green.¹¹ The centrality of recruiting throughout the game parallels the significance of evangelism for dispensationalists. In all there are 40 levels, or missions, to complete in the first game. All of these levels follow a very similar structure, which requires the player to build up the Tribulation Force. As in the book series, it is important to obtain sufficient physical resources. So the player must build banks and cafés to maintain the Tribulation Force. It is also imperative to maintain the spirit level of the Tribulation Force, this is primarily achieved through praying. The player also can train his/her characters to become influencers – these are musicians who sing the praises of the Lord to raise the spirit level of characters under the player’s control. They also have the ability to turn Global Community Peacekeepers units into neutrals, making them easier to recruit. The player quickly finds out that if the spirit level of the

10 Although, controversially, in the multi-player version it is possible for players to take the side of the Global Community.

11 The recruiter can always convert neutral characters, but must have a higher spirit force than the evil character to be successful.

characters under their control is not maintained, they will succumb to the power of the Global Community Peacekeepers, and the current mission will be lost.

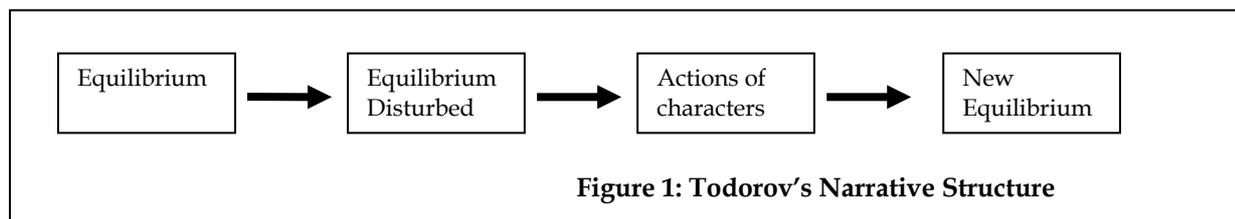
The player also has to build up enough military strength to withstand the attacks of the Global Community Peacekeepers. Consequently, although spiritual defence and influence are significant aspects of the game, in appearance and game play *Left Behind* is not very different to other real time strategy games, and in particular war strategy games. Although the game stresses the importance of ‘spiritual warfare’ in the struggle between good and evil, physical combat is a fundamental dimension of the game play. The player, as in any other war strategy game, has to build up military strength, as well as spiritual strength, in order to defeat the enemy forces. In fact many levels of the game are most effectively completed through building up military resources such as tanks and annihilating the Global Community forces. In each level the player has to perform specific tasks, such as training a builder in order to make a café or bank, or find a specific person – such as Bruce (who is also a major character in the earlier books).

5 Novels, games and mazes.

One of the reasons for the phenomenal success of the books is that the narrative is exciting. The theology of the books, which suggests a time of increasing corruption, war and natural disasters in end times, and providing one last opportunity to be saved from evil, gives the books a dramatic tension. One would imagine that this apocalyptic scenario would also be a basis for an exciting game, but this is not the case. One of the reasons for this failure is that games, while having a narrative dimension, are not narratives in the same way as novels: the strategic non-diegetic aspect of a game is more significant than the narrative dimension. While the theology is apparent in the books, it does not detract too much from the narrative pace. On the other hand the theology does have a direct impact on the non-diegetic aspect of the game-play. Immersion, which is defined by Janet Murray (1997, p.98) as ‘having the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place’, in the novel is contingent upon various aspects of the narrative. However immersion in games, and in particular real-time strategy games, is more contingent upon the game-play.

There are major structural differences between novels and games. Frasca (2003) suggests that traditional media forms, such as the novel and films, are narratives. These narratives are primarily representational, and structured by a sequence of events, which normally have an ending of some type. Novel and film narratives can be understood primarily in terms of the structure posited by Tzvetan Todorov who indicated that narratives might be understood in terms of “a movement

between two states of equilibrium” (cited in Andrew 1984, p.84). In a diagrammatic form this can be represented as in Figure 1.



The first book of the *Left Behind* series begins with the pilot Rayford Steele flying above the Atlantic. He is vaguely dissatisfied with his life, and fantasises about making a pass at the younger and very attractive flight attendant Hattie Durham. A hysterical Hattie dramatically disrupts this when she informs the incredulous Rayford that some of the passengers have simply vanished from the plane. The reader then discovers that “the simultaneous disappearance of millions all over the globe had resulted in chaos far beyond imagination” (LaHaye and Jenkins, 1995, p.24). Rayford and a number of the other characters quickly realise the significance of these disappearances, and set out on a quest to find out what they can effectively do, given this new set of circumstances. At the end of the first book the core characters form The Tribulation Force dedicated to surviving the seven-year tribulation, battling the forces of the Antichrist and achieving redemption. In the last book the faith of the Tribulation Force, despite all their suffering detailed in the intervening ten books, is vindicated with the defeat of the Beast and the False Prophet which heralds the Millennium of Christ’s reign on earth and the damnation of all those who failed to accept Christ. In other words a new equilibrium is restored at the end of the narrative. This new equilibrium is of course determined not only by the theology, but also by the very structure of the novel.

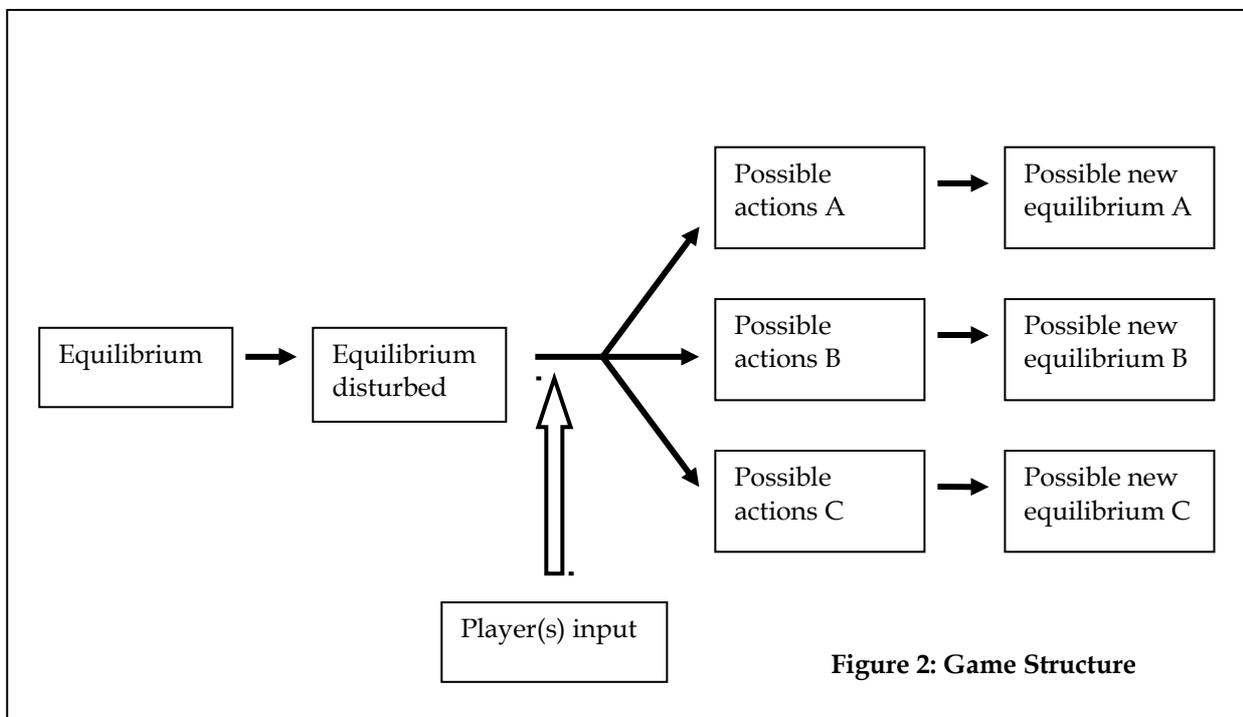
However, the novel reader is clearly not a totally passive consumer of texts. The reader constructs the text: passages can be glanced over or perused; reading can be linear or a skipping back and forth; and meaning is constructed at the interface between reader and text¹². The reader of a novel can explore the text – he/she does not necessarily have to read the text in a strictly linear sequential order. Furthermore readers can interpret and understand the actions of the characters and the final outcome of the narrative in ways that differ from both the intent of the author and other readers¹³. Whilst the reader of the novel might imagine different scenarios for the end of the book, might skip to the end to ‘find out what happens’, and might even speculate on what happens to characters after the end of the text, the new equilibrium at the end of the text is primarily

12 See for example Roland Barthes (1976) *The Pleasures of the Text*.

13 See Amy Frykholm (2004, 68-74) where she discusses various resistant readings of the *Left Behind* novels.

determined by the author. Furthermore, the way in which the reader interacts with the novel is fundamentally noetic, purely a mental act. This limitation is primarily determined by the very structure of the novel’s narrative form. In other words the novel is a relatively closed narrative form.

Espen Aarseth (1997, p.1) argues that reading a cybertext, which he defines as “any system that contains an information feedback loop” of which computer and video games are important exemplars, is a radically different experience to reading a book or watching a film. The way in which the reader of a cybertext interacts with the narrative is quite different, as it not purely noetic. Aarseth (1997, 4) suggests that the difference between reading a book and reading a cybertext is comparable to the distinction between watching a game of soccer and playing the game. The spectator will in all probability conjecture on the outcome, at times watch intently and other times be distracted, but never really has an *influence* on the actual game. Like the soccer player, the reader of the cybertext has an extra-noetic input into the text, and therefore influences the end result. This results in a much more open narrative form in comparison to a novel. Cybertexts might be considered as a type of game. While, as Wittgenstein has observed, it is problematic to define what a game is, it is reasonable to suggest that games involve a certain input from the player, which influences the way in which a sequence of events unfolds. In Todorov’s terms these extra-noetic inputs will impact on both the nature of subsequent actions and the nature of the new equilibrium. In diagrammatic form the structure of a game can be represented as in figure 2.



For example, in a game of football the referee blowing his/her whistle disturbs the equilibrium of the opposing teams facing each other at the beginning of a match. The players then have a range of possible actions open for them, and these actions will have a direct effect on the nature of the equilibrium at the end of the match – team X could be the winners, losers or the match could be a draw. Games are therefore characterised by player input and the indeterminacy of the end result. Frasca (2003, 227) argues:

Games always carry a certain degree of indeterminacy that prevents players from knowing the final outcome beforehand. To paraphrase Heraclitus, you never step in the same video game twice.

The outcome or restored equilibrium at the end of a game is indeterminate due to the player's extra-noetic input. However, Roger Caillois points out that there are certain games that are determined not by player input, but by chance. For example the spin of the roulette wheel, the throw of a die etc. So whilst player input might be attenuated to such a point as to be almost non-existent, the outcome is uncertain. In fact it is the very uncertainty of the outcome that makes games of chance so appealing. So the minimal requirement for a succession of events to be considered as being a game, rather than a narrative, is the indeterminacy of the outcome. Play is "an uncertain activity" and "doubt must remain until the end, and hinges upon the denouement" (Caillois 2001, p.7).

Espen Aarseth (2004, p.47) suggests that a cybertext must have three dimensions: rules, a semiotic system (the game-world) and the game-play (the application of the rules to the game world). The reader of the cybertext, like the player of the game, is instrumental in determining the final equilibrium at the end of the text. While the cybertext author determines the rules and the semiotic system, the cybertext reader determines how the rules will be applied. It is the *application* of the rules, determined by the cybertext reader input, which creates the indeterminacy, which enables most computer and video games to be classified as games. In other words games might be considered as very open narratives.

A further dimension of a game, as indicated by Caillois, is that it requires some form of resolution or denouement. The resolution might be determined on a purely arbitrary basis by the player(s), by a time limit, or by the rules of the game. Consequently, in the strict sense of the term *The Sims* or multi role playing activities such as *Everquest* are not games, as there is no denouement as such. However, most real-time strategy games qualify as games because they do have some final end point determined by the game design. For example in *Sid Meier's Civilization*, the player might lose, or might win by: destroying all other civilisations, getting to the end of the modern era with the highest score, or by winning the space race.

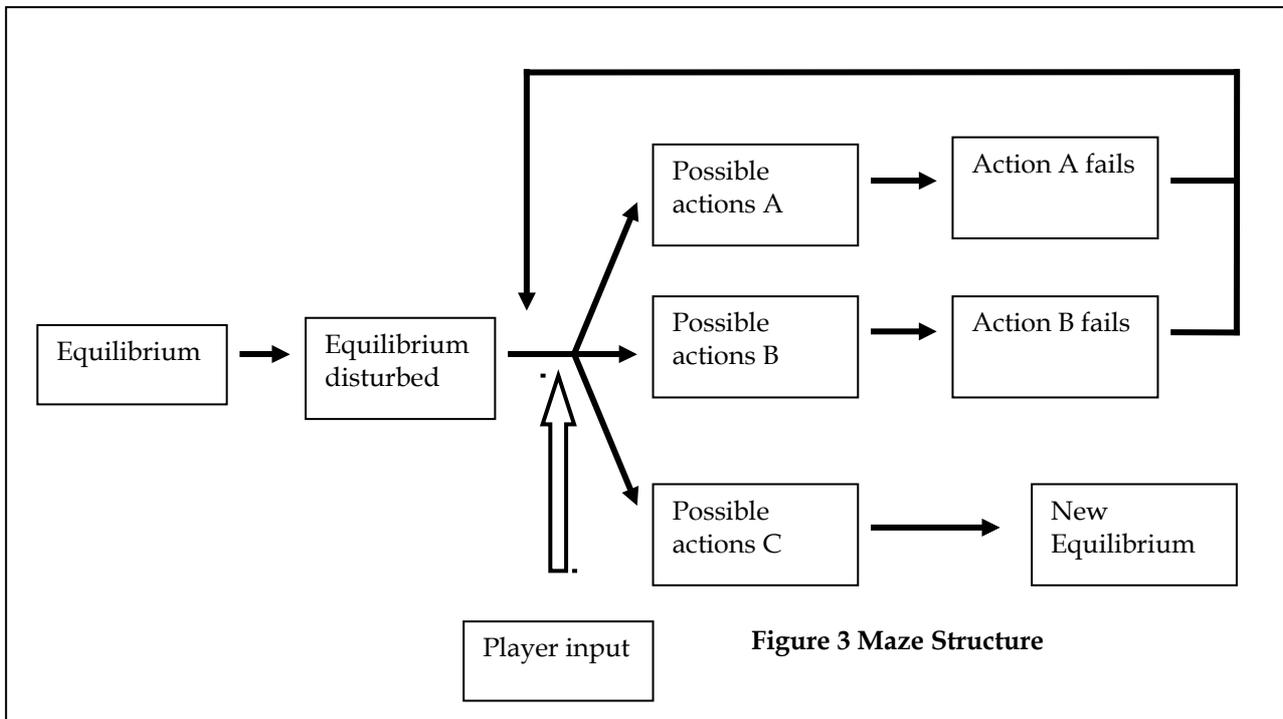
In summary games are characterised by three dimensions: player extranoetic input, uncertainty and some sort of ending or closure. Immersion in games is generated by the

indeterminacy of the outcome, until the very end, when the new equilibrium has been determined by the player(s) input. However, how can we understand the *Left Behind Game* in which there is no indeterminacy and the outcome is determined not by player input, but by dispensational theology? Dispensational theology and the narratives of the popular series of the *Left Behind* books, both suggest there is a clearly defined end. At the macro level there is no indeterminacy in this worldview. According to dispensationalism there can only be one possible end namely, the glorious appearance of Christ and the final apocalyptic confrontation between good and evil, in which evil will be ultimately defeated. In the final book of the series, despite the vast army that confronts the small remnant who have accepted Christ, there is no possibility of the true believers being defeated. At the individual level, there are really only two possibilities: salvation or damnation. In particular there is only one route to salvation, or in the term utilised in the introduction to the game “to seek a relationship with God”.

As a result of this predetermined end and single prescribed path to salvation identified in dispensationalist theology, the *Left Behind Game* is not structured like a game. Furthermore, because of the extra-noetic nature of the player input the *Left Behind Game* is not structured as a novel. However, this is not to say that the *Left Behind Game* does not have a narrative dimension, nor do I claim that the *Left Behind Game* does not have a gaming aspect. The relationship between a game and a narrative is highly contested. While a game can be considered as a form of narrative it has a very open structure. Conversely a novel has a much more closed narrative structure. In Wittgensteinian terms the *Left Behind Game* is a distant cousin of both novels and games. The narrative of the *Left Behind Game* is more open than a novel, but more closed than a game. Rachel Wagner (2012, p.7) suggests in her analysis of the online interactive site *Stations of the Cross* that “the goal here is pious consumption with rather prescribed limitations on human interactivity and very low agency”. Similarly, I suggest that the goal of the *Left Behind Game* is ‘pious consumption’ and this limits its game play to such an extent that it cannot be really defined as a game.

In a game there must be choice. There clearly is some choice for the player in *Left Behind*. The player can choose to move the characters under his/her control to various points within the game environment: choose to train converted friends to become musicians or soldiers, choose to acquire a building and convert it into a hospital, military base or church. However, although this seems to be a considerable choice, it is not in fact the case. Failure to make the right choice leads to defeat, and the player has to begin the mission again. Consequently there is effectively only one successfully prescribed course through the game, and only one possible resolution.

Diagrammatically the structure of the *Left Behind Game* can be represented as in figure 3.



The player explores the game world, but the choices that are available to him/her either lead to a wrong path, in which case the player has to repeat that level, or the right path, in which the player progresses through the game. The only possible resolution indicated in figure 3 is to take path C. This structure is similar to that of a maze. In other words, the player has a number of critical choices, but only one path will lead to success. Playing the *Left Behind Game* does feel like being stuck in a maze. On the bottom left corner of the screen, the player is provided with a map. At the beginning of the game no details on the map are shown, just as someone entering a maze has no knowledge of the possibilities ahead. Details of the game world (the streets of post-Rapture New York) are only revealed as the player navigates his/her characters around the streets. In level two, for example, the player has to recruit eight neutral characters and find a builder, whilst resisting the attacks of the Global Community Peacekeepers. This takes a great deal of navigation around the game environment, ensuring that the spirit levels of the characters are sufficiently high to resist the attacks of the Global Community Peacekeepers. It is possible to take a number of wrong turnings, and not find the builder or neutral characters that the player needs to convert in order to progress to the next level. Once the player has found the builder and converted eight neutral characters, these have to be guided to the church, the metaphorical centre of the maze, where the new equilibrium is restored, allowing the player to progress to the next level. Whilst the final mission of the game does

not portray the final judgement, it does require the player to build up a base with sufficient resources for the Tribulation Forces to defeat the Global Community Peacekeepers.

The maze like structure of the *Left Behind Game* represents how dispensationalists perceive the world today. The world is a maze in which it is very easy to take a wrong turning and become lost. The consequences of a wrong turn are potentially eternal. However, there is a single right path which leads to salvation. The intent is that through playing the game the player is made aware of the consequences of their actions in the here and now. On a promotional video available on *You Tube* the makers claim that the game “remains one of the only games produced to show gamers the consequences of poor decisions”¹⁴. For example, failure to maintain one’s spirit level or to recruit will lead to inevitable defeat, not only in the game, but also in the world. On the *Left Behind Game* web pages the chief executive of LB Games Inc., Troy Lyndon cites a comment by a leading member of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association who suggests:

One of the geniuses of the Left Behind game is that it gives gamers a chance to see the consequences of poor decisions ... we’re pretty excited to see that the *Left Behind Games* were designed to provide positive moral input to a youthful generation which would otherwise not hear it. (Lyndon 2011)

However, this is rather an overstatement. Although the player has the option to pray for and convert enemies rather than simply annihilate them, defeat at different levels is more often caused by failure to build sufficient banks or cafes to resource the Tribulation Force, rather than through any moral choice.

6 Conclusion

The *Left Behind* phenomenon represents an important development in the relationship between religion and popular culture. The sales figures of the books have entailed that popular cultural forms have become a far more significant battleground for the ‘soul’ of America than ever before. Nicolas Guyatt (2006, p.16) suggests, “with nearly 65 million books sold, *Left Behind* has influenced the whole entertainment industry”. Christian popular cultural forms have been fairly marginal, and have been primarily consumed by the faithful. In other words these have been popular in form, rather than in terms of the more dictionary definition of the term having “an appeal to or favoured by many people” (Brown 1993, 2292). The sales of the *Left Behind* books have indicated that Christian fiction can have a mass appeal, at least in the USA.¹⁵ With computer games

14 Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TH9US35NOsA>.

15 The success of Mel Gibson’s 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* is also indicative that religion can be popular, in

becoming an increasingly significant form of popular culture, it is critical to understand how individuals and groups with a specific religious agenda utilise what is essentially perceived as a form of entertainment. Consequently although in terms of sales the *Left Behind Game* has not been particularly successful¹⁶, an analysis of the game itself provides some clear indications of how a very strong theological belief has a significant impact not only on the game content, but also on the game design.

A structural analysis of the *Left Behind Game* suggests that whilst it has a narrative dimension, it also has, as with other computer games, “a hidden structure of simulation” (Aarseth 2004, p.52). These simulations are characterised by “a bottom up hermeneutic” in which “knowledge and experience are created by the player’s actions” (Aarseth 2004, p.52). The game-world is doubly important in the *Left Behind Game*. The game world not only represents dispensational beliefs about the end of time, post-Rapture and pre-Armageddon, but also represents current anxieties about the present – namely the dominance of secular humanist values that are perceived as being inherently hostile to the Christian worldview. Consequently, navigation through the game world can be considered as experiential learning in which the player learns not only the truth about the final days, but also about how to act in the present. For example, the two most significant actions in the *Left Behind* game play are to pray in order to keep up characters’ spirit strength to resist the power of the Global Community Peacekeepers, and to recruit new members to the Tribulation Forces. These clearly parallel the centrality of prayer and proselytising amongst those who adhere to a dispensationalist worldview.

The analysis of the *Left Behind Game* also demonstrates that although it has a ludic dimension, in that player input is of a different order to that required of the reader of a narrative text, it does not have the structure of the game. The outcome of a game must have a certain degree of unpredictability. However, the dispensationalist worldview posits a predetermined end, and whilst the *Left Behind Game* does not take the player to the final defeat of evil, the Tribulation Forces must win the final mission to complete the game. Consequently I suggest that the structure of the game is akin to a maze. This mazelike structure is clearly homologous to the theological structure of dispensationalism, namely that there are only right and wrong moves. Choices in the game will either lead to success or failure, just as choices in this world will either lead to salvation or away from God. Although there are many choices that the player can make within the game world there is only one path to complete the game. Similarly dispensational theology suggests that although there are many possible choices in life, there is only a single path to salvation. The structure of the *Left Behind Game*, therefore is analogous to the structure of dispensational theology, in terms of a clearly defined binary opposition between right and wrong paths.

all senses of the term.

16 In February 2007 Left Behind Games reported over that they had lost over \$4 million dollars. (Jenkins 2007).

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The Politics of Pokémon

Socialized Gaming, Religious Themes and the Construction of Communal Narratives

Marley-Vincent Lindsey

Abstract

Twitch Plays Pokémon presented a unique opportunity: sixty to one hundred twenty thousand players aimed to complete a single run of Pokémon: Red Version. Oppositional identities, based on differences in strategy were created, and a player-driven narrative began to form, codified by specific Pokémon and items. Rather than employing a secular theme to navigate a secular space, the moment of confrontation was imbued with religiosity.

This paper seeks to account for the construction of a communal narrative, revolving around the alignment of religious themes with Pokémon through two sources: the transcript of the chat where religious identities were assigned to Pokémon; and the subreddit of the same. The framework of this paper combines threads of research on social media, seriality, anthropology of globalized phenomenon and the specifics of internet gaming and connectivity to analyze the primary sources of this phenomenon.

Keywords

Digital games, Multitude, Seriality, Twitch Plays Pokémon, Iconography, Competition, Convergence,

1 Introduction

The central focus of this paper will be on the role of seriality in producing communal narratives. At heart is an engagement with postmodern modes of communication, and the production of new forms of media and their influence in the development of “Many Input, One Output” games to quote Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (Boluk & LeMieux, 2012). In the particulars of the case at hand, religion became a mode by which organization could be molded from chaos. Antonio

Gramsci, in *The Prison Notebooks*, noted the role of the intellectual religious classes in developing modes of cultural norms, in order that society might function as an ordered set (Gramsci, 1971). While the more salient aspects of “cultural hegemony” find themselves embedded in discussions of politics within the post-colonial state, it is also useful for identifying such organizational purposes wherein religion is the main tool (Chakrabarty, 2007 Guha, 1997 & Spivak, 1999). It is the experience of the game through time, and its exchange through a global audience that made a basic religious soteriology the easiest way for order to convene itself.¹

The game in question is a particular run-through of Pokémon, called *Twitch Plays Pokémon* (henceforth, TPP). The innovation of TPP was the use of Twitch.TV’s chat platform as the controls for the game, allowing anyone watching the channel to participate in the game by typing in commands, such as “down” “up” and “A”. After a brief delay, these inputs would be translated into in-game actions that the Pokémon trainer, Red, would follow. While the programmer of this game imagined it might catch a few hundred people, the highest number of observers (and thus, “players”) reached over one million players (Prell, 2014). As such, it is a case study in how the “multitude” to use the terminology of Hardt and Negri, engage with online media (Hardt & Negri, 2001).

The game of TPP was less about Pokémon and more about the attempts of players to coordinate their efforts at live speed in attempts to finish the game. Through this attempt, an in-game religion developed as a means to communicate order within a historical perspective. In order to produce a meaningful discussion on this phenomenon, as well as develop the importance of TPP to both game and religious studies, a couple of things are needed. First, a historical description of *Pokemon* as a game is needed to understand its value to the programmer as something of interest to a number of people, as well as situate it as a form of media that moved between the 20th and 21st century modes of communication. Second, a number of comments given on the notion of seriality by Jean-Paul Sartre will give a means to understand the importance of repetition. Finally, using the archive of the game’s chatlogs, and a number of images, a connection must be given between the mode of repetition from the game, and the role of religion in ossifying a narrative. The narrative in question is not one with huge stakes—people are not crucified for following not following it—but it serves as an interesting case in the development of spreadable media (Jenkins et. al., 2013). The first section of the paper will attempt to draw connections between each of these ideas within the context of recent work within Game Studies, and its intersections both with new modes of producing games and religious ideology.

1 I offer my deepest thanks to my peer-review readers, as well as Scott Zeng and Jamie Keener for their careful reading and comments.

Part of the benefit of such a large number of participants in a game means that the scholar has more sources available than is normally the case. The sub-Reddit /r/TwitchPlaysPokemon, is incredibly useful as a home base by which one can engage with the real-time history of TPP as it took place². The transformation of this active region of communication into an archive of historical inquiry brings innovation to the problem posed by English Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm, 1959). In the context of his work, Hobsbawm attempted to show the politicization of the English peasant was necessary prior to its incorporation within the proletariat class. Part of the influence of Subaltern Studies was a direct challenge to the concept of the peasant as “pre-political”, part of which found its argumentation in the utilization of archival sources to demonstrate an active political consciousness within modes of Indian peasant rebellion.

In a similar sense, the “multitude” of TPP gains – perhaps not political, as the stakes are not that high – but certainly a readable form of consciousness.³ In order to “read” this consciousness, I will be limiting my argument to what can be argued through the iconography found on these pages, as well as the transcript of text and commands given in the TPP run. Where these sources come from, as well as a discussion of several examples will take place in the second part of the paper. In order to emphasize the role of religion as organizational, I will be emphasizing three moments in the TPP run, where explanation for events was given by modes of religious understanding.

Even after all this is said and done, there is something that needs to be said about whether there is value in discussing religious constructions within a secularized environment. This is something the editors of *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* points out, in the problems of discussing religious narrative within gaming communities (Campbell & Grieve, 2014). The last section will be dedicated to showing how meaning might be successfully described, through a somewhat comparative approach within the community of TPP and that of an actual church, whose engagements stretched across multiple levels of media and reality.

As such, the usefulness of this paper lies in contributing to a new and evolving discussion about the role of what might be borrowed from Adorno as “mass culture” within game studies and digital media more broadly (Adorno, 2001). The first drafts of this paper were written in August of 2014, during which the advent of Gamer Gate was crashing upon mainstream game media and development (Hathaway, 2014). While the movement is still ongoing, and there are many political repercussions to what it has or has not “accomplished”, I invoke it less for its specifics and more for it being situated around the hashtag #Gamergate, in which anyone with access to an internet

2 <http://www.reddit.com/r/twitchplayspokemon>: Sub-Reddit “Twitch Plays Pokémon” Last Accessed: September 29, 2014.

3 I connect “multitude” and “peasant” both as substitutes for the political guise of “proletariat.” While each category has its own set of implications, they also serve as subjects unbound by historical circumstance. See Chakrabarty, 2014.

connection and a Twitter account could contribute. TPP serves as another case in which patterns of the multitude might be more broadly derived and understood.

2 Methodology and Scholarship Overview

The division between late 20th and early 21st developments in technology and communication are staggering. There have been major changes between a system like Pong, the development of the arcade, and the current day in which Twitch.tv serves as a medium by which ideas and developments in games are rapidly exchanged (Kent, 2001). To highlight the present case, one only need look at the world record set by Cosmo for *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* in July, 2014 (McWhertor, 2014b). Where a decade earlier, this run would have existed only within his memory and the memory of anyone physically present, it now was recorded, and streamed live for an audience of seven thousand people. The notion of “game completion” itself has also fundamentally changed. Cosmo’s speedrun clocked in at just under 19 minutes, which is impossible unless one makes full use of the game’s glitches. These glitches have become easier to communicate in the era of Twitch. Where easter eggs and hidden glitches took individuals a longer period of time to figure out, the connectivity of the Internet has made the process of sharing such glitches a more efficient process, resulting in more developed competitions (Whitehead, 2014). Indeed, one of Cosmo’s central contributions to the speed-run community is one of the first websites and forums dedicated to hosting speed-races, in order to further the process.⁴

Peter Cowhey suggested an important connection between the nascent Internet of which he wrote and that of the old Roman highways.⁵ Both were novel forms of network, who have shown very different results than their initial creators intended. For the Romans, this included the development of new vocabulary: *latro*, *latronis* became a noun that was specific to the concept of “highwayperson”. For the present, it has meant modes of interconnectivity by which old paradigms of capital and resistance have been re-configured time and again. In a similar sense, the Internet has fundamentally changed the old paradigms of games. Where the conception of a gamer, locked in a basement, spending time with a glowing screen begun, we now see gamers as cultural and national icons. As an example of this transition, we might look at one of the very first novel engagements with gaming in the early 21st century. A mockumentary series, entitled “Pure Pwnage” (pronounced “ownage”), followed the antics of a hardcore pro-gamer whose handle was “teh_pwnerer”. In

4 <http://www.speedrunslive.com>.

5 Peter Cowhey, “Building the Global Information Highway: Toll Booths, Construction Contracts and Rules of the Road” in William Drake ed. *The New Information Infrastructure* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995) 175-204.

Episode 4, viewers are introduced to teh_pwnerer's trainer, "teh_masterer."⁶ Teh_Masterer is shown dressed in a ninja outfit, playing four games at once and beating them in record speeds. It is later said in the series that teh_masterer's ninja outfit was the result of fifteen years in a basement, where the only light he received was that from the output of his computer screen.⁷ As a result, his skin was super sensitive to any form of light.

Contrast this to the representation of a professional gamer later on in the series. In Episode 15, we are introduced to the character Terrence "T-Bag" Brown, who is a professional Halo player and whose success has endowed him with six figure salary and claims to have Bill Gates on his favorite contacts⁸. As the transcendence of "urban" as "cool" will not be covered in this essay, I will leave my description at Terrence's cockiness, attitude and wealth is reflective of a professional athlete's work in her prime. As such, we see the description of video games shifting between old and new modes of production within narratives, even in the short span of a couple years. There is also a layer of connectivity engaged. Teh_Masterer is a solo gamer, who interacts with others sporadically, but spends most of his time alone. Terrence hosts parties, "talks trash" to other players on Xbox live, and uses his credentials to improve his social standing. The impact of Internet and connectivity on the games we play has had long-term effects for how we perceive the construction of gamer identity and networks.

This evolution of connection within the context of all gaming spheres has now influenced the development direction of gaming practice itself. TPP reflected such connection through Reddit and Twitch, two sites whose inspiration was drawing together like-minded individuals based on their commitments to gaming. Unlike purely competitive modes of gaming, there is also something specific to the engagement of *Pokemon*. It had initially been constructed as a method of engaging the world prior to the full development of connectivity via the Internet. As we will see later, it evolved with cards, games, magazines and TV in order to assist in building the world in which *Pokemon* resided. Such world-building meant that *Pokemon* existed in a slightly different context than the games featured on Pure Pwnage.

As the boundaries of TPP are so porous, scholarship has also been helpful in giving them some more definition. Richard Ferdig's conceptions of "player capital" and "game challenge" become re-oriented such that they completely overlap. The challenge comes from the massive number of players attempting to complete the run *simultaneously* (Ferdig, 2014). Rachel Wagner's development of the "earnest" gamer allows us to separate those who play to beat this game and those who play to stall it (Wagner, 2014). TPP was able to bypass the inevitable number of

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aku3rA7Im78>, 9:20.

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTBC4AQ67-M>, 26:00

8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8st_3a3ZQY, 10:50 is his first appearance. His description about his life starts at 12:00.

“cheaters” and “triflers” that may have stymied progress, but even the perfect game run would be inevitably surrounded by repetitive commands (Prell, 2014). As such, the network of TPP players separated the individual experience of playing the game from the communal one. Something innocuous, like selecting an item once, means little for a single player. Selecting that same item thousands of times an hour, between seventeen thousand players, however, becomes significant in the development of assigning order to chaos.

Within any game, there are a continual number of “ordinary activities”, primarily concerned with the physicality of the game. In Pokémon, I use the D-Pad to signify where I would like to move. I hit “Start” in order that I might select items. I hit “A” so that I can confirm my selections. When I operate on my own, such a performance hardly qualifies as meaningful since the “accidents” – perhaps going the wrong direction – have no power within them. On the other hand, when sixty thousand individuals are continually hitting “Start” and selecting the “Helix Fossil”, then the power of the ordinary action begins to interfere with the progress of the game on the whole. In other words, the key to these actions becoming significant is their becoming redundant. In this regard, it becomes important to discuss the seriality of such moments within the TPP run. As explored by Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux in a paper entitled “Hundred Thousand Billion Fingers: Oulipian Games and Serial Players”, the question of seriality is one of generative content (Boluk & LeMieux, 2012). Here, the authors are concerned with the application of seriality into metagaming practices within video games on a whole:

Instead of executing the game in a discrete, sequential order, these examples convert the player’s labor into a visual cacophony as hundreds of Marios simultaneously follow all possible paths as they traverse a level. McClure sees this ‘Mario cloud’ as an emblem for the multiplicity of potential action suggested by the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics. In the Many Worlds Emulator, the struggles of one hundred playthroughs are collaged within the same frame. (Boluk & LeMieux, 2012, page 29)

TPP uses this particular approach, replacing a single input with that of thousands. And while there is only one *recorded* output (the movement of the character), the transcripts of TPP demonstrate how many people were involved in the development of that one output (Archive, 2014). As a result, it answers the question posed by Boluk and LeMieux:

But what happens when the reset button is removed? When in-game actions are not only recorded and analyzed, but also reorganized into new forms of play? What happens when the metagame is fed back into the system? (Boluk & LeMieux, 2012, page 17)

Jean-Paul Sartre, as cited by Boluk and LeMieux, has written extensively on the concept of seriality as paradoxically isolating and communicative (Sartre, 2004). This is taken in the example of the newspaper: a series of individuals waiting for a train reading a newspaper both reflect the feelings of increased isolation, while participating in an institution that subconsciously enforces the notions of nationality. In *Pokémon* a similar comparison might be made to the number of hours required to read, to watch and to imbibe every aspect of that world. However, it is not simply the relationship between the knowledge of the individual player and the society of players in which she resides that constitutes this seriality – it also exists in the relation of each player to each other player. To quote Sartre’s discussion on seriality as it relates to anti-Semitism testing the idea of the Jewish subject:

Thus, for example, if there is an outbreak of anti-semitism, and Jewish members of society are beginning to be accused of ‘getting all the best jobs,’ then for every Jewish doctor or teacher or banker, every other banker, doctor or teacher will constitute him as dispensable (and conversely). (Sartre, 2004).

The exchange between players themselves saw the negation of their experience, but also their dispensable nature when compared to the thousands of other players engaged within the run. The processes by which the connection between players are understood is covered in detail within Anne Allison’s work on the ways in which *Pokémon* represented not only a game, but a world. This was reinforced by the composition of materials within which *Pokemon* took place. In the words of Allison,

Pokémon is a media-mix complex – of electronic game, *manga*, television *anime*, trading cards, movie and character goods – where the basic concept is an imaginary universe inhabited by wild monsters that children capture, then keep in balls in their pockets. (Allison, 2006, page 196)

Players within *Pokemon* are not simply players. They represent, in some very basic sense, world-builders. To participate in catching *Pokemon* or playing its games meant joining a community in which *Pokemon* was a lifestyle. Thus, in the case of *Pokémon*, the magic circle transitions to envelop not just the solitary process of the game, but also the interactions and relationships in which the game is engaged; thus, head designer Tajiri Satoshi’s inclusion of particular *Pokémon* who could not be obtained without trading between players (Allison, 2006).

This creation process could be extended further into a discussion of players as subcreators, demonstrated by the communities that developed around TPP. I will refrain from the larger question of the relationship between play and creation (Hemminger, 2014). For me, it is enough that play, in regards to the overlap between players and challenge, becomes distinctly “creative”. From this

generative space, we are given exploits and glitches in single player games. We are given perfected strategies, cleanly executed in multiplayer games. Each of these is brought home by the viewer of such a performance, and attempted in her own play, which creates a new tree of possibilities of engagement between player and game.

In a globalized world, such creative power has become more oriented towards and produced by consumers. Jenkins, Ford and Green explore this relationship extensively, using the example of Susan Boyle's audition. Their argument for media's spreadability relies on the distinction between consumers and producers becoming more blurred. As a more recent example, the rise of "doge" came from a relatively unknown consumer in Japan, whose collection of Shibe Inu photos was released onto the internet. From this, its discovery and codification as human expression led to a successful circulation of the image as a globalized icon, having real-world effects (Chappell, 2014.) The evolution of *Pokémon* from the insect typography of Satoshi to the inspired collusion of one hundred twenty thousand people across the world is the story of a world created in the image of late modernity, to one of postmodernity. (Allison, 2006 & Bogost, 2006). To capture this transition and the appeal of religion as an organizational tool is a valuable discussion.

3 Pokémon: Game and World.

Pokémon: Red Version was initially released in 1996, by 4Kids Entertainment. It would serve as part of what Anne Allison has referred to as the globalization of Japanese culture (Allison, 2006). Shows like *Dragonball Z*, *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* and *Sailor Moon* gave a context in which *Pokémon* as a show, card game and video game would prove successful. The engagement with this wave of culture in the late twentieth century were as much commentary on the relationship between states as they were between individuals. Allison traces the history of Japanese gamemaking to before, and immediately after the Second World War. Japanese toys had become known for both their quality and relatively low prices. American GIs, within the first decade of Japanese occupation would pass on leftover deposits of tin, and other metals, the Japanese would then use to create toy trucks, soldiers, and other war toys (Allison, 2006, 35-39). While there is a fascinating commentary on subjugated power in this regard, it is more interesting in my mind the general theme Allison sketches in regards to the tradition of Japanese toymaking. Even the first generation of cultural exports, *Godzilla*, becomes a battlefield between which the cultural distinction of the minority had to be appropriated and re-oriented to match with the desires of the colonial masters. Thus, *Godzilla* transitioned from a costumed character, whose origins in the nuclear aftermath of Hiroshima had

left him with a deep mutation of both mind and body, and distinct Japanese character, became the mindless killer with little development on the side of the Americans (Allison, 2006, 47-49).

Pokémon was one of the first games that was capable of refusing this tradition of cultural transformation. While some aspects of it were still localized—for example, the expansion of player versus player Pokémon battles—it remained relatively untransformed. Satoshi, the game’s designer, was committed to keeping the game in its origins as a means of social interaction. Upon interest in expanding Pokémon into a global brand, Nintendo first proposed a similar mode of appropriation for the Pokémon brand, in order to turn it into something familiar with American audiences in particular. The narrative that Allison tells of Pokémon contrasted starkly with that of Japanese game exports in the past. Rather than seeking to align itself for an easier assimilatory process, the game had no intention of ever leaving the domestic market, and was not easily translatable from *kawaii* to *cool*. Nor did the designers desire such a translation. From their perspectives, Pokémon had to remain a chiefly Japanese export (Allison, 2006, 236-241).⁹

A history of *Pokemon* is essential to understanding what aspects of the world would be of interest to such a large player database. The ease by which one was capable of learning the games, and the wide variety of characters meant that Pokémon was a game that would necessarily appeal to a large audience. However, it was a game that largely escaped the globalization process.¹⁰ Rather than the global markets transforming Pokémon, it was Pokémon that transformed the global market. Each element of gameplay transcended its localized origin; so long as the player had access to the medium by which the game was played, it could be played in a uniform sense. Much as chess players do not need a common language in order to discuss the best play in a situation, Pokémon players were equally flexible in regards to their associative and communicative prowess. Within the first month, every earnest player knew which Pokémon had to be traded in order to ensure the evolution of those Pokémon, and language would not prohibit such a communication from being made, if the possibility arose.

In a similar vein, we might ask as to whether the imposition of religious order within TPP distorted the initial project of *Pokemon*. This hearkens to one of the many debates of the cultural turn, in which we ask whether Western categories are the best way to approach non-Western subjects.¹¹ However, even as the game retained its Japanese identity, it still participated in the global language of capital.¹² As briefly explored in fields that range history to literature, we may

9 Anne Allison, “Gotta Catch ‘Em All” Millennial Monsters, 236-241.

10 This is to differentiate from the process of *localizing* games. Rather, globalization refers to the process by which games seek to fit the specifics of Western paradigms, rather than the individual influence of particular markets. For localization, see Peter Likarish “Filtering Cultural Feedback” in Campbell, *Playing with Religion*, 170-190.

11 McKinnon, “Sociological Definitions”, pages 74-76.

12 Here I refer to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s discussion of capital’s potential to “universalize” particular aspects of history and culture. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*.

understand that these distortions are introduced by capital's ability to exploit and use marketable commodities from a variety of origins. In this regard, I use religion as a category to analyze the game of Pokémon that was globalized through the transmission of capital. Any such distortion, thus, existed prior to the application of Western categorization, and using such categories to discuss globalized products ought not be nearly as questionable a proposition, should one ascribe to such regional conceptions of inquiry.

In 1998, when Pokémon first broke onto the global stage, the Internet was still in its infancy. So were the individuals to whom Pokémon was most aggressively marketed. The author of this paper was six during the year, and remembers first playing through the game and cards as an immersive experience. While he had played *Tetris* and *Super Mario*, Pokémon marked the first moment in which a game became a world for him as a player. Nintendo executives noted this as part of the initial interest in the game. And it transcended the limits of normal games by marking itself with a TV show, with toys and with cards, all of which could be used in turn to build social relations. The connectivity of the Pokémon world allowed for a successful orientation in which this generation of children spent a large number of hours creating and maintaining presence both within and outside of the game world.¹³

Such connections existed to further our engagement in the Pokémon world or to continue making the world a reality outside of the game. It would be an exhaustive procedure to give a list of such behaviors. As a few examples: link battles/trades, getting up to watch the show, going to Pokémon card events, going to releases and Pokémon Centers, discussions of Pokémon and button smashing during battles and attempted captures. Each of these actions made for a successful immersion into the Secondary Reality of Pokémon's Kanto region. Magazines were published with the intent of disseminating information about strategy. Players continually discussed methodologies and preferences for certain Pokémon based on assessed goals.¹⁴ It took less than a month to understand the Psychic type in generation one was broken, since there existed no Bug Types powerful enough to keep the legendaries, like Mewtwo and Mew in check. This engagement was continued with the release of later card sets, seasons of Pokémon, and games, each of which expanded on the mythological cartography, known dataset of Pokémon themselves, and added further mechanics.

This first wave was largely the first generation of what Hardt and Negri call postmodernization. In this process, "information replaced industry." What was important in the development of the *Pokemon* world was less the materialism of the cards and the toys and more the

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pages 16-20.

13 Something alluded to by scholarship, see Allison, 206-215.

14 This somewhat parallels Henry Jenkins' discussion of *The Matrix in Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

information they conveyed in developing the *Pokemon* world. The Internet's maturation only sped the process by which information became the dominant paradigm. Websites and forums like *Pokemonshowdown* and *PokeWiki* were focused not on the collection of toys and books, but on giving participants the information they needed to continue being involved. New children became indoctrinated into the Pokémon world, and demand for a continued narrative increased. Thus, by 2014, there were six generations of games, sixty sets of cards (with two others never released in English), and more than two generation of kids who had engaged with the game in a significant sense. Even more interesting were the sorts of competitions that developed. The World Pokemon Championships this past July were the culmination both of the large interest in such a project and the importance of information.¹⁵ *Pokemon* battles were determined by the amount of information each player could retain on statistics for attack and defense, as well as what moves each Pokemon could know, and against what they were strong and weak. By these means, consumers became basic forms of producers. To quote Jenkins et. al.,

This shift from distribution to circulation signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined. (Jenkins et. al., 2013, page 3).

In February, 2014, one such consumer began to reframe *Pokemon* media. Where *Twitch.tv* had been constructed for players like Cosmo to connect to other players looking to develop their skills and watch the latest matches, an anonymous programmer saw an opportunity. By using Java to build a connection between the input of *Twitch.Tv*'s chat function and an emulator playing *Pokemon Red*, Twitch itself became the mode for a game (McWhertor, 2014a). The game was not only a global phenomenon, but its controls were also incredibly simple. When the player begins, it sets you to control one trainer, named by default "RED". After receiving the first Pokémon (a selected choice between three Pokémon, only available at this point), the player is given a Pokédex, which operates as an encyclopedia for the Pokémon seen and captured. The player then has her first battle against her computer rival, who conveniently takes the starting Pokémon that is a direct counter to the Pokémon of the player. After this first engagement, the journey begins properly, and the player navigates the land attempting to complete two goals: defeat the Elite Four, and capture all different types of Pokémon. With clearly defined controls and goals, the game was optimal for the programmer's experiment of crowdsourcing a single-player game. The controls were implemented through a d-pad, with "start" "a" and "b" to navigate conversations and menu. For this social

15 Unknown, "A Monumental World Championships!" *Pokemon.com*, July, 2014: <http://www.pokemon.com/us/pokemon-news/a-monumental-world-championships/>, last accessed: September 29th, 2014.

experiment, the programmer used the “chat” function of a *Twitch.tv* channel to log commands for the game. Thus, someone observing the run of Pokémon: Red could control the game by sending words such as “up”, “left” and “start” into the chat channel. The experiment was to see whether a larger number of players would be able to finish the game.

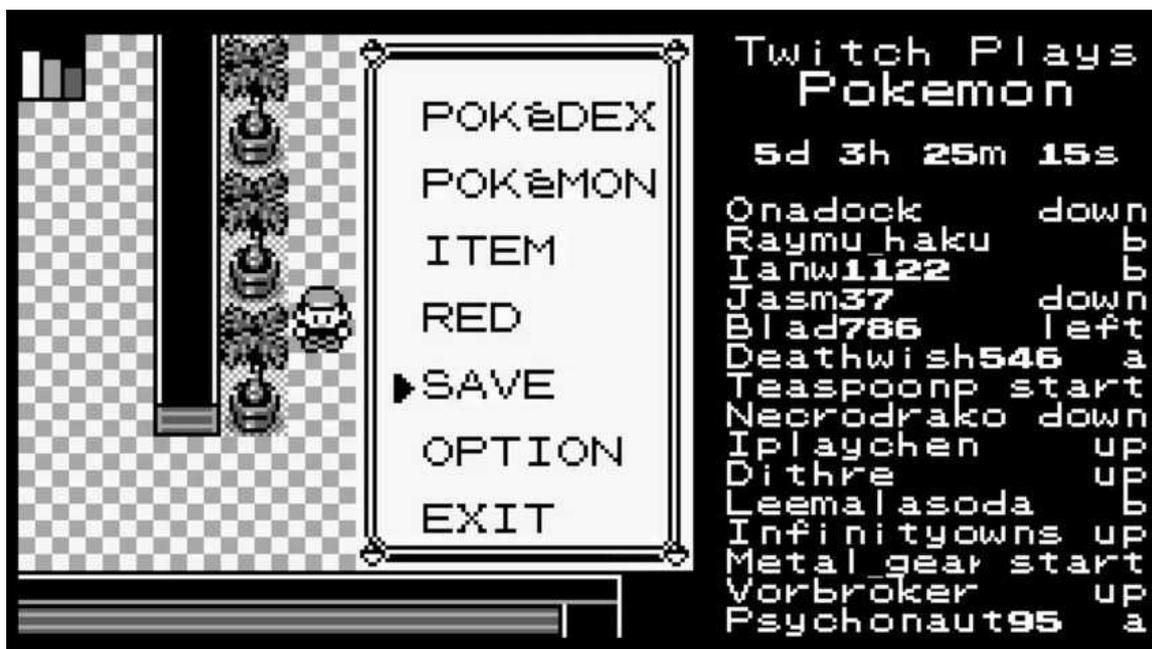


Figure 1: A sample of the stream that was visible. Day 5. Hour 3, Minute 25, Second 15.

The programmer had conceptualized doubted the popularity of the game would extend in any meaningful sense (McWhertor, 2014). The sheer number of players gave the TPP experiment a different feel than any sort of game or runthrough that had come before. Indeed, the only thing that might draw comparison was Gary Kasparov’s match against the world, in which an online forum, moderated by a panel of Grandmasters served as “the World”, with the conception that anyone with an Internet connection could feasibly contribute to the match¹⁶.

As a final note on the game, I would like to draw a connection between the discussion of seriality and the specifics of Pokémon. Early in J.Z Smith’s essay, he makes a significant point in a definition of religion:

There is a thin line, as Freud most persuasively argued, between the neurotic act and religious ritual, for both are equally ‘obsessed’ by the potentiality for significance in the commonplace. (Smith 1982, page 56)

¹⁶ For a firsthand source, see Gary Kasparov Kasparov Against the World (New York: KasparovChessOnline, 2000).

This is not to suggest a direct relation between ritual and action, but it does give a means by which to understand the basis of religious modes of organization in the endlessly redundant commands. A number of items and Pokémon became potential targets for religious worship, specifically owed to the transition between individual and collective selection. On an individual level, each player had the experience of selecting items, and reading Oak's response, or capturing certain Pokémon in certain areas. On a collective level, these experiences were subject to the randomization of serial input. At certain points, items were discarded, and Pokémon were released. One of the most popular, rare Pokémon, Charmander, would be released by accident. Pokémon and items that sought long-term places in the rapidly developing soteriology would need to survive each successive purge. Two examples best exemplify this survival, and subsequent deification: The specific item of the Helix Fossil, and the Bird Pokémon, Pidgey.

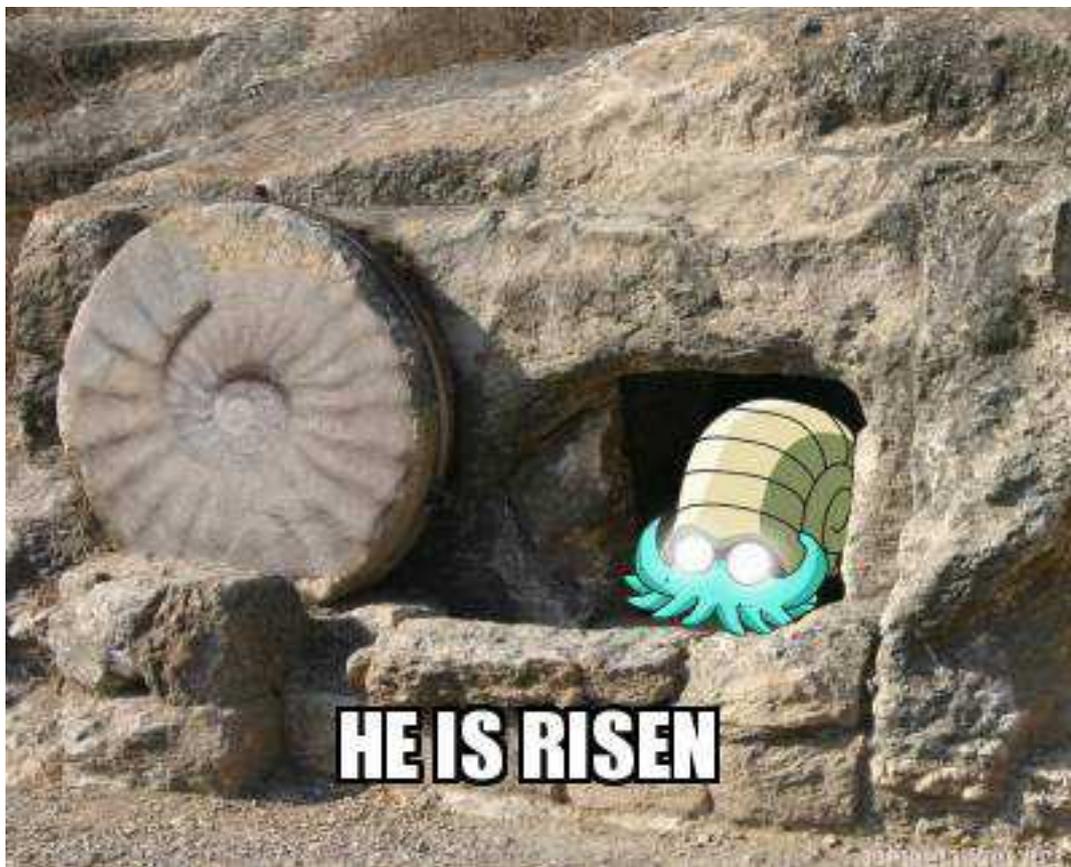


Figure 2: Omanyte rises from Helix fossil. Source: <http://imgur.com/gallery/vpRj4X9>

Giving a narrative created by the hundreds of players required an item or Pokémon that was continually selected throughout the game. That players focused on the Helix rather than the S.S Anne ticket, or a number of other objects, was the result of several factors.

First, the Fossil belonged to a class of item we might call ‘semi-permanent.’ In this class are items that could not be taken out of inventory. When a player attempts to “sell” or “toss” the Helix, she instead receives a message from the Professor exclaiming “This is too important to [sell or throw] away!” When she attempts to use it, the Professor shouts “This isn’t the time to use that Red!” The Helix Fossil thus survived purge after purge until it could be used properly.¹⁷

The second factor was its role as a late-game object. The function of the Fossil is to become a Pokémon. This can only happen just before the battle for the seventh badge, when the player is almost done with her commitment to the Gym Leaders, and is about to move on to the Indigo League. Thus, it is not simply a semi-permanent object, it is a late-game object, something that usually signifies power.

Third, it was part of a dichotomy. When the Helix Fossil is selected, there is another option: the Dome fossil. The narrative of both these items state they were part of an ancient sea, from the beginning of time. The selection of the Helix was not simply an acceptance of Helix; it was also rejection of Dome. In this regard, it parallels nicely with several facets of religious organization, in which practitioners often have to make a plurality of choices that fundamentally stem from the words of Augustine,

Thus, to forsake God and to exist in oneself—that is, to be pleased with oneself—is not immediately to lose all being; but it is to come closer to nothingness. (Dyson 2014, page 609)

In the particulars of Christianity, this is the choice between good and the absence of good. Indeed, as early as the Ledge, we begin to gain a sense of this dichotomy:¹⁸

2014-02-15 13:51:56 <tendo28> IF WE WORSHIPPED THE DOME FOSSIL THIS WOULDN'T BE HAPPENING.

Pidgey was less secure, and this was reflected in the history of the narrative. As any good Pokémon trainer knows, the mythology of the Starting Pokémon is typically dominant. Any of the three Starters tends to have stronger stats than the wild Pokémon, and there is only one chance to obtain a Starting Pokémon: at the beginning of the game. The choice of one eliminates the others. On the

17 Unknown, “Pokémon Red and Blue/Mt. Moon.” StrategyWiki.org: http://strategywiki.org/wiki/Pok%C3%A9mon_Red_and_Blue/Mt._Moon, last accessed: September 29th, 2014.

18 Transcript, February 15, 2014

other hand, Pidgey is available widely at a variety of levels. Pidgey's only significance is often being one of the first few Pokémon captured, alongside Rattata and Caterpie or Weedle. Pidgeys and their evolutions are often used in multiples by a variety of trainers and battles. As a result, a number of other Pokémon were also given narratives alongside Pidgey, and there would have been less unique about Pidgey in this narrative had it not endured as a Pokémon that was never accidentally released. As we will see later, Pidgey would receive its deification as being able to defeat a Gym Leader on its own.

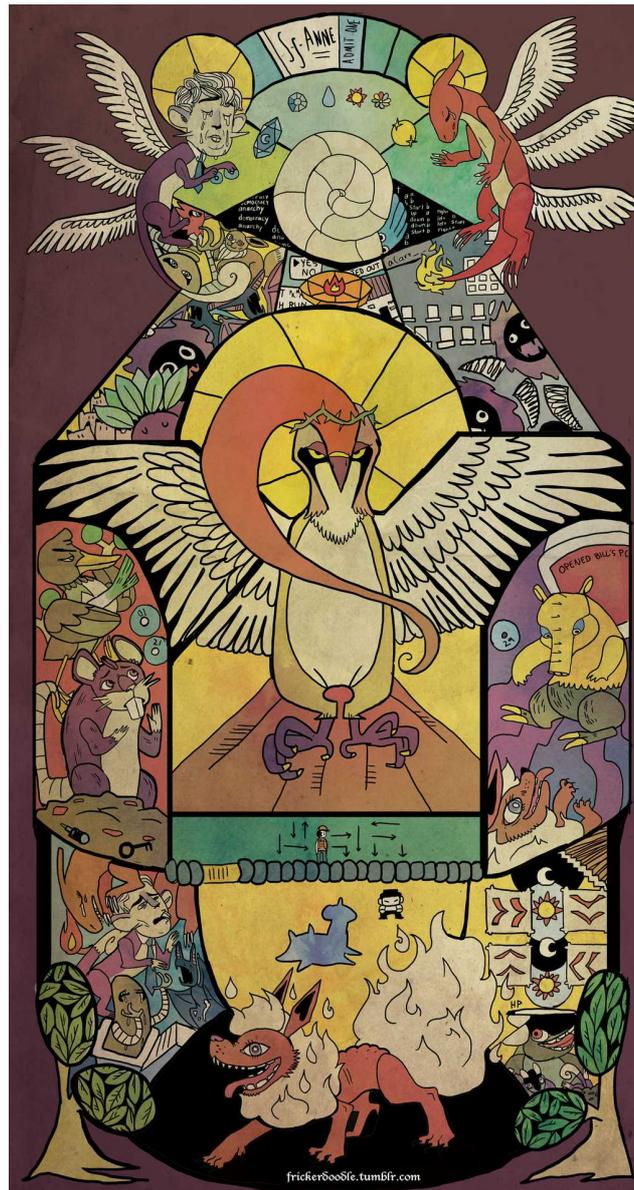


Figure 3: Source: <http://shyree.deviantart.com/journal/Twitch-art-437345748>

Here, we see the eventual place Pidgey will take in the narrative: as Bird Jesus. Front and center is the third evolved form, Pidgeot, surrounded by a number of Pokémon who had been released throughout the journey, with the badges acquired at the moment of Pidgeot's deification. At the bottom, we see Flareon, the false prophet as a demon, something we will explore later. Thus, the answer to the questions of Boluk and LeMieux seems to be a desire to craft order from chaos. The narrative was largely self-built, within real time, where if one takes a cursory glance through the number of images and words, seemingly from randomized instances of action. Perhaps owed to other social reasons, this order found itself in an explicit mode of religious re-production. And as it continued to be inscribed, the religion reflected "human desire to impose order on a chaotic earthly environment," (Wagner, 2013). The relationship between world-building, and to that extension, sub-creating, in creating order has been explored by Peter Berger most prominently (Berger, 1967). As such, religion and order continued to feed each other within the context of 21st century media.

4 The Ledge

The Ledge Problem arose early in the game run. After the defeat of the third Gym leader, the players encountered a ledge. Within the game, ledges are jumpeable lines. Once jumped, they cannot be crossed over until the player encounters a path for such a purpose. Thus, jumping off a ledge is a semi-permanent decision, since getting back above it can take time and effort that was otherwise unplanned.

In this case, there is one particular Ledge, noted with a capital L. This Ledge runs for about two game screens, as part of an extraordinarily narrow pathway. In order to proceed, the player must walk, and maintain her position above the ledge throughout the entire length of the two screens without jumping off. If she does, she has to walk back, and start again.

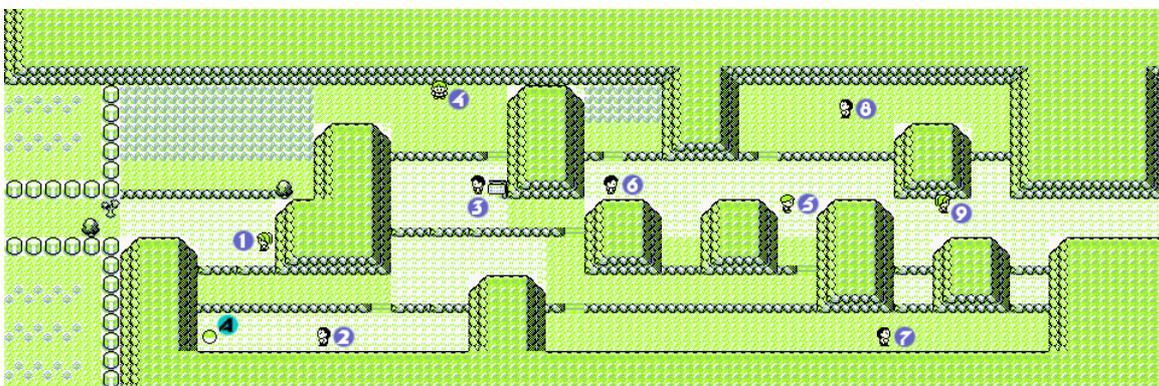


Figure 4: The Ledge is on the bottom.

Source: http://cdn.wikimg.net/strategywiki/images/b/b0/Pokemon_RB_Y_Route09.png

In the individual experience, the ledge presents very few problems. The dexterity is a difficult requirement for a run with seventeen thousand people.¹⁹ Indeed, it seemed like every time the players approached the ledge, they were bound to jump off. As it happened, the subreddit began to circulate a series of threads about the people who were jumping off the ledge. It was believed that it was a set of trolls from 4chan was jumping off the ledge in order to frustrate progress. The logic for this trolling, if it existed, may never be known without a deep analysis of the 4chan archive. However, it seems a safe projection that Wagner's categories of non-earnest gamers would apply here: any individual who saw no point in the run, or decided against achieving the goals set out by the majority of players would fit neatly into her classification (Wagner 2014, page 203-204). Thus, the Ledge became a strategic battle between "earnest" and "other" players.

The solution was a strategic innovation, one that put into effect the new modes of mass communication. On Reddit, a number of players had pointed out that there was a 30 second delay between when a player input something in the chat, and when the program accepted the command, creating a bottleneck of sorts.²⁰ It was further pointed out that however many trolls were involved, they could not be more than the number of earnest players. Based on these points, it was proposed that players encourage the stream to spam "START", which opened the menu. This would allow the earnest players to coordinate with each other, and immediately begin spamming "right". The idea was that the number of "right" would overwhelm the number of "down" and that the stream would clear the ledge before the ledge could be jumped. To this end, there began a stream of players attempting to convert others to the plan:²¹

Shurtagal (2014-02-16 4:23): check the progress on reddit.

Indigo_prophet (2014-02-16 4:48): Shiet, we're on the front page of Reddit!

Chalkypink (2014-02-15 13:59:27): Can someone link the google doc

Ambit_sja (2014-02-15 13:59:37): [provides the link]

Chalkypink (2014-02-15 14:00:27): Can someone link the google doc

Zombi (2014-02-15 14:00:35): [provides the link]

Mizion2012 (2014-02-15 17:02): start is god

Teosihier (2014-02-15 17:03): STRATEGY MEETING GUYS [reddit link]

Ianthesoupdude (2014-02-15 17:03): STRATEGY MEETING GUYS [reddit link]

Veterandawg (2014-02-16 17:15): reddit is why there's more people today

19 Dein_nomos2 (2014-02-15, 16:59): WHY DON'T WE ALL SLOW DOWN AND PRESS START, OH WAIT THERE'S 17000 OF US.

20 Alex_Rose "The Metra Strat or How We Beat the Ledge." Reddit.com, February, 2014:

http://www.reddit.com/r/twitchplayspokemon/comments/1y1ee8/the_meta_strat_or_how_we_beat_the_ledge/, last accessed: September 29, 2014.

21 Transcript, February 15th-16th, 2014.

There are countless other examples of players pointing to the Reddit and its Google Document with the proposals to counteract the strategies. The spreadability of Reddit was used to defeat the “player challenge” of the trolls. This isn’t to say there was complete overlap between the Reddit population and players on a whole—indeed, there were some earnest players who were missing the point of Start.²²

Sintsuke (2014-02-16 4:30): I’m paying 100 bucks for every person you kill that says start.

Eventually, the strategy succeeded. After just over twenty-four hours of struggling with the problem, TPP successfully navigated past the ledge twice in seven minutes. And within the aftermath of celebration, there was a common thread:²³

Skletoner (2014-02-16 7:25): AVE HELIX AVE HELIX AVE HELIX AVE HELIX [cont.]

Consult_the_fossil (2014-02-16 7:26): OUR FAITH HAS BEEN REWARDED.

This had been briefly coming in and out of the chat prior to this moment, but it was also focused immediately after the successful completion. And such outbursts made sense. The community of players had successfully navigated against a serious challenge and overcome it. Some players knew it was a successfully premediated strategy. Others thought it was blind luck. It resulted in the continued insistence of the Helix Fossil as divinely ordained to guide the players through the seemingly nonsensical movements and selections of the multitude. As one might imagine, with thousands of players, mundane items had the capability of transforming into extraordinary relics of the imagination. I have found mention of the Helix Fossil as a deity as early as Day 2, and it probably existed prior to the transcript.²⁴

The Ledge thus, provided a first test, both of faith and of strategy. It tested to see whether the TPP players could successfully coordinate to defeat the perceived non-earnest players, and it tested to where reddit attributed its success. Although the latter test was not conclusively proved, it would be in an instance where the encounter was one where strategy could prepare little for the moment.

22 Transcript, February 16th, 2014

23 Transcript, February 16th, 2014.

24 2014-02-15 13:39:30: From now on, I will praise the Sun no more, only Helix Fossil.

5 A Test of Faith

I take this encounter from the fourth Gym battle. As background to this encounter, the TPP chat had been unsuccessful in its attempts to avoid the Trainers available prior to the Gym Battle. TPP had to battle each trainer, and due to the randomization of commands, they lost nearly all their Pokémon before the Gym Battle.²⁵ To heal their Pokémon would obstruct progress, for a tree blocked the entrance to the Leader. Much like the Ledge, the tree represented a moment of dexterity easily overcome for a practiced individual player, but not the crowd. The process of removal for this tree required standing in front of the tree, selecting a Pokémon with a move called Cut, and successfully picking Cut. In this instance, they had done it in twenty minutes, but an earlier tree had taken twelve hours. If they left at this point, it could be an additional twelve hours of agony. Thus, they moved towards Erika, and had one Pokémon with which to combat her team: the third evolved form of one of the very first Pokémon captured, Pidgeot.

Unlike the Ledge, this was an encounter in which little strategy could be implemented – there was no way by which to coordinate every single attack in the time they had, so Reddit and the rest of players, both earnest and non-earnest had to wait and see what Luck had in store. Fortune smiled on the battle, as Pidgeot was able to defeat the entirety of Erika’s team. And it is here that Pidgeot is first referenced as “Bird Jesus”, while the cult of the Helix Fossil took on a new meaning. Throughout the battle, it was continuously consulted, and this was taken as a sign that Helix’s will was being affirmed. Thus, the continued repetition of actions and connectivity became focused in these single acts of praise:²⁶

2014-02-17 03:09 <zettosanji> PIDGEOT IS A GIFT FROM HELIX HIMSELF
 2014-02-17 03:07 <luckyest3> PIDGEOT OUR SAVIOR
 2014-02-17 03:06 <firemoose123> PIDGEOT BASED GOD OF WIND
 2014-02-17 03:05 <fisshgold> PIDGEOT ALONE CAN SURPASS THE ALMIGHTY HELIX
 2014-02-17 03:05 <deschain1> U ARE THE GODSEND WINDMASTER
 2014-02-17 03:03 <jay_leno_the_rattata> PIGEOT GOD
 2014-02-17 03:03 <punkphantom> if helix is our god then pidgeot is our jesus
 2014-02-17 03:01 <reggie339> ALL HAIL THE JESUS BIRD!
 2014-02-17 03:01 <game2590> pidgeot is a freaking hero
 2014-02-17 03:01 <sgarv> pidgeot will solo erika

25 Image available via Bulbapedia.net: http://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/File:Celadon_Gym_RBY.png, last accessed: September 29, 2014.

26 Transcript, February 17th, 2014.

2014-02-17 03:01 <zlod> PIDGEOT OUR LORD AND SAVIOR
 2014-02-17 03:00 <turtlykun> PIDGEOT IS THE TRUE PROPHT
 2014-02-17 03:00 <musicexam> PIDGEOT LET THE HELIX FLOW THROUGH YOU
 2014-02-17 02:59 <kappa1> YOU'VE ANGERED OUR WIND GOD (יְהוָה)
 2014-02-17 02:59 <runfools> I do not believe in SS ticket or helix fossil. there is only pidgeot.
 2014-02-17 02:58 <adonids> THE JESUS BIRD STRIKES AGAIN

These transcripts are also supplemented by interactions with moments in which the game transcends its locality as existing exclusively in virtual reality. For example, one viewer placed Bird Jesus within Jerusalem on Google Maps:²⁷

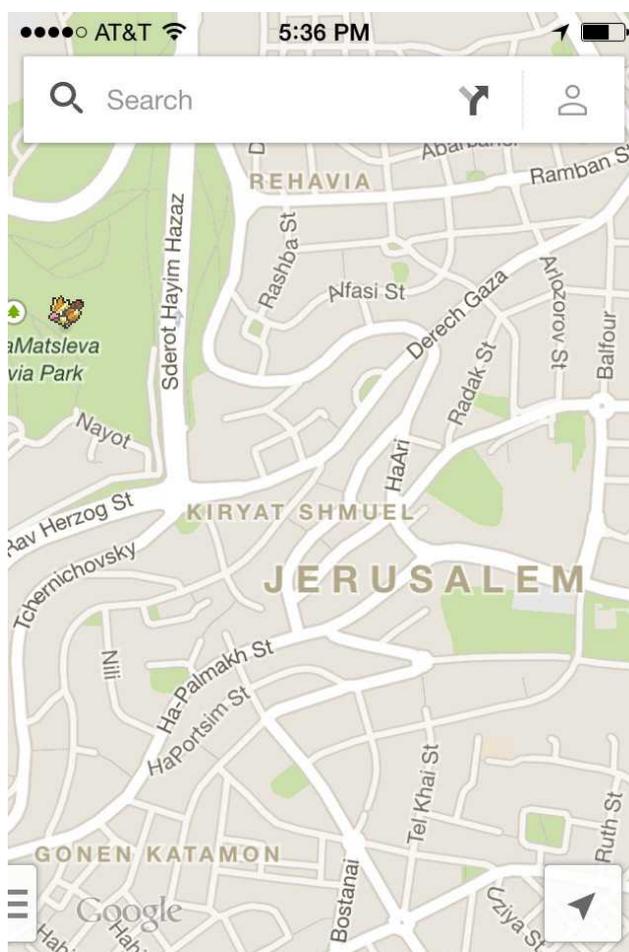


Figure 5: Bird Jesus in a park near Jerusalem

27 Adam_Hernandez “Bird Jesus Sighted Right Where He Belongs.” Reddit.com, March, 2014: http://www.reddit.com/r/twitchplayspokemon/comments/21v63w/bird_jesus_sighted_right_where_he_belongs/, last accessed: September 29th, 2014.

Even Pidgeot's least respected moves, such as Sand-Attack became glorified, both in iconography and the transcript:²⁸

2014-02-17 02:58 <bobbylumpkin> MORE SAND

2014-02-17 02:58 <rapidfir3pho3nix> saaaaaaaaaand

2014-02-17 02:58 <abcdefghijklkappa> POCKET SAND Kappa

2014-02-17 02:58 <manefyre> SAND

2014-02-17 02:58 <filsk15> Of, course sand attack

In this sense, divine intervention becomes a parallel for the moments of miracle within TPP. These moments are numerous, but this one stands out for its importance in the development of Pidgeot as a central character in the soteriological understanding of the world that players continue to create. Divine intercession has its role in giving agency to the lack of power each individual player feels in their futile attempts to shift the action of Red.

6 The False Prophet

The team would soon need a Water-Type Pokémon, capable of learning the move Surf. As Cut allows the player to get rid of trees, Surf allows the player to travel on bodies of water. This was essential for later progression. The team had five Pokémon already, which meant there was only room for one more before Pokémon were sent to the PC box. In order to claim Pokémon from the PC, the character would have to deposit another from the team in order to access it. However, this is also where Pokémon may be released permanently. And with the actions of thirty thousand people, the risk of losing Pokémon to this release was higher than normal.

For this last slot, there were two candidates. One was a classic in the Pokémon series: Eevee. Eevee was unique with the number of evolution paths it could take. At the time, this was three, and now it is up to seven. The plan with Eevee involved obtaining Eevee by talking to a CGI, who yields Eevee at the end of the conversation, buying a Water Stone from a specific store, designed to imitate a large department store, and using that Stone on Eevee. If this succeeded, the team would end with Vaporeon, the Water form of Eevee, who would be ready for Surf. The other was less traditional, but more pragmatic. It was a Water-Type Pokémon available in the next city: Lapras. The plan with Lapras would involve obtaining Lapras by talking to another CGI, who yields Lapras at the end of the conversation. After that, Lapras could learn Surf, immediately.

28 Transcript, February 17th, 2014.

In a game where thirty thousand individuals are issuing hundreds of commands a minute, it seemed like the easy choice, strategically speaking, ought to be Lapras. Nevertheless, TPP opted for Eevee. The end result was a complete failure to evolve Eevee properly—it became the Fire Type, Flareon, instead—and, upon attempting to deposit Flareon, the permanent release of both the starting Pokémon and the first Pokémon Twitch had caught. This event led to some of the largest fall-out within the Reddit subforum. Through each step of the mistake, it exploded with a variety of interpretations. Some saw Flareon as a new prophet, one to take over from where the Starter had begun. Others conceived Flareon as being set up by the true culprits for the ire of the masses. The largest demographic, however, viewed Flareon’s imposition as malicious, one designed to punish and test the loyalty of Twitch. This was made clear both by archival record and iconography.



Figure 6: The Pokémon, Flareon as listed the False Prophet. Source:

http://fc01.deviantart.net/fs71/f/2014/059/3/a/the_false_prophet_by_ry_guy176-d78bfda.jpg

7 Interpretations, Soteriology, and Religious Meaning in Secular Contexts

I develop this part of the narrative because it was integral to the first division between earnest players: that between the Helix and Dome faiths. The followers of Eevee continued to insist it was for the right reasons that Flareon was summoned, while the Helix contingent blasted them for

heresy. It is also here that Flareon becomes most commonly associated with the Dome Fossil. And much like any religious schism, there were a variety of claims to the truth of these events.

Members of the Eevee contingency often stuck to their choice, claiming it was ordained in a variety of ways. Some members claim the traditional role of the rejection of the Dome as the moment of inception. Others go so far as to state Flareon was sent by the Helix as punishment, much like some Old Testament act of faith. Even others tried to communicate the agency of Flareon itself, a Pokémon caught within something akin to the curse of the old Greco-Roman demigods, where it was a product of forces beyond anyone's control.

The many productions of the community's narrative all share one common theme: they are answers. They look at a series of incidents and events that had been occurring for over a week, and tried to understand how what and why they were happening. In the absence of any meaningful study, like the strategies of Reddit, they turned to a narrative in a region they knew best: doctrinal inspiration for supernatural interventions. This is perhaps best exemplary of such a religious hierarchy: Why does it matter that this division occurred? Even further, what religious significance can we attach to a narrative largely generated in a space whose loudest participants are proud members of the atheist tradition? In the introduction to J.Z Smith's short collection of essays, he states the following:

Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. (Smith, 1982, xi)

Taking his queue, I would propose the main generators of the religious functions within TPP were engaged in creations of world-building. Wagner notes that "Religion is a very effective mode of world-building" (Wagner, 2013), suggesting that the second, organizational, order of world-building, and the second, reflective, order of religion are not mutually exclusive. One can imagine a social form of religion in which its participants simply exist as members of a community, as suggested by Durkheim (Durkheim 1995).²⁹ We might say that each member of the sub-Reddit acted as a student of religion, attempting to organize and categorize the varying moments they both experienced as players, and then studied as observers. The promulgation of this religion does not take as its litmus test the pious belief of its student, but the earnest efforts of her project (Wagner, 2014).

29 This is broad generalization about the particulars of Durkheim's argument for functional interpretations of religion. However, scholars have interpreted it as such in the past. For example, see McKinnon, 2002.

The world-building also falls into our own, as the development of its religious hierarchies become more and more complex. In the twenty-first century, this form of engagement is far from the average. Iconography and religious doctrine have a way of showing up in a plurality of sources. Much like alternate-reality and transmedia games benefit from players interacting through a series of medias and stimuli to better achieve a connection with the real world, so too do major themes in Twitch Plays Pokémon. As a brief example, here are three that clearly engage elements of worlds unrelated to the Pokémon universe.



Figure 7: Source: <http://www.funnyjunk.com/Makes+sense+i+think/funny-pictures/5025438>



Figure 8: juz_4t “It Was a Massacre.” Reddit, February, 2014: http://www.reddit.com/r/twitchplayspokemon/comments/1yq1nn/it_was_a_massacre/, last accessed: September 29, 2014.



Figure 9: Source: <http://imgur.com/gallery/AS6gC0G>

The first two images are referential to other aspects of popular media. The first plays off a popular song by Kanye West, whose lyrics appear in the cartoon. The second refers to a climatic scene in *Star Wars III*, where Anakin Skywalker slaughters young Jedi. Both of these images refer to specific aspects of the game—the first, to the organized relationship between the varying entities, the second, to a day later known in the narrative as “Bloody Sunday” in which an occurrence, similar to the third one I discussed happened on a larger scale, releasing twelve Pokémon, three of whom were central to the narrative (Transcript 2014).

The third one engages the real world. It is a literal manifestation of the religious iconography transposed on the everyday reality of people. This is one of several such images, in which Helix believers across the world allowed their engagement to stretch past the defined boundaries of an Internet community. Other engagements included drawings, graffiti and even preaching. This influence is separate from the spin off influence we might expect of a game, and is more similar to the cosplay narrative, or engagements like Orlando Studio’s *Harry Potter World*, which seek to find a place in the realities we exist for the locution of our imaginations.

Indeed, the centrality of the player is another avenue in which TPP shows the importance of intersection between the individual and the multitude. This is, after all, a game about Red’s journey, and his progression through the game, against all odds and the voices. A number of final images seek to place Red where he belongs: as the main protagonist.



Figure 10: Trainer Red, flocked by his Pokémon friends, the ones who made it, and the ones who did not.

This may evoke comparisons to Alternate Reality Games, in which a series of mediums are used to deploy a narrative for the purpose of the game. I am unsure if such a comparison is helpful, however, as the main point of an alternate reality game is that it engages a plethora of media for the game. Citing the earlier references of the anonymous Australian programmer, there is not likely any sense that this game would have transcended the Internet, certainly not as a religion. Rather, I would tentatively propose that this connection to the real world is a result of the sub-creative process.

8 Concluding thoughts

I have tried to show that the seemingly random satirical religious elements of communal narrative development in TPP were not so random when one considered the broader perspective in which TPP resides. *Pokémon*, used many aspects of twentieth century technology to create a world for its players. In contrast, TPP was a product of twenty-first century social and technological aspirations. As such, this case presents a unique intersection in which both the game and media surrounding it evolved with its initial player base. This is not an exhaustive study by any means, but as is being studied, there is a large amount of overlap between the action of playing video games and social religiosity. Thus, this may be seen as not simply a case study of material, but also of methodology. As the editors of *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* noted, the claims of virtual mediums not reflecting reality are becoming increasingly less clear (Campbell & Grieve, page 5). Even as court cases rule in virtual worlds as non-real entities, increasingly understand the interaction between reality and virtuality to be more involved than simply the projections of one onto the other. Virtual space has begun to exist on its own, creating a variety of communities and exchanges that are specific to the Internet. And these exchanges can have results on the real world. For example, the use of a pseudo-cryptocurrency to send a bobsled team to the Olympics, or race a car on competitive circuits. We often use words like “satire” or “Internet humor” to explicate this connection, but at what point does humor start having results similar to serious enterprise?

There is also an element of temporality. As *Pokemon* straddles the 20th and 21st centuries, players who experienced the selection of their starters, or certain battles at certain moments in their lives may also reflect on these moments during the communal production of TPP (Allison, 2006). A more exhaustive analysis of these connections may be able to produce a map of sorts in which the relationship between the player and innovation reveals a variety of experiences associated with those mechanical discoveries.

That each of us became indoctrinated with the language of play individually was only confirmed by gameplay within TPP. The selection of Eevee is only interesting when one asks why it

is important to the game that Eevee be part of the journey. Eevee was a Pokémon that was essential for most players, much like the decrease in viewership that was associated with the release of Red's Starting Pokémon. These individual characters, generated by tiny bits of memory become associated with a theology of the game, in which no study is complete without certain components.

Since the advent of TPP, there have been a variety of follow-ups for many games. While this is excellent for individuals interested in the relationship between seriality and narrative, it also means that the target audiences have diminished rapidly. There has not been a *Twitch Plays X* game yet that reached the same numbers of TPP³⁰. Nevertheless, sample studies and polls are often drawn from much smaller groups than ten thousand. Perhaps by bringing in some of the methodologies involved with poll-sampling, future students of religion in games might be able to make arguments with similar certainty from fewer numbers.

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A Digital Devil's Saga

Representation(s) of the Demon in Recent Videogames

Jonathon O'Donnell

Abstract

This paper investigates the use of demons in videogames. It analyses how representations of demons in videogames replicate and subvert theological and socio-historic representations. While demons can be seen as 'loans' from Christianity, their representations in videogames often rely on syntheses of religious and secular sources, including Christian theology, world mythologies, conspiracy theory, and post-Miltonic literary appropriations of Satan as humanistic liberator and symbol of desire. These produce representations genealogically linked to but distinct from traditional Christian representations of demons. This paper looks at how the figuration of demons in recent videogames, primarily *DmC: Devil May Cry* (2013), and *Shin Megami Tensei IV* (2013), fit into the secular ideological legacy of the Enlightenment, in which the demon departs from purely a representation of evil and becomes recast as a polyvalent symbol capable of exploring a number of human themes, including desire, liberation, and control.

Keywords

videogames, demonology, secularism, Enlightenment, humanism, evil

1 Introduction

Study of Religions scholar Bruce Lincoln has noted that of all the fields of theological inquiry, demonology has suffered most in recent years. Seemingly discredited by the Enlightenment, systems of demonology have been viewed as naive, ridiculous and infantile, receiving only distanced and condescending attention, lest the foolishness of the beliefs somehow negatively impact upon the reputation of the researcher. Countering these perspectives, Lincoln holds that such skittish analyses lead to an impoverished understanding of religions, for, he notes, "some of the

most serious issues of ethics, cosmology, anthropology, and soteriology were – and still are – regularly engaged via demonology” (2009, p. 45).

The demon is perhaps one of the West’s most enduring cultural symbols of evil. However, even within Christian demonology, the demon has multiple sources of origin and has undergone numerous historic mutations in response to social and political milieus. As a figure whose primary symbolic value is as a marker of ‘evil’, it has been used politically to both prop up and undermine the status quo, to foment revolution and extinguish it, and to demonise both minorities on the margins of society and ruling elites. At times, it has been used for all of these at the same time. Although demonology has diminished as a subject of scholarly inquiry within disciplines like history and religious studies, formulations of the demonic have blossomed within subsets of literature and popular culture, such as the genres of fantasy and science-fiction, religiously-themed conspiracist literature, and apocalyptic forms of religiosity. Often present as an evil foe to be overcome for the peace and security of the world (or a world) or as the crystallisation of negatively perceived societal trends that the authors wish to highlight, representations of the demonic vary widely throughout their manifestations, both historic and contemporary. The purpose of this article is to tackle several these representations as drawn from the artistic medium of videogames, analysing the ways in which they encode a variety of (sometimes antagonistic) ideologies in order to sketch out a (necessarily incomplete) picture of how the (post-)theological figure of the demon has come to be symbolically utilized in modern, secular society. For, as Armando Maggi has rhetorically asked,

Why could we not at least try to walk through the ‘senseless’ maze of this folly called demonology, which posits the presences of a paradoxical ‘other,’ at once radically different from us and so close and similar to us, an enemy that finds in our minds its primary and most abhorred interlocutor? (2001, p. 3).

This paper sketches part of a cultural demonology, an analysis of demonic motifs in popular culture and the ways these tie into broader ideological systems and genealogies. As a form of cultural and artistic media, videogames reside within a genealogy of representations of the demon. They adopt and adapt it to ludonarrative purposes. Sometimes this is merely in using the figure of the ‘demon’ as a convenient cultural catchall for an evil force, a foe to be defeated in the name of righteousness; demons are evil, and thus their defeat at the hands of the player-protagonist codes the latter as a force for good. At other times, videogames utilise the symbol of the demon in more complex manners, ones bound up in its complex historical, religio-political permutations. While usually (but not always) retaining the symbolic function of ‘evil’, the demon (also) becomes a symbol of personal rebellion or liberation, of societal control, of loss or desire. This polyvalency is a result of a history of interpretation, which this paper examines in the context of two specific videogames,

DmC: Devil May Cry (2012) and *Shin Megami Tensei IV* (2013). However it also draws on others for broader contextualisation. The portrayals of the demon within these titles fit into a legacy of the desacralisation and fictionalisation of the demon within secular modernity, a movement from doctrine to literature through which the demon transitions from a specifically religious figure to a more general symbol related to, but distinctly disassociated from, its original religious signification(s). After a general overview analysing the main themes at work on videogame representations of demons (and related figures, such as angels) I analyse each of the two games as an example of a specific ideological trend resulting from the desacralisation of the demonic since the Enlightenment, a trend which pushed the figure of the demon away from mainline theologies and into realms of fringe religiosities and fiction. Whereas *Shin Megami Tensei IV* rests in the legacy of ‘Romantic Satanism’, an ideological trend beginning with English Romanticism that recoded the Devil as a champion of human individuality and modern consciousness, *DmC: Devil May Cry* appropriates far-right religious critiques of the modern world; however, it opposes to its diabolic vision of modernity not a spiritual or religious force for good but rather a secular, libertarian humanism. While in these fictionalised settings the sign of the demon still carries the genealogy of its religious meanings – concepts like evil, sin, rebellion, possession – it becomes capable of signifying new meanings as well as encoding revaluations of its original thematic contents.

2 Demons in Videogames: A Thematic Analysis of Some Recent Titles

Demons are common adversaries in videogames. Partly, this is because of their value as an identifiable symbol of evil in the (post-)Christian West – the creators are able to rely on a pre-existing cultural concept of the demon, which they can then proceed to subvert or adhere to depending on the function of the demon within the work. The popular role-playing game series by BioWare *Dragon Age* (2009; 2011) uses demons as spiritual entities that live in a dimension parallel to the material world, embody traits such as pride, sloth, hunger, desire, and rage, and are able to possess mortal bodies and twist them into monsters. Blizzard Entertainment’s *Diablo III* (2012) chronicles battles between the angels of the High Heavens and the demons of the Burning Hells as part of an eternal war between light and darkness, with the mortal world of Sanctuary caught between them. These games utilise the figure of the demon as a generalised symbol of evil, severed from any specific religious context. However, there are others that draw directly on (Judaeo-)Christian traditions. Visceral Games’ 2010 action-adventure game, *Dante’s Inferno* bases itself loosely on the classic text of that name, using the original’s description of the regions of hell to craft a macabre story of a crusader who descends into hell in pursuit of his beloved, culminating

in a battle with Satan himself. Vigil Games' duology *Darksiders* (2010) and *Darksiders II* (2012) have the player take on the mantle of one of the horsemen of the apocalypse (War and Death, respectively) but casts the apocalyptic horsemen not as agents of God, but as agents of the "Charred Council", a group constructed to mediate in the war between heaven and hell. In a distinctly different vein, the Japan-developed *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron* (2011) takes its world and characters from the apocryphal text of First Enoch, chronicling the fall of seven angels, their interbreeding with humans and bestowal upon humanity of advanced technology – coded in the game as fragments of divine wisdom for which humanity was unready. Satan is present in this title as the yet-unfallen 'Lucifel', and reports Enoch's progress in quelling the rebel angels to God on a mobile phone. Another Japanese title, *Catherine* (2012), has the titular succubus involved in an ancient curse to eliminate men who entertain thoughts of infidelity so that their spouses are freed up for more worthy partners, an interesting twist on the medieval succubus myth. There are also games where entities serve demonic roles and attributes, but are known by different names, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), in which demonic entities known as 'daedra' inhabit a spiritual realm named Oblivion and interfere capriciously and maliciously in the affairs of mortals.

The variety of demonic portrayals in this brief selection of recent games serves to highlight that the proper place of the demon in modern society has become the realm of fantasy. Real religions, when invoked at all, provide little more than a source of inspiration and artistic license. Superficially, game franchises like *Diablo* and *Darksiders* would seem to reproduce Christian concepts of cosmic good and evil, primarily those of 'spiritual warfare', as well as a broader moral-spiritual dualism in which good angels and evil demons are at war. However, below this veneer, much of the substance of their narrative frameworks is drawn from an amalgamation of historical and religious sources. The cosmology of *Diablo* draws transparently on the Near Eastern combat myths thought to have inspired early Jewish apocalypticisms, portraying a dualistic struggle between Anu and Tathamet, two entities whose mutual destruction birthed the races of angels and demons from their respective corpses (see Cohn 2001; Peerbolte 1996; Forsyth 1989). In *Darksiders*, humanity has already been annihilated and the ultimate antagonists of the story are revealed to be several angels and the mediating council itself, who conspired to begin the apocalypse ahead of schedule in order to secure victory for heaven, sacrificing humanity in the process. A similar plotline is visited in *Diablo III's* 2014 expansion, *Reaper of Souls*, in which the archangel Malthael actively endeavours to destroy humanity because he believes their capacity for free will makes them the greatest evil of all. In these titles, the true enemy is arguably not the demons, usually coded as a chaotic force of destruction, but rather the angels who embody an ordered destruction evil precisely because it envisions itself as necessary, and above all, righteous. While the games adopt/adapt characters and terminology from the occult and apocalyptic traditions of Western Christianities, their narratives tend away from specificities and code themselves in

generalised terms of cosmic war – a belief that “a mighty spiritual power intent on maintaining and furthering life in an ordered world is locked in struggle with a spiritual power, scarcely less mighty, intent on destroying life and reducing the ordered world to chaos” (Cohn 2001, p. 104). More than this, however, humanity often finds itself as little more than collateral damage in this cosmic war, with nobody to turn to but itself and, at times, a handful of rebels as likely to be demonic as they are angelic.

Several points may be drawn from this brief sketch of themes. One is possible disillusionment with religious and political authority, in which the forces meant to aid humanity are often the agents of its destruction, tied to a suspicion of claims to moral righteousness or the greater good as masking ulterior motives. Another, perhaps more subtle implication, however, is the symbolic shift of the demon (and, to an extent, the angel) away from being aspects of living religious traditions and into broad cultural cyphers that stand in for moral-philosophical binaries like good/evil, order/chaos, and light/darkness. This transformation, however, is not a recent shift but rather the latest iteration of a gradual marginalisation of allegedly ‘irrational’ elements from religious doctrines in response to the critiques of the Enlightenment. Demonology bore the brunt of these critiques. The renowned scholar of the demonic Jeffrey Burton Russell has documented that by the eighteenth-century, literal belief in Satan, Hell, and demons, had become common areas for anti-Christian writers to attack Christian orthodoxy; the Devil became a frequent topic for parody, and even those who believed in the literal truth of the scriptures invoked his existence less and less as a key article of faith (1990, pp. 127–68). Even in the latter seventeenth century those groups still holding to belief in the Devil often used him symbolically, such as the Muggletonians – who held that demons were manifest only in evil thoughts – and the Ranters – who held that the Devil was merely an embodiment of repressed desires (Schock 2003, pp. 12–14).

However, decline in the literal belief in the Devil and demons opened up space for their presence in literary rather than theological form. Such literary appropriations ranged regarding their adherence to the original material, both in letter and in spirit. Opposition to the structures of orthodox religion opened up a space for positive uses of demonic figures, notably Satan. Stemming partly from commentary on Milton’s 1667 epic *Paradise Lost*, such usages frequently aligned the demonic with revolution, humanism, passion, and creativity, recasting Satan from (only) a treasonous angel to a hero of humanistic values and modern consciousness (Schock 2003, 2010; Wolfson 2013). This ‘Romantic Satanism’ exerted an influence on philosophers and writers to the present day, and can be found running from the Romantics via poets like Charles Baudelaire, Giosuè Carducci and Walt Whitman, philosophers and thinkers like Alasdair McIntyre and Mikhail Bakunin, to the works of recent popular novelists like Anne Rice and Philip Pullman. In recent videogames, this trend is exemplified in *Shin Megami Tensei IV*, which draws upon some of its earliest formulations in the works of individuals like William Blake.

Alongside this positive appropriation, however, was another trend that cast the Devil in a more traditionally adversarial and corruptive form. This also flourished in fictional quarters, sensationalised in gothic novels and the works of early horror and science-fiction writers such as H. P. Lovecraft – though many of these texts can also be read against themselves, with Satan adopting the mantle of liberator of marginalised groups like women and people of colour within a narrative of social collapse fuelled by the fears of the (white, male) writers (Faxneld 2010; 2014; Faxneld and Petersen 2013). Fear of demons – and those who served them – as agents of the collapse of ‘traditional’ society, however, stretched beyond fiction and into fringe religiosities and modern conspiracy theory (Barkun 2003). The late nineteenth-century hoax of the Palladist Order put the idea of a Satanist conspiracy to achieve world domination into public consciousness (Hartland 2004), and it became a recurring theme in religiously-inflected conspiracy literature throughout the twentieth century (Barkun 2003; Cook 2008; Filiu 2011; Fuller 1995; O’Leary 1994). This discourse figures demons as agents of subversion, attempting to disrupt cosmic order – a cosmic order that is always instantiated in the interests of a particular group or nation (Dittmer and Sturm 2010, pp. 1-23; Lahr 2007; Lincoln 2009, 2012, pp. 31-42; Runions 2014). It is within this legacy that *DmC: Devil May Cry* takes an uneasy and parodic place.

Yet it would be a mistake to view this second, more seemingly traditional, version of the demonic as either wholly traditional or wholly separate from the radical Romantic re-valuation. The two are intertwined. The Romantic utilisation of Satan as a symbol of humanist revolution relied on his traditional alignment with a material, fallen world and his role as a treasonous rebel, adapting that treason and materiality as part of a challenge to an established religious and political system viewed as corrupt and tyrannical. Similarly, alignment of the Devil with the ideologies of the humanist and liberationist themes of modernity allows individuals opposed to them to use their symbols to challenge a modern, secular order now construed as demonically inspired. What emerges from these dual narratives is a sense of the fluidity and polyvalence the sign of the demon has come to adopt in contemporary culture, such that even when seen as ‘evil’ it is able to encode a multiplicity of (sometimes conflicting) ideological concepts.

3 Progress, Chaos, and Human Nature in *Shin Megami Tensei IV*

Shin Megami Tensei IV (*SMT4*) is the latest instalment in the long-running *Megami Tensei* series, by Japanese game developer ATLUS, released in English in 2013 on the Nintendo 3DS. While the fourth numbered entry, *SMT4* is the latest in a franchise of thematically connected titles, including the *Digital Devil Saga* duology, the *Devil Summoner* series, the *Persona* series, the aforementioned

Catherine, and a number of other titles. It is a sequel to the 1992 *Shin Megami Tensei*, the 1994 *SMT2*, *SMT if ...* (also 1994), *SMT: Nocturne* (2005) and *SMT: Strange Journey* (2010), making it the sixth main entry. All titles in the franchise draw heavily on world mythologies, folk tales, and living religions. Within the games' cosmology, it would not be amiss to see Christian archangels positioned alongside figures drawn from Norse or Sumerian mythology, Hinduism or Buddhism, Native American traditions or Japanese folklore. However, even within this eclectic blend of mythical and folkloric entities, the figures of the Christian God and Devil play key ideological and ludonarrative roles. While God is often presented through angelic emissaries, the Devil often plays more direct roles in the ludonarrative. *SMT: Nocturne*, for example, was restyled *Lucifer's Call* in Europe in reference to the Devil's role in bequeathing unique powers to the protagonist, and one of the game's endings has him lead Lucifer's demonic armies against Heaven. Usually coded as a sexless, archetypal entity, Lucifer often appears initially disguised as a human and going by transparent pseudonyms such as "Louis Cyphre" (when male) or "Louisa Ferre" (when female). Regardless of guise, Lucifer is presented as a potential ally for the player-protagonist either explicitly or implicitly, or as a potential enemy if the player chooses a path antithetical to its desires. In the following section, it is these desires that I concentrate upon. They tie into a genealogy of Satan as humanistic liberator against an oppressive heavenly order, but problematise this in taking the ideological structure to its extreme.

The cosmology of the SMT franchise is complex, nuanced and difficult to summarise, however its key aspect focuses on the cyclical destruction and recreation of the world. The games often take place close to or even during these destructions, in a time where the world is in chaos and its next form is still undecided. In the games, this form is dictated according to the player's alignment with specific factions, each of which seeks to create a world according to its ideological paradigms. With the exception of *Nocturne*, which contains more complex ideological structures, the fate of the future world is decided according to three broad ideological paradigms, coded within the games as 'Law', 'Chaos', and 'Neutral'. Angelic beings such as God and his angels are aligned with Law, while more traditionally demonic beings like Lucifer and Beelzebub are aligned closely with Chaos. Between these poles lies Neutral, usually representing a recreation of the world as it was prior to the apocalypse and thus a return to normalcy. This return to the status quo is the ending most frequently presented as the true ending of each game, yet because it merely returns the world to its prior state it also represents a refusal to solve the issues that ultimately lead to the apocalyptic destruction and thus keep the cycles repeating in perpetuity.

The narrative of *SMT4* takes place in an interstice between rebirths. Set within a post-apocalyptic Japan, the game's world is divided into two kingdoms: Mikado in the east and Tokyo in the west, sealed within a dimensional barrier known as the Firmament which forms the cradle for the world's inevitable rebirth. Demons run rampant, preying on humans who survived the

cataclysm, and the protagonist Flynn is a member of Mikado's elite demon-hunters, known as the Samurai. Flynn is aided by three main allies, also Samurai: Isabeau, Jonathan, and Walter. While Isabeau is a voice of moderation as a representative of Neutral, Jonathan and Walter embody Law and Chaos and the conflict between them forms the crux of the narrative. This conflict is made clear early in the story: Jonathan is kind-hearted but naïve; a member of Mikado's ruling class, he believes that society as it is benefits all, a view that clashes with Walter. The son of a poor fisherman, Walter has been forced to fight his way up through Mikado's rigid societal structure and his opinion of it is far less favourable. This conflict escalates over the course of the game until they find themselves on opposing sides of a cosmic war, fighting for radically different visions of the world's future. Ultimately, they sacrifice both their humanity and their individuality in service to their beliefs. In order to explicate on the intricacies of this struggle, however, it is necessary to examine the narrative in more depth.

Jonathan and Walter's conflict comes to its head at the mid-point of the story. The Samurai are dispatched to Tokyo on a mission to eliminate the demon Lilith, who acts as the leader for a revolutionary group undermining both Mikado and Tokyo. However, Lilith reveals that issues are more complicated than they appear, and that the ruler of Tokyo, a man named Tayama, is the 'face of true evil'. Directed to a hidden facility, the Samurai discover that Tayama is keeping the people of Tokyo safe by processing human dissidents into a drug used to keep the demons sedated and preventing them attacking his other, loyaler subjects. Shaken, the Samurai are then recalled to Mikado and introduced to the true rulers of the Eastern Kingdom: the archangels Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael, who created Mikado in the wake of the apocalypse in an effort to create the Millennial Kingdom. The angels reveal their revulsion with the people of Tokyo, seeing them as impure and unworthy of life, and restate the Samurai's mission to eliminate Lilith. Believing both Tokyo and Mikado to be ruled by selfish dictators who care little for humanity, Walter defects, declaring that he will ally with Lilith to bring the whole system down and stating that "It matters not that I am a Samurai. This is my stance as a human being."

The world Walter attempts to create is a form of social Darwinist meritocracy, one in which an individual's power and ability determines who rules, not the position they are born into or other structural forces. Horrified by a world in which the 'strong' dominate the 'weak', Jonathan vows to stop him, pledging to uphold order and try and return to the status quo before Lilith disrupted the fragile peace of the two kingdoms. Both surrender themselves to become avatars of higher powers. Walter gives up his body to Lucifer, who proceeds to wage war on the angel-ruled Mikado to bring about a world of 'freedom' where humanity is unchained by laws. To stop Lucifer, Jonathan merges with the four archangels, transforming into Merkabah, the Chariot of God. By doing so, Jonathan's wish for a peaceful and harmonious society becomes twisted into a desire for a world of total equality, in which all individualism is stripped away in the name of the greater good. Flynn, guided

by the player, is given the choice of assisting either Walter or Jonathan realise their respective visions, or indeed of opposing both.

While alignments of demons with chaos and angels with order are not novel, the specific ways in which *SMT4* codes these alignments bears analysis. The specific rhetoric—free will, individualism, equality, and social Darwinism—which the game’s narrative employs is one entrenched in the paradigms of secular modernity. Moreover, its usage of Lucifer in the role of a rebel against tyrannical authority who champions libertarian autonomy and personal strength (even, and perhaps especially, to the point at which it brings harm to others) is part of the specific genealogy of Miltonic re-interpretation that I identified earlier as ‘Romantic Satanism’. Specifically, the trend can be identified in a particular phrase which, while it never appears in *Paradise Lost*, is often used to encapsulate the character and motives of the Miltonic Satan: the Latin *non serviam*, or “I will not serve.” The *non serviam* is often seen as a statement of both rebellion and autonomy. Georges Bataille called it “the motto of the devil” (in Surya 2002, pp. 420), while philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre notes that it “marks not merely a personal revolt against God, but a revolt against the concept of an ordained and unchangeable hierarchy” (2003, pp. 97). Following its sentiment, Mikhail Bakunin’s categorised of Satan as “the eternal rebel, the first free-thinker and the emancipator of worlds” whose temptation of Eve he refigured from a sin into a political injunction (in Booker 1997, pp. 41). Within *SMT4* this mentality is best encapsulated in a statement Lucifer makes before his fusion with Walter, in which it describes itself as one who “seized selfhood by opposing God”.

Within the Romantic Satanist paradigm, the Devil shifted away from his place solely as the architect of evil and became what Ruben van Luijk has termed the “archetypal embodiment of rebellion” (2013, p. 45). Part of this included his alignment within subsets of the Romantic movement with particular philosophical, political, and psychological characteristics – “imaginative principles, critique, subjective anguish, exile, and alienation” (Wolfson 2013, p. 120; see also Schock 2010, p. 507). Scholars such as Susan Wolfson, Peter Schock and Neil Forsyth have connected these with ideas of modern consciousness and subjectivity (Forsyth 2003; Schock 2003; Wolfson 2013). Forsyth in particular links the subjectivity of the Miltonic Satan to his subjection under God, realising in the moment of his fall. He writes:

He [Satan] is a ‘subject’ in our contemporary theoretical sense (the ‘humanist subject’), and certainly his troubled ‘I’ is prominent in the poem. But he is a “subject” also in the more literal, root sense of the term (*sub iectus*, thrown under): he discovers at the moment of his rebellion just what it means to be subject to God. Subjection is the origin of his subjectivity. And he doesn’t like it at all. The result is that he is thrown out and down and under, into Hell ... [Later, he] explores himself, and finds he is exploring what it means to be in Hell ... God and Heaven are what is high and unitary, while ‘depth’

is that ‘profoundest Hell,’ and himself. The oppositional war with God continues in these new terms, and this depth is now not only his refuge, but also the site of the battle he now wages: he appeals to Eve’s own inner image of herself, and when he succeeds, Adam and Eve join him in this newly invented, Hellish interiority (2003, pp. 150-51).

The components of this particular trend are exhibited distinctly in *SMT4*’s narrative. In addition to Lucifer’s declaration of how he ‘seized selfhood’ through opposition, his dialogue frequently aligns his plans with notions of progress, freedom, human potentiality and desire. Moreover, Lilith in earlier sections closely aligns the demons with humanity, even intimating that they are one and the same—demons, she claims, are just the repressed desires of humanity, given form through the application of wisdom and knowledge, things denied to them by the forces of heaven in pursuit of a harmonious but sterile and repressive social order.

The association of the Devil, and demons generally, with this particular cluster of ideological traits – progress, individual freedom and desire, humanity and human potential – place *SMT4*’s representations of them firmly within the Romantic Satanist model. As noted previously, this genealogy encompasses a number of disparate poets, writers and philosophers. While beginning mainly with English Romantics like Blake, Byron, Shelley, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Wordsworth (Schock 2003, pp. 5-40), its ideas filter down through a number of artistic and literary works to the present. On mainland Europe, for example, Charles Baudelaire’s ‘*Les Litanies de Satan*’ positions Satan reposing near the tree of knowledge, whose bows spread out to form a new Temple (2008, pp. 269–70), while Giosuè Carducci’s ‘*Inno A Satana*’ envisions Satan as modernity itself, as the avenging force of reason and progress (1996, pp. 461), while in America Walt Whitman’s ‘Chanting the Square Deific’ makes him the “brother of slaves” who stands with the “sudra”, lowest of Hindu castes (Eiselein 1998, pp. 113).

While *SMT4* sits in this genealogy, it draws most clearly on early formulations of ‘Romantic Satanism’ such as those found in the works of William Blake. Blake’s iconoclastic and contentious mysticism has evoked much analysis and been the source of much inspiration. His *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93) and the *Bible of Hell* are notable in their radical re-appraisal of Satan as a mythic personage and the role of hell, fitting it into a cosmology driven by forces of energy and desire. This is perhaps most visible in his prophetic poems, *America* (1793), *Europe* (1794) and *The Song of Los* (1795) in which Blake reconfigures the Devil in the figure of Orc, the “son of fire” who operates as “the mythological vehicle of desire and energy, embodying a moral and political rebelliousness” (Schock 2003, pp. 42). He opposes this infernal creativity with a celestial power that is sterile and controlling, aligned with the cold forces of reason embodied in the figure of Urizen. In the *Marriage*, Blake plays with the binary opposition good/evil and re-encodes it as one of passivity and activity, writing:

Good is the passive that obeys reason. Evil is the active springing from energy.
 Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

He later concludes the *Marriage* with a declaration of Satanic liberation akin to global revolution:

... the son of fire in his eastern cloud, while the morning plumes her golden breast,
 Spurning the clouds written with curses, stamps the stony law to dust, loosing the eternal horses from
 the dens of night, crying
 Empire is no more!

Blake's juxtaposition of a restrictive, ordered heaven set against a chaotic, energetic hell is one of the more enduring aspects of the Romantic Satanist paradigm, though it is one which Blake himself moved away from in his later writings, recasting Orc in a more traditionally adversarial and tyrannical role (Schock 2003, pp. 67-73). Nonetheless, the aligning of the Devil with human desire and human potentiality was a stark departure from negative correlations drawn on their shared experience of fallenness and radically recast the demons' common associations with sin and materiality into a celebration of vivacity and the natural world (Forsyth 1989, 2002; Maggi 2001, 2006; Russell 1986, 1987, 1990). The ideologies of emancipation offered fertile ground for this revaluation, allowing the Devil and his demons to adopt new, liberatory roles keyed to humanity's experience of and aspirations in modernity, roles that became exemplified more in fictional literature than religion (Faxneld 2014; Forsyth 2002). This ideological legacy is presented in full force in *SMT4*, which takes the Romantic Satanist conceptualisation of Satan as the archetype of rebellion as its primary representation, though it is at pains to indicate the horror that could come into being from following such an archetypal schema to its logical conclusion: a world order dictated by primal violence and narrow notions of strength, one which presumes that the natural (and so correct) state of humanity is a war of all against all: a championing of self-centred individualism stripped of compassion and any notion of community.

4 *DmC: Devil May Cry* between Human and Demonic Secularisms

While *SMT4* utilises the Romantic Satanist alignment of demons with passion and creativity against a celestial order of regulation and homogenisation, *DmC: Devil May Cry* (*DmC*) utilises the demonic in a fashion far closer to modern apocalypticists who use it to critique and condemn cultural-political institutions and persons antagonistic to their worldviews. The manner in which it does so, however, is profoundly secular, casting its demons not as enemies of a god or even really

an angelic host, but of a humanity whose freedom they curtail in the service of spiritual and ideological corruption. *DmC*'s usage of the demon therefore stands in clear opposition to *SMT4*'s, casting the demons in the role of the tyrant rather than the liberator. In order to examine the nuance and intricacy of its scenario, however, it is necessary to analyse both the game's narrative and the ideologies it simultaneously parodies and supports. Much of this hinges on modern interpretations of the Christian apocalyptic scenario and the figures of Babylon and the Antichrist, particularly those emanating from conservative America (McGinn 1994; Runions 2014).

Developed by the Cambridge, UK-based studio Ninja Theory, *DmC* serves as the fifth entry in the *Devil May Cry* franchise, originally created by the Japanese developer Capcom. It is, however, a reboot of the franchise, intended to re-envision it for a Western market. This point is important because it both severs any significant connection to the earlier entries in the series, as well as establishing the themes which Ninja Theory believed would speak to a Western audience. Earlier entries in the series were more overtly fantastical, taking place on mysterious islands and nameless gothic cities. Their themes were ones of familial revenge and ancient evil, but their contexts made any direct correlation to the real world tenuous. By contrast, *DmC* draw explicit parallels to contemporary society. In a loosely veiled parable of modern social ills, *DmC* presents the player with Limbo City, a metropolitan hub from which demonic entities secretly control the world through the media, banking, fast food, and even networks of social work and foster care. The game's story follows Dante, a half-demon, half-angel 'nephilim', who lives a life of meaningless hedonism from his dilapidated trailer by the waterfront. Able to see the demons by virtue of his unique heritage, Dante is thought unstable by the human populace; moreover, his constant battles for survival against the invisible demons is coded by the media as the actions of a violent thug and vandal. As the narrative progresses, Dante is drawn into a war between the demon-controlled state and an underground 'hacktivist' collective called The Order, run by Dante's estranged twin, Vergil. The Order evoke clear parallels with WikiLeaks (through their leaking of information to expose the demon-led reality of the social order) as well as the real-world hacktivist collective Anonymous in their methods and styling, including white masks reminiscent of the *V for Vendetta* masks used by members of Anonymous.

Opposing The Order is the demonic state apparatus and its rulers. Foremost of these is the game's central antagonist, Mundus. A powerful demon, to the citizens of Limbo City Mundus is known simply as Kyle Ryder, a wealthy investment banker. At the start of the story, Mundus/Ryder is portrayed closing a call with the 'President', having essentially brought what is inferred to be America under his control, and his office's walls are coated in photographs of him shaking hands with global religious and political leaders. These present a clear visual message to the player that Mundus is in control, and are geared (alongside the cultural coding of The Order) to encourage the player to see the game as taking place in (a form of) our own world and to connect Mundus'

demonic empire with contemporary debates of corporate control. Mundus is not alone, however. Alongside this central antagonist are the demons Lilith and Bob Barbas: the former runs a series of popular clubs in which the citizens drown themselves in hedonism and substance abuse, while Barbas is the anchorman for the demon-run Raptor News Network, the primary news network of the city and the main outlet of the propaganda against the efforts of Dante and Vergil. Alongside these are minor demons, including a succubus whose bodily fluids form the hallucinogenic core of the popular energy drink, Virility. In its foundational plot elements *DmC* draws heavily not only on contemporary social issues (corporate oversight, fast food, media bias, hacktivism, and terrorism), but on apocalyptic scenarios used by the Christian Right in the contemporary United States, notably those dealing with the end-times rule of Antichrist and the sign of Babylon as metonym for a demonically-controlled (and therefore illegitimate) society. The confluence of these two trends is important in considering how *DmC* adopts and subverts them both.

While apocalypticism has been part of Christianity since its early phases, the form that apocalyptic religiosity takes in contemporary America – that most presented in *DmC* – is influenced by a number of recent geopolitical turns, such as the Cold War and globalisation. As such, it is necessary to examine these in order to sketch a clearer picture of what *DmC* is attempting to represent. The bipolarity of Cold War politics is particularly formative here, since the political rhetoric employed within it lent itself readily towards appropriation by apocalyptic forms of Christianity. As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1960, “we [America] are embattled with a foe who embodies all the evils of a demonic religion” (2005, pp. 21), encapsulating many of the sentiments that followed, from Ronald Reagan’s binarisation of a ‘free world’ against an ‘evil empire’, to the distinctly secular visions of apocalypse arising from nuclear proliferation (Lahr 2007; Stein 2000; Weigert 1988; Wójcik 1996. Angela Lahr has noted that the construction of an American identity during the Cold War fused (usually Protestant) Christianities with eschatology and nationalistic anti-communism in a chimerical ideology that allowed “evangelicals [to adapt] millenarian thought to a Cold War world”, enabling the subculture to utilise “prophetic politics to renegotiate their national identity” (2007, p. 4). Evangelicals like Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham, and Pat Robertson capitalised on the instability of the Cold War by presenting current events as foretold by scripture, overlaying a veneer of order and sensibility onto a culture wracked by anxiety: atomic bombs were God’s pre-ordained method of destruction, Russia was the Gog of Revelation that would invade Israel in the end-times, and the Antichrist would rise as head of the newly-formed United Nations (Boyer 1992). The Soviet Union was identified as fulfilling a religiously demonic role in history, and a paradigm emerged wherein a nationalism composed of equal-parts capitalism and religion (here coded primarily as Christianity) was counter and remedy to ‘godless’ communism. As Lahr notes, the discourse “provided a ‘villainous’ foe and a ‘righteous’ cause” (2007, p. 199).

Cold War rhetoric exerted a strong influence on later apocalyptic paradigms, not only in the construction of a people of god against an atheistic other but also in constructing a broader discourse that juxtaposed individualism with enforced equality. Conservative philosopher Paul Rahe has argued that since the Cold War the United States has abandoned the principles of self-governance in favour of a homogenisation that reduces all people to an infantilised state concerned solely with personal pleasure. He proceeds to quote Alexis de Tocqueville, writing: “I see an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who turn about without repose in order to procure for themselves petty and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls” (Rahe 2009, p. 187). This idea of the strong individual against a homogenising force of ‘equality’ feeds into political and religious discourses, echoing not only Cold War impressions of Soviet Communism but also Christian apocalyptic notions of Antichrist, whose coming kingdom became closely associated with international bodies such as the United Nations, European Union, and with broader discourses of globalisation, forms of a ‘one world government’ that will ultimately abolish nations and thus US hegemony (Boyer 1992, pp. 283-4, 328–30; Fuller 1995, pp. 71-3, 136-60). In fiction, this trend is perhaps best represented by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’ bestselling *Left Behind* series, in which the Antichrist becomes the Secretary-General of the United Nations. However, it is also present in other fictional works dealing with a particular Christian vision of the end-times, such as James BeauSeigneur’s *Christ Clone* trilogy. Outside of the fictional arena, evangelical leader Lou Engle reportedly referred to pro-abortion and pro-gay marriage legislation in California as “antichristic legislation” (Posner 2008), with the written call for the day of prayer adjuring “*This is not a time to be hiding in caves. This is a time to resist mightily the spirit of peaceful coexistence and apathetic resignation in the face of this prevailing darkness*” (in Runions 2014, p. 202; emphasis in original. See also Corbett 1997; Froese 1997; Kjos 1997). The Mormon television and radio personality Glenn Beck frequently draws on the same rhetorical paradigm, part of which has been charted by Erin Runions. Drawing on the image of the tower of Babel, she summarises Beck’s critique of modern America as follows:

Beck tells his viewers that they are being offered a choice under impending duress, between the ‘yes we can’ communist model (as Babelian bricks) and the ‘yes I can’ individualist model. People must retain their individuality, agency, and belief in God. Beck declares, ‘I can reach out to my community... and I can help. And together a collection of strong eyes [sic] will make the strongest “we” the world has ever seen.’ For Beck... God-ordained social distinction (over and against equality) is the key to unity (2014, p. 66).

The homophony here between eyes and ‘I-s’ here is clearly deliberate, linking sight to individuality. This is a connection that feeds into the narrative that *DmC* attempts to construct, through which humanity’s awakening to its own enslavement is a clear vision that returns their individuality,

releasing them from the innumerable crowd of “like and equal men” filled only with “petty and vulgar pleasures”. The demonic state apparatuses reduce humanity to docile bodies, conditioned to obey and care only for personal pleasure while ignoring the world around them. In these ways, the narrative of *DmC* reflects the conservative critique of ‘equality’ that they saw first in Soviet Communism and then later in movements of globalisation. It’s ‘antichristic’ system encodes the qualities of an early Reaganist vision Communism as affiliated with “totalitarianism, repression, orthodoxy, tyranny, controlling political forces, the subordination of the rights of individuals to the collective, and it stifles human freedom and muzzles self-expression” (Martin 2014, p. 4).

Yet *DmC* is a product of the twenty-first, not the twentieth-century, and this is noticeable in the way it portrays its world, as well as the ideological solutions it presents for that world’s problems. While it takes the model of demonic society from that which evolved in the Cold War – where individualism is crushed in the service to a totalitarianism system – its presentation in *DmC* is unmistakably one designed to tie closely to social issues deeply enmeshed in a worldview of neoliberal capitalism: Mundus is a powerful corporate banker with the world’s leaders in his financial pocket, the citizens have retreated into a hedonistic lifestyle of junk food and thrill seeking which dulls their minds to reality, all the while they are watched by CCTV cameras and taught by the media to fear and despise those fighting to liberate them. In a more direct comparison to the real world, the demonic Raptor News Network is an ill-disguised parody of the conservative American Fox News Network, using an almost identical colour scheme, while its anchorman Bob Barbas is an amalgamation of figures like Bill O’Reilly and the aforementioned Glenn Beck. On the human side of the conflict, The Order is a more vigilante version of WikiLeaks or Anonymous. Its leader Vergil – the charismatic, white-haired face of a faceless organisation – evokes comparisons to WikiLeaks’ founder, Julian Assange. The game’s message is also reinforced several specific scenes. During his battle with Barbas, for example, Dante will be drawn into a parallel world reminiscent of black-and-white CCTV footage and forced to fight against lesser demons while Barbas offers a running commentary, recasting Dante’s struggle as the actions of a dangerous lunatic and terrorist. Another moment occurs while infiltrating the facility which produces the energy drink Virility: the advertisements alter to read “Stupidity” or “Obesity”. The least subtle, however, occurs in Mundus’ towering corporate headquarters: Dante reaches a room filled with the shadowy souls of the bankers who work in the complex, and Vergil remarks that such people are barely human. In using such simple comparisons and imagery, *DmC* is perhaps too readable, its message too readily discernable. *DmC*’s Limbo City is Babylon, the ancient city frequently coded as the hub of the antichristic world order (Runions 2014). Yet the game’s solution to its Babelian totalitarianism is enmeshed in the same neoliberal ideologies system it tries to defy.

Where *DmC* differs radically from the conservative religious critiques of the social order is not in its depiction of the corrupt, demonic society but in its solution to that society, one far more

entrenched in the sphere of secular politics than in religion. In much apocalypticism found in contemporary America the fate of the United States has become inextricably intertwined with the fate of all; in Runions' words "political threats to the nation become spiritual threats to the destiny of humanity" and thus the good of the nation becomes recoded as the good of humanity at large (2014, p. 189). *DmC* contains a similar structure, but only goes halfway in its commitment to this because it severs religious aspects from one side of the conflict. As noted before, both Dante and Vergil are hybrids – half-angel, half-demon – yet beyond their maternal heritage angels are absent from the narrative, playing only a historical role. A god, Christian or otherwise, is never even mentioned. Vergil informs Dante that the angels and demons have always been at war, but this war is never depicted, and if anything the narrative seems to suggest that the angels have abandoned humanity entirely to their demonic subjugators. By relegating divine powers to a largely forgotten history, the conflict of the story becomes framed solely through humanity's struggle against its demonic oppressors. Dante and Vergil's otherworldly heritage plays only a tangential role, serving as the ludonarrative reasoning for their superhuman abilities, while the story aligns both strongly with humanity and its plight. This heritage emerges partly in the game's conclusion: after defeating Mundus, Vergil proposes that Dante and they should become the leaders of the new world, leading humanity on a new path. Dante rejects this, arguing that humanity should be free to rule itself. The ultimate message of the game becomes one in which humanist anarcho-individualism is placed in opposition to an authoritarian demonic, reinforced by the final conflict over who should lead humanity: a divine/demonic entity, albeit one deeply entrenched in the human world, or humanity itself, unchained from all supernatural and structural authority. Dante's victory over his brother frees humanity from the bonds of its unknowing servitude, and the game closes over a sequence of text messages and posts on social media the catalogue humanity awakening to reality as it is: able to see the demons who enslaved them, humanity begins to reclaim their lost personhood. *DmC*'s appropriation/subversion of far-right Christian apocalyptic narratives creates an intriguing lens onto the de-sacralisation of the demon in the modern Western world. While maintaining many of its symbolic values – evil, tyranny, pride, corruption, excess – the demon becomes figured as opponent to an ostensibly godless humanity, and the theme of rebellion against a demonic society that has lost its way becomes the staging ground not of a return to prelapsarian paradise but the charting of a distinctly humanist world. The demon in *DmC* can thereby be construed to represent not (only) the theological 'demon', but rather a cipher for authoritarian structures *in toto*, against which Dante occupies the site of the Romantic Lucifer in declaring to his oppressors '*non serviam*'.

5 The Face(s) of the Demon

SMT4 and *DmC* represent two distinct but intertwined faces of the demon in modern society, both of which draw on the ideological legacy of the Enlightenment. While *SMT4* draws on a literary tradition stretching from the Romantic Satanist commentary on *Paradise Lost* through to novelists like Anne Rice and Philip Pullman and presents the Devil as a champion of human nature against celestial suppression, *DmC* draws inspiration from the apocalyptic conspiracist Christianities of contemporary America, an apocalyptic framework that draws first from Cold War bipolarity and then post-Cold War unipolarity, orienting itself around conspiracies of antichristic one-world government and societal malaise around the apparent triumph of neoliberal capitalism. In these scenarios we see the demon as represented on opposite sides of an order/chaos binary opposition. In the former, the demon symbolises a force of chaos (or, properly, Chaos)—they are the unfettered force of the human psyche, stripped of all restraint and thrust into a war of all against all in which only individual supremacy assures survival. In the latter, the demon is a controlling force of order—a tyrannical system of both overt and subtle violence that suppresses humanity’s potential and its spirit. In one the demons act to disrupt a status quo, while in the other they are the very status quo that must be disrupted. Both, however, are constructed as necessary for humanity. While the trajectories exhibited in *DmC* and *SMT4* may initially seem at odds, both arise from an alignment of the demon with humanity, specifically with an idea of humanity in a state that the narratives construct as natural, liberated from the artificial constraints of government or culture. The demons of both games—to appropriate Armando Maggi’s words—represent that “paradoxical ‘other,’ at once radically different from us and so close and similar to us”, the enemy (or, indeed, the ally) that “finds in our minds its primary and most abhorred interlocutor” (2001, p. 3).

The complexities of this order/chaos binary also encode one of the main ways the polyvalence of the sign of the demon has come to be constructed in modernity, one tied closely to the patterns of secularisation and the de-sacralisation of the public sphere. This shift is represented in the primary sources drawn on by the two games in the construction of their narratives. *SMT4* draws on the intellectual genealogy of Romantic Satanism, a counter-cultural movement in which the Miltonic Satan became reconfigured as an embodiment of modern human consciousness and humanist values against an existing religio-political orthodoxy. By contrast, *DmC* draws inspiration from the contemporary West in which religion has become mostly privatised and state institutions are distinctly secular. It is important, however, to note that these are two halves of the selfsame genealogy of the demon’s symbolic relationship to humanity. While the Romantic Satanist appropriation of Milton’s Satan opposed itself to societal orthodoxy, the success of the process of secularisation within the West transformed the Satanic rebel into another form of status quo, one which found itself easily coded into pre-existing apocalyptic frameworks. While *DmC* attempts to

mock parts of its apocalyptic/conspiracist influences through its overt parodies of conservative outlets like Fox News and individuals like Glenn Beck and Bill O'Reilly, as well as its subtler championing of movements like WikiLeaks and Anonymous, it cannot help but adopt the conventions and critiques of that apocalyptic-conspiracist discourse. Its demonic world is unmistakably a secular one, and its dilemmas are carefully styled to reflect a narrative of our own: apathy and hedonism, surveillance and corporate greed. While it opposes demons to humanity, the demonic world it presents is all too human.

It is the multiplicity of this human aspect that marks the faces of the demon in secular modernity. Shorn of much of their religious specificity, the sign of the demon has become one capable of symbolising a plurality of human ideologies and emotions. This transition, which can be charted in a variety of artistic media, is also present in a number of videogames. Even in those games where demons are present merely as shallow archetypal foes to cement the righteousness of the player-protagonist, these demons are not the demons of Christian demonologies. Rather, they are constructs that draw on a variety of religious and secular sources. *Diablo III* drew on Babylonian mythology as one aspect of piecemeal appropriation of demonological traits, while *Darksiders* and its sequel draw only the loosest inspiration from the Biblical sources. In our specific case studies, *SMT4* drew on a specific Romantic literary model of the Devil, while *DmC* drew on secular conspiracy discourses and contemporary narratives of societal ills. In these works, while demons retain a certain symbolic value as 'evil', they are able to simultaneously encode a variety of sometimes conflicting ideological and psychological concepts: freedom and control, rebellion and oppression, the depths of human potential and desire and the horror that can result from it. This makes the demon a potent and enduring cultural symbol, one whose demise within mainstream Christianities may have given them more power and freedom than any war in Heaven ever could.

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Biography

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Prophecy, Pre-destination, and Free-form Gameplay

The Nerevarine Prophecy in Bethesda's '*Morrowind*'

Angus Slater

Abstract

'*Morrowind*', Bethesda's 2002 game, marries an explicit attachment to the type of free-form, gaming experience that allows for intensely personal character creation and role-play, with a rich and complex main storyline based on the theological concept of prophecy - the story of the reincarnation of the legendary hero, Indoril Nerevar. The interaction between these two aspects of the game puts *Morrowind* in a particular position at the point of interaction between theology and computer game design. By seeking to balance the competing demands of an explicitly prophetic main story with a free-form user experience, *Morrowind* produces an effective synthesis of both narrative gaming and theological prophecy in a new light which changes the common paradigm of both. This paper aims to trace and highlight the way in which this tension has been resolved within the game, relying on a voluntary understanding of prophecy and a distinct approach to narrative urgency.

Keywords

Morrowind, Prophecy, Pre-destination, User-created Texts, Free-form Gaming, Narrative

1 Introduction

"Each event is preceded by Prophecy. But without the hero, there is no Event."

Zurin Arctus, the Underking

The interaction of religion and the realm of computer gaming has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, with innumerable articles published highlighting the impact on popular culture of religious themes and symbols in computer games (Bainbridge 2007), the importance of religious

tropes and metaphors in driving narrative engagement with the plots of computer games (Wagner 2011), and even on the usefulness of seeing computer games as a form of religious behaviour themselves (Bainbridge 2013). However, this prominence has tended to approach the issues of religion in the world of computer games from a broadly sociological or psychological standpoint, dealing with the impact that this religious imagery has on the gamer, rather than the way that the use of these theological concepts in popular culture, such as gaming, has had on the concepts themselves. In approaching the matter in this way, the relationship between popular representations and technical concepts can be more fully explored, seeking to chart the relationality between the two.

This article attempts to examine this interface by focusing on the relationship between the theological concept of prophecy and the design feature of free-form, or open-ended, gameplay in the computer game '*Morrowind*' (Bethesda Softworks 2002). Having only briefly been examined in academic literature (Hayes 2007, Kadakia 2005, Mallon 2007), *Morrowind* represents an untapped resource for novel ways of implementing strong narrative formations within highly non-linear worlds (Lindley 2005). By beginning with a brief exploration of the tension apparent between these two concepts, the creative tension and the synthesis achieved between them in the game can be exposed to scrutiny. While the tension is not fully resolved within the game, this exploration hopes to bring to the fore certain aspects of the synthesis that bear examination – a change in the use and understanding of the theological concept of prophecy, a change in the use and meaning of narrative in computer game design, and as consequence of this, a step toward a form of user created text (Turner 2005).

This aspect of narrative computer gaming has come under some examination in academia, especially from those considering the place and validity of describing computer games as narrative in form. While Ryan (2001) has identified ten characteristics of 'narrative' that fit well with common forms of roleplaying games, the move toward increasingly complex and detailed gaming worlds has left her last characteristic problematically focused on a singular idea of narrative, rather than the multiple possible narratives now possible even within quite simple, linear, games. By engaging with the way in which the design, and coding, of the game incorporate aspects of narrativisation and prophecy, this article also hopes to move towards a multiple exploratory framework that takes seriously the 'gamework' aspects of the genre (McAllister, Menchaca & Ruggill 2006).

2 *Morrowind* and the Nerevarine Prophecy

Released in 2002 by Bethesda Softworks (now Bethesda), '*The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*' is the third in the '*Elder Scrolls*' games series. Following on from the release of '*Arena*' (1994) and '*Daggerfall*' (1996), and preceding the release of '*Oblivion*' (2006) and '*Skyrim*' (2011), *Morrowind* marked a shift in design for the '*Elder Scrolls*' games, being deliberately both smaller in geographical scope and vastly more detailed than its predecessors, a shift continued to some extent in the games that followed (*Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000). While '*Arena*' spans across a continent sized game world, and '*Daggerfall*' deals with multiple provinces, *Morrowind* and the games released since have restricted themselves to highly detailed and free to explore representations of single provinces or self-contained areas of provinces. On release *Morrowind* quickly attracted critical acclaim for its detail, style of gameplay, and scope of ambition (Abner 2002), retaining a score of 89/100 on MetaCritic (MetaCritic.com), as well as selling more than four million copies (Bethesda Blog 2005). While criticised for its confusing levelling and journal system, and its drain on the resources of contemporary PC's (Brenesal 2002), a significant and active modding community¹ still exists on the developers official forums and has massively expanded the scope and graphical quality of the original game. This long term popularity of the game more than twelve years after its release can be seen in its continued availability on the shelves of computer game shops and its current availability through the Steam service (Steam Store, 2014).

Intended as a continuance of the type of roleplaying games that had formed the '*Elder Scrolls*' series until then (*Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000), *Morrowind*'s gameplay is a first / third person role-play set within a fantasy world. While restricted to the district of Vvardenfell in the Imperial province of *Morrowind*, the game is focused on an open world concept of gameplay in which the player character is free to roam across the entire 'map' of the game without hindrance. As part of this approach, great emphasis was laid on the creation of living landscapes for the game including respawning and unique wildlife, varied vegetation ecosystems, automatic day / night cycles, changing weather systems, and the creation of complex and believable cultural archetypes for the inhabitants of the game (*Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000). Gameplay broadly follows the conventional role-playing game (RPG) paradigm, with the player having the choice of certain classes and skills in order to determine their characters particular proficiencies – whether physical, magical, or surreptitious – and racial identity. A critical feature of the integration of this paradigm into the open world concept, is that while certain quests may be best suited to completion by a mage, this is no

1 Modding involves using the *Elder Scrolls* Construction Set packaged with the game to extend or change various aspects of the game. The community involved has produced significant amount of new material, effectively tripling the size of the original game.

barrier to their completion by someone specialising in a different class by differing means, and that the options offered have a serious impact on the way in which the player character created will best be able to function within the ludic structure of the game. *Morrowind* provides this by linking the player choices within character creation, which, as Lindley (2005) notes, are significantly greater in number and choice than are strictly necessary, and throughout the game, to social categories and identities formed by race, house, class and so on, in addition to a characters structural proficiency at killing enemies, creating potions, or casting spells.

2.1 Nerevar, Dagoth Ur, and the War of the First Council

Morrowind, though set in the same universe as the other ‘*Elder Scrolls*’ games, deals with a prophecy particular to the island of Vvardenfell. Situated to the north east of the continent of Tamriel, the island of Vvardenfell is dominated by the active volcano, Red Mountain, which forms a central part of both the geography of the game and its main storyline. The prophecy of the main storyline relates to the death and reincarnation of the great Dunmer war leader, Lord Indoril Nerevar, who fell in battle with the mechanically minded and secular Dwemer at the Battle of Red Mountain, during the War of the First Council. While the Dunmer were successful in their war against the Dwemer, the exact circumstances of the victory and Lord Nerevar’s death remain mysterious. According to the most reliable account provided within the game, during the battle Lord Nerevar and his companions entered the chamber of the Heart of Lorkhan, a recently discovered and incredibly powerful artefact. Once there, they defeated the Dwemer defending it, although suffering heavy casualties and wounds in the process. On examining the Heart of Lorkhan and the Tools that Kagrenac, a Dwemer leader, had used to manipulate it, Lord Nerevar entrusted their safety to one of his companions, Lord Dagoth, overriding his urgings to destroy them immediately. Nerevar returned to the surface to consult with his fellow councillors, Vivec, Almalexia, and Sotha Sil, where he was persuaded that the Tools should be preserved in case the Dwemer were to return from wherever they had disappeared to in the heat of the battle.

On returning to Red Mountain to retrieve the Tools, Lord Nerevar, Vivec, Almalexia, and Sotha Sil, were confronted by Lord Dagoth who refused to relinquish them, maintaining that he was required to continue guarding them against their plans. Unknown to the four returning councillors, Lord Dagoth had experimented with the Heart of Lorkhan in their absence, transferring some of its divine essence into himself and had become functionally immortal. Having been confronted, Lord Nerevar attacked Lord Dagoth and was thought to have killed him. However, Lord Nerevar was fatally wounded in the encounter and died shortly afterward.

While the circumstances of the conference between the Council after the Battle of Red Mountain, their return to the Heart chamber, and the actions of Lord Dagoth in the chamber, all remain the subject of significantly different in-world reports and mystery, the events following the conflict are clearer. With Vivec, Almalexia, and Sotha Sil being left in possession of the Tools of Kagrenac, they used the power of the Heart to turn themselves into living gods for their people, the Dunmer. Founding the Tribunal Temple, and re-directing the traditional worship of the ancestors and Daedric Princes, the Tribunal, or Almsivi, form the central part of the religious and cultural background of Vvardenfell during the time period in which the game is set. In addition to this, it has become apparent in the time since that Lord Dagoth, now known as Dagoth Ur, was not killed in the battle in the Heart chamber by Nerevar, but survived and has established himself in a position of power underneath Red Mountain in the centre of the island. His power, and the coming of the infectious Blight to the island of Vvardenfell, has led to the erection of the giant Ghostfence by the Tribunal in order to contain him. However, now cut off from the sustaining power of the Heart of Lorkhan, the divine Tribunal are weakening and becoming less able to hold off the Blight².

It is in this situation that the Nerevarine Prophecy comes to the fore as the game's main story. Related through various tidbits of dialogue and written texts within the game world that the player exposes as part of the quest, the prophecy relates that Lord Indoril Nerevar will be reincarnated and return to *Morrowind* in order to defeat Dagoth Ur. Through the course of the main quest, the player character uncovers various prophecies which, once put together, explain the full nature of the Nerevarine prophecy. The first prophecies uncovered in the course of the main player acting out the Main Quest are '*The Seven Visions*' and '*The Stranger*'. While '*The Stranger*' deals with events leading up to the Nerevarine's return and general aspects of his character and quest – the onset of the Blight, increasing ash-storms caused by Red Mountain, their foreign birth, and the opposition to be experienced from the Tribunal Temple and House Dagoth – it is in '*The Seven Visions*' in which the prophecy takes on a more specific form, relating seven key features or trials that the Nerevarine will undergo or complete before redeeming the people of *Morrowind*. Once the player has progressed a little further in the quest, a third prophecy is revealed, '*The Lost Prophecy*' which is broadly repetitious of the earlier two, though is perhaps a little clearer in nature³.

The canon history therefore plays a key role in setting up the cultural and religious background of the world in which *Morrowind* is set, while the particular events of War of the First Council and its prophesied denouement with the reincarnation of Lord Nerevar form the backdrop to the main quest storyline.

2 For further information on this background, as well as accounts of the various different reported occurrences in the Heart chamber, see the UESP.net wiki particularly the lore articles: <http://uesp.net/wiki>.

3 The full text of all of these prophecies can be accessed either in the game itself, its construction set, or are available transcribed at the UESP.net wiki.

3 Characteristics of Prophecy

The centrality of the Nerevarine prophecy to the main storyline of *Morrowind* is not an uncommon feature of computer games more generally, especially within the role-playing game genre⁴. This reliance is both useful and problematic, as certain aspects of prophecy as it is commonly understood either helps or hinders the formation of convincing narratives in game development. The connection of prophecy to gaming has tended to focus on three facets of the prophetic model – its alignment to the classical form of the story or narrative, its ease of translation into a set and restricted storyline, and the ability for prophecy to be used to explain aspects of pre-destination (Florey 2012).

Given the finite nature of resources when it comes to developing computer games, especially those aimed to be complex and open to multiple playthroughs, it is unsurprising that these characteristics have led prophecy to be a recurring theme in computer game storylines – whether they involve the player character as the subject of the prophecy, or merely represent the broader background to the events playing themselves out around the character. This importation of prophecy into the narratives chosen in development allows for naturalness to be preserved even in the face of physical limits on game design, financial limits on the extent of development, or the narrowing of player choice within the game to certain outcomes over others. Prophecy, because of its connection with elements of pre-destination in popular culture and understanding (Boyer 1994), disrupts the jarring nature of artificial limits on the actions of a player character within a game by softening the edges of character action and gameplay interaction. If, as unfolded in the storyline within the game, a character is prophesied to travel to city A, then the inability to travel to city B which may exist within the background of the game, is less noticeable as the narrative flow of the game naturally points the players actions towards city A.

Prophecy, by its very nature, explains away otherwise artificial limits on the actions of the player character by playing on popularly received understandings of prophecy as curtailing an individual's action within the realms of narrative possibility. In terms of game design, this feature of prophecy offers up significant benefits for the coherent telling of a story within the limits of game design. The scope and depth available to game designers through either technical or financial constraints can be balanced within the framework of a prophetic storyline by limiting either the scope of player actions, the geographic extent of the game world, or the possibility of the interaction of the player with non-player aspects of the game. This balancing between the simulation level of the game, its provision of responses, whether narratively, haptically, audibly etc. in response to player actions, and its generative substrate of designer created rules and systems, is a critical part of the semiotic function of the game (Lindley 2005). While Propp (1968) has noted, the structural

4 Recent prominent examples include 'The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim' (Bethsoft 2011), 'Fahrenheit' (Atari 2005), 'Tales of the Abyss' (Namco 2006), and 'The Legend of Zelda' game series (Nintendo).

substrate of more general interaction is understood as the space of possibilities implicit within a culture or community, the generative substrate in computer games tends to be much more limited than that of language and literature due to their containment within a set system of software, code, and set mathematical possibilities. While Lindley (2005) picks up on this, his characterisation lacks an appreciation for the extent to which intent within the game's constructed system can allow for a much looser structural substrate to the game, which in turn opens up the gameplay, and narrative, possibilities. Recent trends in game design towards sandbox and free-form gaming seem to be gaining ground on this conceptual basis, with some radically 'free' games such as Minecraft (Mojang 2011) and Second Life (Linden Lab 2003) proving popular hits.

While this aspect of the technological and financial limits on game design encourages the use of prophecy within the games themselves, there are other factors that make the theological concept of prophecy particularly useful for normative game design. The structure of most prophecy deals with a particular event, which is then foretold or predicted by the prophecy. This is preceded by a variety of pre-events which build up to the main prophesied event, following neatly the generic narrative arc, whereby the events described flow neatly from one to another with a logical consistency (Florey 2012). Prophecy, by filling in the 'ending', provides a clear path towards that point of closure that reduces the possibility for needless narrative deviation. In attempting to tell a simple story, often necessarily simple due to financial and design limitations, prophecy provides game designers with a clear, and restricted, framework of possible action that depends on the predestinarian quality of prophecy.

However, these aspects of the concept of prophecy also represent a problematic area of interaction with certain aspects of game design. While prophecy may indeed provide a clear linear structure to the narrative within which it makes an appearance, this structure is, by its very nature limiting. The limiting factor is undoubtedly useful in some cases; however, it often poses insurmountable problems to the creation of player interaction, immersion, and sometimes narrative possibility. One way of avoiding this is the rather cliché misunderstood prophecy trope, whereby the prophecy presented to the player or character provides only half of the story, or is to be applied and / or read in an allegorical or metaphorical way. This crops up in a variety of narrative mediums not just computer games, with the Harry Potter series perhaps providing the clearest example of a badly understood prophecy providing the impetus for narrative change (Lavoie 2014). This problem is the other side of the ease with which the use of prophecy as a narrative tool aligns to normative forms of storytelling. While the restrictions help the formation of a clear story, if the prophecy is too tightly worded or described, then these restrictions can make it increasingly difficult for the narrative to develop at all.

This balancing, between ‘strongly’ and ‘weakly’ prophetic models of narrative is a difficult one for the author or designer of any narrative medium. While this issue does crop up in computer games, perhaps the more significant impact of the use of prophecy in games of the genre of *Morrowind* is the impact that it has on the importance, or unimportance, of player action. If the narrative told within the game is too ‘strongly’ prophetic, then the actions of the player, even if playing the subject of the prophecy, can become unimportant to the flow of the narrative, as it has already been scripted by the prophecy, and, at one stage removed, the game designers (Mallon 2007). The appearance of importance for player actions and choices within role-playing games is often held by developers as a key factor in their attractiveness, allowing meaning to be provided to them through changes that become apparent either in the storyline itself, or in the game world within which the story is set (RPG Roundtable #3 Part 1, IGN.com, 20th November 2003).

Pre-destination is therefore a critical factor in the balancing of the freedom of player action and its impact on the world, and the narrative structure of the game. Allowing at least some freedom of action seems to be a required characteristic of immersive gameplay, especially that which aims to allow for role-playing within the game system by the player (*Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000). By allowing the player to choose their responses to events within the storyline, the immersiveness of the gameplay and the attachment to the player character is increased.

Prophecy in computer games therefore occupies a difficult position of being both useful and limiting, while also being both beneficial to the immersion of the player and possibly being a hindrance. However, gaming, and *Morrowind* in particular, faces specific challenges in producing this balance between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ prophetic narratives given the particular game-play aims of its designers.

4 *Morrowind*'s gameplay

The type of gameplay desired by the developers of *Morrowind* represents an exacerbation of the previously identified difficulties with the use of prophecy in game design. Two key characteristics of the game, geographic and narrative openness, both present specific challenges to the understanding of prophecy as being related to pre-destination and a certain, fixed, storyline.

Morrowind was deliberately created with a focus on allowing the player to both go anywhere within the game-world at any time, and to act in any way within the limits of the game engine (*Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000). This means, for example, that the player character is perfectly able to explore the whole of the map right from the very beginning of

the game, jumping onto house rooftops, entering high-level dungeons, getting lost in the wilderness, with none of the more typical linear geographical progression seen even in other roleplaying games. This approach offers significant benefits to the game, allowing for a deeper and more realistic presentation of the setting and freeing up player action to begin the creation of narrative within the game. Exploration, particularly aimless exploration, of the beautiful game world is highly encouraged within the game through quests which take the player outside of the main cities and through the scattering of various caves, mines, and dungeons which have no relation to any particular quest across the map but are there purely to reward and entertain the exploring character. While this does pose problems in connection to gameplay and the context of prophecy, it is an intrinsic part of the designers aim in creating *Morrowind* the way it is. As Rolston (Oblivion's Ken Rolston Speaks, Hard OCP.com, May 23rd 2006) has said in discussing the relationship of the main quest to the free-form nature of the gameplay:

It is my profoundest hope that while advancing along the main quest line, you will find some story YOU want to tell about yourself, or some aspect of the world YOU want to explore, and turn at right angles to the main quest narrative and march off on your own.

While it is perfectly possible for a newly created (and very weak) character to fully explore all areas of the map of Vvardenfell contained in the game, realistically this would be incredibly difficult to accomplish without continually dying. *Morrowind* uses a mix of both specific creature placement and levelled list creature placement in order to represent various degrees of difficulty for the player character in completing the various quests available. This means that in places the creatures that appear are likely to be far ahead of a new player character in power, thereby indirectly restricting access to certain areas before a certain character level has been reached, however this restriction is not a hard, or artificial restriction, and plays toward making the actions of the player determine the possibility for exploration rather than heavy handed game design artificially limiting player action.

The goal of geographic openness aimed for by *Morrowind*'s developers naturally represents a challenge to the prophetic model used as part of its main story. While open exploration is encouraged, this poses difficulties for the developers in keeping certain parts of the unfolding prophecy hidden from the player before the appropriate time, and causes problems to the ease with which *Morrowind* can be picked up by new players. A common complaint found on the game's official forum and elsewhere is the ease with which new characters die while exploring the countryside through stumbling onto a randomly spawned creature that is too powerful for them to handle⁵. Although this complaint is partly down to the way in which *Morrowind*'s combat and

5 This has spawned innumerable darkly humorous player threads expressing extreme frustration at either dying to rats, or being unable to kill rats, right at the beginning of the game. These can be found across the internet, but seem to be particularly numerous at larger gaming forums such as Bethesda's own official ones, the Steam forums, and

levelling system works, it is also an unavoidable side effect of the way in which the game developers have chosen to build the game.

In tandem with the geographical openness desired by the game developers, *Morrowind* also places a strong emphasis on narrative, or player action, openness. By this I mean the possibility for the player to do anything within the physical or design limits of the game world. For example, it is perfectly easy to interrupt quests by completing them early or by a different method than the ‘correct’ one, to pick up and leave off on quest arcs as desired, or to kill any non-player character within the game that you desire (*Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000). This option of killing anyone within the game, even very important characters to the main plot such as the Tribunal member, Vivec, posed significant difficulties for the development team as it required a significant extension of the possible dialogue and quest options implemented into the game (K. Rolston, cited in Turner 2005) but was used as a way of opening up player choice within the performance of their character in the game.

As a particular characteristic of roleplaying games such as *Morrowind*, this internal-ontological interactivity (Ryan 2001) promotes narrative plurality, and re-playability, by offering multiple different narrative and experiences within the game system on each play through. The interaction promoted between the game world and the player, the reflexivity involved in its narrative adjustment to the actions of the player character, forms novel ‘pathways’ through the jumble of possible narratives contained within the designed and coded structural substrate of the game. *Morrowind*’s particular game play style encourages this in two ways, first through the deep identification of the gamer with their player character through the immersive cultural and social world built up within the texts of the game, forming a strong narrative identity for the character being played. This narrative identity, formed dramatically through the players actions, rather than diegetically, through the game’s own narration, represents a step towards both plural narratives within a single medium, as well as a step toward the kind of user-created narrative suggested by Ryan in her discussion of the holodeck and Aleph (Ryan 2001). Second to this, *Morrowind* incorporates both halves of Mallon’s taxonomy of agency within the one game (Mallon 2007), providing game aspects within which the gamer feels agency in their actions, such as choices regarding quests and factions, but also incorporating game mechanisms which encourage and promote that aspect of agency, through the reflexivity of the world to the players choices, perhaps best represented by the conflicts that become apparent once a player joins a faction and completes quests for them. For example, the reaction of members of the Tribunal Temple changes for the worse once a player character becomes a senior member of the rival Imperial Cult, or joining House Telvanni causes members of the Mages Guild be less likely to offer the player character services or

information⁶, providing the choices made and actions performed by the player character with real and meaningful consequences, and, as Kadakia has found (Kadakia 2005), driving engagement with the game.

This feature of the game poses an almost insurmountable problem for a prophetic narrative model. While the radical extension of player choice, and player impact on the world, provides the individual with greater engagement in the narrative, the nature of prophecy, foretelling set events which involve set people and places, forecloses the possibilities which still make narrative sense. If a prophecy foretells the involvement of a particular person in a particularly event, it is quite a stretch to reconcile their appearance and their death at the hands of the player in a way in which makes narrative sense. Allowing the user or player as much freedom of action as *Morrowind* does in creating their own text, or narrative, places strains on the designed text of the game both technologically and narratively. This tension between the developer created text and the player created text of the game is the point at which *Morrowind*'s particular synthesis informs and changes the theological notion of prophecy in order to resolve the tension. In doing so, a balance is struck between the prophetic narrative and the player narrative, between the designer's text and the players' text.

5 *Morrowind*'s approach to narrative

Morrowind's approach to narrative, loosely defined, provides the grounds on which the synthesis of the prophetic narrative and the player narrative can be created within the restriction of the game. *Morrowind* approaches the difficulty of reconciling the ability for the player to create their own narrative and the narrative provided for the game world through the game designers work by implementing the main narrative in such a way that the main narrative and its subsidiary narratives are themselves not necessary to the playing of the game, and by allowing the player choice of following the main quest narrative or not to itself become part of the creation of the player centred narrative. As the main developer of *Morrowind*, Ken Rolston (Oblivion's Ken Rolston Speaks, Hard OCP.com, May 23rd 2006), has noted this allowing of the player to create their own narrative within the game provides a greater scope to the narrative possibilities, but also represents one of the weaknesses of the game – the creation of a narrative by the player is much more difficult and time consuming than the consumption of a pre-written and well defined one.

6 These reactive factions are most extensively detailed at the UESP.net wiki.

While it is normal in roleplaying computer games to foreground the main quest either by not offering any alternatives to its completion, or by having it continuously impinge on the player's experience of the game, *Morrowind* takes a different approach. On creating a character, the player arrives on the coast of *Morrowind* in the town of Seyda Neen, a small Imperial outpost on the island of Vvardenfell. Once the player has completed the character creation process (choosing particular classes, star sign, proficiencies etc.) they are given a coded document and told to deliver to it a man called Caius Cosades in the town of Balmora. However, as soon as the player steps out of the character creation office there are no further prompts to complete or even engage with the main quest at all. It is perfectly possible to never complete this beginning part of the main quest, even selling the package on to a merchant or dropping it in the middle of the road, and to continue playing the game without reference to the main quest – completing subsidiary faction quests, or quests connected to particular cities, or ignoring quests altogether and simply exploring the hundreds of caves, caverns, tombs, and mines scattered across the landscape. Indeed a running joke among players of the game is that a great number of new players may never even realise that the main quest exists at all, simply forgetting the original package and playing through as the mood takes them. This was identified in some reviews (Abner 2002), and by the game's creator (Oblivion's Ken Rolston Speaks, Hard OCP.com, May 23rd 2006), as a critical weakness of *Morrowind* as a popular game – its lack of clearly foregrounded narrative meant that the player had to do more work to create the narrative or to engage with it, while the sheer variety of quest choices available proved confusing or dazing to player expecting a more straight forward dungeon romp.

This approach to integrating the main quest into the broader player created narrative is relatively unique among computer games, especially those in the role-playing genre. By leaving the player's engagement with the main quest narrative purely up to the choice of the player, agency is added to its inclusion – without the agency of the player, the main quest narrative effectively disappears from the player created narrative, only returning when and where the player wishes it to. This creates agency in the choice of whether to engage with the main quest, and allows for the creation of moral choice in the actions of the player. As Svelch (2010) notes this moral identification by the player with their player character is a critical part of the construction of meaning within the actions of the player character.

In working in this way, the narrative of the game experienced by the player is created by the player through their actions, a particularly effective methodology for the promotion of immersion and meaning for the player, as well as a unique take on the idea of a main narrative within game design. Further to this, *Morrowind*'s implementation of the journal system as containing the character's reflections on events, rather than a direct copy of the dialogue involved creates another layer of narrative complexity and plurality within the creation of narrative, allowing the character's inner perspectives to be examined as well as their external actions. As Lewter, Ontanon, and Zhu

(2011) have noted this is a rare occurrence within role playing games where the focus tends to remain solely on the physical actions of the player, rather than their internal reflections. *Morrowind* goes some way towards including this internal narrative, although it remains somewhat more rudimentary and pre-determined than other aspects of the games narrativisation.

This ability to choose whether to engage in the main quest does not hamper the ability for the game to provide a satisfying and lengthy experience and can promote the inclusion of ethical and moral deliberations within the player's performance of their character (Simkins 2010). Indeed, looking at the individual subsidiary quests required for completion, the main quest only requires nineteen steps, in comparison to over thirty for most of the faction quest lines. While in places, the steps required in the main quest are longer or harder, each of the main faction quest lines is just as involved and complex, with often significant changes on the social, cultural, and geographic dimensions of the game world. De-centring the main narrative in this way pluralises the possible narratives that the player can create in their playthroughs, through engagement or non-engagement with the main quest, and through engagement or non-engagement in the various faction quest lines. The sheer extent of the available quest lines within the framework of the game pluralises the concept of a singular narrative to the game in a way that is reminiscent of certain movements towards plural and fragmentary narratives in post-modern literature (Ryan 2001).

The main quest exists in '*Morrowind*' not to only allow for some players to perform their characters within its structure, but also to provide meaning to those quests that are not part of the main quest line as well. The opportunity of meaning that the main quest in its mechanics provides is in tandem with the meaning provided to the broader social and cultural relationships expressed within the game by the historical background within which the main quest exists. As Rolston (RPG Roundtable #3 Part 1, IGN.com, 20th November 2003) has noted:

There are epic characters, stories and themes behind *Morrowind*'s main quest, but you can ignore them and still enjoy the main quest gameplay. Even if you don't explore the background of the main quest, however, that epic background gives the world dignity, and by association, gives your hero dignity for the part he plays in its affairs.

This dignity provides depth and meaning to the world, and to the players' actions within the world depicted without constraining them to act in a certain way. He goes on to note:

In an open-ended, freeform CRPG [Computer Role Playing Game], the important narrative elements are setting, themes, characters and faction conflicts - NOT the central story. Linear stories are the enemy of good gameplay.

Before quoting Greg Costikyan's phrase:

“Stories are linear. Games are not.”

These quotations, from the game's lead designer, form the basis of what *Morrowind* was supposed to be on release. The placement of the main quest, its relation to the trope of prophecy, and the formation of the cultural and social matrix of society on Vvardenfell were not accidental. The game forms an outcome of the deliberate decision to try and marry the two points that have been identified as in tension above, a prophetic narrative and free-form gameplay.

Morrowind's approach to narrative is therefore somewhat unique within its genre. The position of narrative, at least the game designers' narrative, as not an end in itself, with the game perfectly able to be played without any kind of engagement with it, allows for the integration of player choice within the narrative structure of the game to an extent that is greater than normal. As Simpkins (2010) notes, freedom of this kind, along with social context for the players actions, logical consequential outcomes to those actions and a reflexivity on the part of the narrative to them, provides a path towards both narrative creation, and immersion in the game. The depth of narrative available, and the broad choice of narratives that are able to be created by the player within the game system, foreground narrative generally, though not any one particular narrative, in a way that is significantly different to Ryan's (2001) identification of narrative in games as solely a tool of immersion, that can be easily dispensed with once the player is hooked. A key aspect of this is the low key way in which the 'entrance' to the main quest is presented, with the player easily able to remain completely unaware that this 'is' the main quest line until quite far through completion. This unobtrusiveness is continued in interaction with non-player characters suggesting the player heads off and completes some of the faction quests before returning, and in the complete lack of intrusion by the main quest should the player simply ignore the original prompt. This allows the engagement with the main quest, or any factional quest lines, to be part of the role playing of the player, expressing their particular character through their reaction to subtle external stimulus rather than forcing their involvement in a quest line which may have no interest to their created character.

This aspect of choice as key to the placement of the main quest in *Morrowind* represents a key attraction of the role-playing aspect of the game as it provides a greater sense of meaning of the actions chosen by the player character within the game world by making them a true, rather than false or forced, choice. The player is free to create their own narrative within a much larger set of possible designed narrative options, or, given the geographic and dialogical openness of *Morrowind*, to refuse the creation of any narrative but their own and wander aimlessly through the game. The point of tension previously identified between the developers' created text of the game, and the player's own process of text creation in their playthroughs is resolved by having the

developer texts function solely as a prop for the performance of the player's narrative. By this, I mean that even the main quest relies on the action of player choice in order to bring it into the foreground of the game narrative, de-constructing the notion of a necessary or even 'main' narrative to the game at all. In this *Morrowind* prefigures a type of narrative that is open and user-created, mirroring certain hypertext efforts in a way in which more accurately reflects the ideal than more traditional mediums that have been adapted for the purpose. While, as Turner (2005) notes, this type of narrative may remain niche, the increasing technological proficiency of game design and the increasing popularity of free-form gameplay mean that alternative user-created narrative are becoming more mainstream in the context of computer games than they ever have been in literature or art.

6 *Morrowind's* approach to prophecy

This unique approach to the formation of narrative in *Morrowind* is mirrored in its utilisation of the theological concept of prophecy in a particular way in the content of the main quest. As we saw earlier, the role that the notion of prophecy plays in the construction of the main quest narrative is significant in *Morrowind*, with it forming the structure of the main quest as a whole. We have also seen that this creates tension between the type of gameplay desired by the developers of *Morrowind*, open to player choice and expression, and the type of narrative that the concept of prophecy seems to require, linear and structured. Overcoming this tension requires a change in the theological conception of what prophecy is, as well as a change in the way in which prophetic tropes are implemented and introduced into game design. By doing so the tension present can be fruitfully resolved or balanced, while the two aspects remain central pieces of the overall game design. This synthesis of free-form gameplay and a prophetic narrative structure represents a significant step towards a new form of game design, a new understanding of the nature of prophecy, and a change in the formation of narratives within the context of role-play games.

Prophecy as it appears within the main quest of *Morrowind* is something that engagement with is fundamentally voluntary. While, as we saw in the earlier discussion of the particular characteristics of *Morrowind's* gameplay, the individual performance by the gamer of their character's actions allow for the creation of both narrative in the wider sense, and meaning for their particular actions, the relationship of the player to the Nerevarine prophecy is one that is still a function of player choice. The prophecy requires, for its existence both within the game and in any particular play through, an active choice by the player – without this choice the prophecy never comes to light within the narrative of the game, and never has an impact on the world within which

it is set. This is important to the way in which the rather fixed narrative of prophecy is integrated within the broader world of *Morrowind*, taking its place as one among many possibly created narratives for each play through. Given this, perhaps it is better to talk of the Nerevarine prophecy not as the ‘main’ quest, but rather as the meta- or world quest, as while it has a far greater impact on the wider game world than the other quest lines on completion, it does not represent a necessary quest line for any character, and nor is it significantly longer or more involved than other comparable faction quest lines.

This approach to prophecy represents a significant shift in the way in which role playing computer games have commonly integrated prophetic narrative into their gameplay. While more recent *Elder Scrolls* games, such as ‘*Oblivion*’ and ‘*Skyrim*’, have foregrounded the ‘main’ quest line to a greater extent, either through the use of map icons, intrusive changes to the game environment, or forcing completion of certain aspects of it, *Morrowind* takes a very particular approach to it. The central storyline requires not only player involvement to start the narrative, but also continuous player involvement to continue it throughout the play through, something significantly different to popular conceptions of prophecy as pre-destinarian.

Further to this, *Morrowind*’s approach to prophecy contains within it a form of mutability, both in the meaning of the prophecy and the relationship of the player character to the prophecy. Critical to this mutability is the plurality of texts within the prophecy, its application to the individual player created character in the context of features of that character, and the narrative unfolding of the relationship between the character and the prophecy itself. While the main quest in *Morrowind* revolves around the Nerevarine prophecy, as we saw before this prophecy is made up of three individual prophecies that work together to outline the characteristics of the reincarnated Lord Nerevar, the actions required for the defeat of Dagoth Ur, and the various pieces of equipment required in order to do so. The three prophecies, ‘*The Stranger*’, ‘*The Seven Visions*’, and ‘*The Lost Prophecy*’⁷ leave room for changeable aspects of the player’s character, with specific characteristics being broad enough to fit any combination of race, gender, star sign etc. These specific characteristics required of the reincarnated Nerevar include being born under a particular star sign and being a foreigner to the island of Vvardenfell. As ‘*The Lost Prophecy*’ narrates:

From seventh sign of eleventh generation,
Neither Hound nor Guar, nor Seed nor Harrow,
But Dragon-born and far-star-marked,
Outlander Incarnate beneath Red Mountain...

7 The full text of all of these prophecies can, again, be found either within the game itself, within the construction set offered, or transcribed on the UESP.net wiki.

The vague allusions to the foreign background of the reincarnated Nerevarine – “Neither Hound nor Guar, nor Seed nor Harrow” referring to the four native Ashlander clans, “Dragon-born” referring to the Imperial sign associated with the mainland, “Outlander” which is used a common term of reference for those not originally from the island of Vvardenfell - ties in well with the original character creation process which requires the choice by the player of both a race and a particular star sign, but which limits the player to outlander characters. While at the time this is presented purely in terms of role-play and game mechanics, the process also ties into the prophetic narrative presented within the game. However the prophecy presented above contains within it a certain amount of flexibility with regards to its particulars. This is perhaps more clearly seen in the following passage from *The Stranger*:

To the hearth there comes a stranger,
Journeyed far 'neath moon and star.
Though stark-born to sire uncertain,
His aspect marks his certain fate.

Both prophecies, while being specific about certain details, for example the Nerevarine's foreign birth, are generic enough about other details for the players role-playing and character customisation to fit within the prophetic narrative. This is clearly seen in the reference to “his aspect” rather than a particular star sign. This creates a form of mutability within the prophecy, allowing for differing aspects of player performance and identity to work within a broader prophetic narrative structure which uses the uncertainty represented by player choice in the character creation process in order to build a series of prophecies that are both immersive, in that they rely on specific details of the games background and canon, while also being amenable to the functionality of *Morrowind's* player choice driven game design.

This balancing of the tension exposed earlier between the free-form gameplay of *Morrowind* and its prophetic main story exposes the third way in which its use of the theological concept of prophecy bears the closest examination. While the voluntary and mutable aspects of the particular prophecies examined above relate to the implementation and creation of the particular subsidiary prophecies, the integration of the Nerevarine prophecy as a whole within the game represents a new way for approaching the issue of prophecy in contemporary game narratives and design, while also representing a new direction in conceiving of the role and mechanics of prophecy itself.

On progressing through the course of the main quest and uncovering the various prophecies that make up the Nerevarine prophecy, the player character comes into contact with a wise-woman of the indigenous tribes of Vvardenfell, Nibani Maesa of the Urshilaku Ashlander tribe⁸. She plays

8 The Ashlanders are the native inhabitants of Vvardenfell who rejected the elevation of the Tribunal to divinity by

the role of guide to the player character, helping to uncover and decipher the prophecies, but also provides her own interpretations of the relationship of the player character to the Nerevarine prophecies. Throughout this role she maintains that the Nerevarine prophecy is not a fated role, which requires a predestinarian approach to the future, but is rather a calling or description of possible virtues to be perfected in anyone seeking to become the Nerevarine. On asking her if the player character meets the description of the Nerevarine, her reply proves illuminating as to this aspect of the concept of prophecy presented in the main quest of *Morrowind*:

Nibani Maesa says I am not the Nerevarine, but I may become the Nerevarine⁹.

This reply fits with the process through which the player character must go in order to be recognised as the true Nerevarine, a process of seven trials or tests, without which his / her¹⁰ claim to be the fulfilment of the prophecy remains unproven, and critically, unrecognised.

Although able to be read as a specific prophecy dealing with a particular person and their definite actions, the Nerevarine prophecy is instead implemented as a prophecy regarding the virtues of the person that will complete the trials described. This moves the implementation of the prophecy from one that definitively predicts the future, to one that describes what may become, if and when someone with the required virtues arrives and chooses to engage and act out the prophecy. This move is not unique to *Morrowind*, but it does represent a significantly new way of approaching prophecy in an age where set or fixed narratives are viewed with suspicion and distrust. This is furthered by the later discovery by the player that he / she is not the first possible Nerevarine, and that they have been preceded by other virtuous heroes that fell along the quest.

The Nerevarine prophecy therefore acts not as a descriptive laying out of events, but as a guide to the characters possible actions – it is not determinative, but suggestive in nature. By building on the role-playing and performance aspects of the player character with regards to virtues such as heroism, care for others, a sense of responsibility for society, the prophecy encourages the player to complete certain actions which align with the type of things that a person of that particular character would probably do anyway. This reduces the obtrusive requirement of prophecy on the players' action by moulding the prophecy into the broader performance of the players' character through their in-game avatar.

the Temple and have been forced out into the Ashlands as a consequence. They remain a warrior society organised into four clans: Urshilaku, Erebenisum, Ahemmusa, and Zainab.

9 This dialogue can be found either within the game during the 'Meet Sul-Matuul' quest line, or can be found in her dialogue options in the Elder Scrolls Construction Set packaged with the game.

10 Although in *Morrowind* players of either gender are equally able to be the Nerevarine and complete the main quest, later dialogue options in the '*Dragonborn*' (Bethesda 2013) expansion to '*Skyrim*' suggest that in-universe the Nerevarine was male, although this is only reported by a single character.

Prophecy becomes a suggestion, rather than an order, relying on and requiring active participation and ‘playing-along’ by the player in order to drive its unfolding. The player does not have to be Nerevar reborn if they do not wish to be, and does not have to do any of the actions that would be expected of them were they to be the Nerevarine. Rather the player chooses to be, and become, the Nerevarine through performing the actions expected of someone of the character or virtues of the Nerevarine, steadily perfecting the alignment between the player character and the Nerevarine character through the completion of the various trials and tribulations expressed in the content of the three prophecies which make up the Nerevarine prophecy. While the specifics of who the Nerevarine will be may be vague within the text of the prophecies, the expected actions and characteristics of the Nerevarine are much clearer.

This clarity with regards to the expected character of the Nerevarine, in contrast to the obscure references to particular features of their birth, race, or star sign, is most clearly seen in ‘*The Seven Visions*’ prophecy which narrates the seven trials that the person who is the Nerevarine will overcome. It is written:

Sixth trial

He honors blood of the tribe unmourned. He eats their sin, and is reborn.

Seventh trial

His mercy frees the cursed false gods,

Binds the broken, redeems the mad.

One destiny

He speaks the law for Veloth’s people.

He speaks for their land, and names them great.

Each of the first two stanzas of the prophecy quoted here relate not to specific actions as destined to come about, but present the actions that the Nerevarine is expected to perform as logical outcomes of the character of the reincarnated Nerevar. His honourable and merciful character are detailed more specifically than the consequences of these characteristics – his honourable and merciful character are mentioned first, and lead to the outcomes given, without the specific way in which this will be accomplished being revealed.

This change of focus from specific prophecy to a more general virtue prophecy represents a significant shift in the common appearance of prophecy in role playing games, and shift in the implementation of the theological concept of prophecy into game design. By freeing the prophetic narrative from specific actions and acts, the pre-destinarian aspect of the prophecy is reduced in the move from seeing the prophecy as fate, towards seeing it as representing a calling for the player

character. This refuses the reduction of player choice in more strongly prophetic narratives, while still using the trope of prophecy as a central part of the narrativisation of the game. In this, *Morrowind* prefigures contemporary, post-modern, moves in the utilisation of prophecy within narratives. This change in use and concept can be seen in popular works of fantasy fiction such as the Harry Potter series (JKA Smith 2005)¹¹ which, although sticking to a singular structural narrative, present the concept of prophecy as having aspects of mutability, change, and a closer relation to calling than fate.

Morrowind's use and presentation of prophecy in this way changes the way in which prophecy is commonly presented, as well as representing a successful synthesis of the contradictory principles of a strong narrative and radically free player action, by placing the prophecy as an initial and continual part of the players' choices. In doing so, the prophecy serves to both create, and allow for, increased player choice through engagement or non-engagement, while also allowing those choices to have an impact on the wider game world. This choice, and the role playing it allows for, expands the development of meaning with regards to the relationship between the player and the broad narratives within the game, in turn creating a deeper involvement by the player in creating and performing their own narrative within the designed structure of the game.

7 Conclusion

I aim to have demonstrated that while the combination of a prophecy centred narrative and a commitment to free-form gameplay produces a serious tension in the production of a narrative and immersive game, *Morrowind* creates an effective synthesis between the two by reimagining both concepts. This re-imagining involves a change in the common positioning of prophecy in role playing games, from a central and necessary part of the game to one that requires player action to activate and continue through the game experience. As part of this, the relative unimportance of the prophecy based narrative in the game of *Morrowind* allows for significant exploration and enjoyment of the game without requiring the player character come into contact with the main quest at all – rather by increasing the effort put into factions quests, local culture and politics, as well as unconnected dungeon crawling, the need for a strong central, and ultimately obtrusive, narrative is reduced.

Further to this, *Morrowind*'s implementation of the concept of prophecy itself is significantly different to that commonly seen in alternative forms of popular culture and society (Shuck & Stroup

11 Reprinted in his book '*The Devil reads Derrida*', the article '*Harry Potter and the Prophet of Doom*' originally appeared on Beliefnet.com, on July 15th 2005.

2007). While prophecy is normally associated with the pre-destination of events, *Morrowind*'s utilisation of multiple prophecies and 'virtue' rather than 'specific' prophecies creates more scope within the prophetic narrative for player choice and action. *Morrowind*'s understanding of prophecy as predicting the actions undertaken in a particular situation by someone of the prophesied character shifts the burden of narrative back on the player, allowing them to perform their actions either in accordance with the expected actions or not, as their own particular roleplaying narrative demands. The prophetic narrative is therefore mutable in its specificities, such as race or star sign, while also remaining open to the vagaries of player choice in a broader sense.

Morrowind represents an interesting intersection of a theological concept with popular culture that has an impact on the conceptualisation of both. The step made towards a focus in gaming on user-created "texts" of the game (Turner 2005), creates a change in the way in which the theological concept of prophecy is conceived and utilised within the game, leading to a pluralisation of the ways in which the prophetic narrative can be incorporated within the players own performed role playing narrative. In addition to this, *Morrowind*'s use of free-form gameplay opens a greater possibility for moral engagement (Svelch 2010) and agency (Mallon 2007) within the storyline, the incorporation of ethical meaning to the actions of the player character (Simkins 2010), and the representation of the inner reflection that drives those actions (Lewter, Ontanon & Zhu 2011). This aspect of *Morrowind*'s synthesis – a prophetic narrative encouraging and allowing for malleability with regards to user-created narratives – represents a significant shift in the conception of narrative in game design, as well as a step toward a problematisation of the relationship seen between prophecy and pre-destination.

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Biography

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‘Playing God’ On God & Game

Frank G. Bosman

Within the context of videogames, the phrase ‘playing God’ refers often to the genre of the ‘god games’. In the *Encyclopedia of Video Games* (Mark Wolf 2012) Mark Hayse defines the genre as ‘a video game in which players assume an explicitly divine role in the emergent growth and development of a simulated life-system.’ In a broader sense god games however share some characteristics with other video games such as real-time strategy and simulation games ‘in which the players construct and manage the emergent growth of other systems such as cities, civilizations, neighborhoods and nations.’ Famous examples of the genre are the *Sim City* (1989-2013), *Civilizations* (1991-2013) and *The Sims* (2000-2014) game series.

According to Heidi Campbell (2014) god games have three distinctive features setting them apart from other game genres: they alter the conventional game rules (achieving state of immortality for the game avatar), they convey a particular religious notion (of an omnipotent and immortal god), and the induce an altered game experience in the players (feelings of absolute power and of ‘playing God’). God games, according to Agata Meneghelli (2007), simulate the divine experiences of omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. The world lies in front of the gamer, to be ruled by the click of a mouse button. Steven Garner links the ‘god game’ to the theological idea of man as *imago Dei*, identifying God as a metaphysical ‘hacker’.

The metaphor of God as hacker incorporates into it the concept of God as creator of new things as well as a certain playfulness. A God who, in this particular imagery, is defined by being creative and enjoying it. (Gartner 2005)

Garner refers to the idea of humans as ‘created co-creators’ of God. Like God has created mankind in his own image (as the Genesis narrative describes, *imago Dei*), his creations can create other ‘things’ in their own image, and therefore (in a secondary fashion) in the image of God himself. Culture and technology at large, but recently robots and artificial intelligence in particular have been seen as products of the creative force of mankind. Philip Hefner (2003) has developed the metaphor of human beings as created co-creators as part of his work in examining the relationship

between technology and theology. By the use of technology man could be living out his unique possibility to create, to make something new, to be ‘a god’ in his own right.

Noreen Herzfeld (2005) however criticized this theological interpretation of god games and *imago Dei*, stretching the importance of the concept of relationship. Quoting the German theologian Karl Barth, Herzfeld interpreters *imago Dei* as ‘being in relation’ (with God and/or people). God games, in her view, ‘promote a preoccupation with the self, and with our own perfection, mastery, and control.’ She argues that god games are not that interactive or concerned about interactivity between players. With the rise of MMORPG’s as *World of Warcraft* it is to be seen if this argument still holds ground.

According to Hayse however, game series as *Populous* and *Black and White* (both by Peter Molyneux) explicitly explore the religious dimension of these god games. ‘In both series, players adopt divine roles as they seek to guide, direct, protect and prosper a simulated civilization, while opposed by over deities.’ Molyneux himself claims that his fascination with the concepts of good and evil stood at the beginning of his *Black & White*.

From the days of *Populous* I had been fascinated by the idea of controlling and influencing people in an entire world. I was also interested in the concepts of good and evil as tools the player can use to rule or change the world. (Molyneux 2013)

Heidi Campbell, writing about morality and god games, points out that while ethics and morality are an integral part of every religion, authors on videogames tend to neglect this aspect altogether.

God mode morality stands for the ludological evaluation of players’ decisions in terms of dualistic judgmental concepts like ‘god and evil’, ‘light and dark’, ‘spiritual and mundane’, and so on. (idem)

Seen through the eyes of the authors quoted above, the god game genre represents not only a specific ludological game mode, but is also narratologically linked to religious and theological concepts as ‘good versus evil’ or the *imago Dei*.

Within the emerging field of investigation on the interaction between video gaming and religion, theological inquiries and reflections are, as Heidi Campbell suggested, not among the popular topics to be discussed. Traditional or ‘classic’ Christian theological topoi like salvation, incarnation, sacrifice and Eschaton are nevertheless easy to be found in modern day video games, like the *Mass Effect series*, *Bioshock*, *Bioshock: Infinite*, *Master Reboot*, *Limbo*, *Brink*, *Fallout 3*, *Fallout 3: New Vegas*, *Metro 2033*, *Metro 2033: Last Light* and the *Diablo series*. The old narratives of the Christian tradition reappear in new and inventive forms and modes in modern video games. Can God be found in video games? And if so, how and where?

1 The symposium ‘Playing God’

On the 17th of October 2014, the Dutch academic research group ‘Moving Visions’ (traditionally focusing on the interconnection between film, religion and theology) has hosted a special symposium ‘Playing God’ on religion and video games, investigating the role religion and spirituality plays in modern videogame series. The lectures held during this symposium, are included in this issue of *Online*.

The title ‘Playing God’ was chosen because of the religious and theological associations surrounding the genre of the god games, as described above. Although none of the lecturers of ‘Playing God’ were actually on the genre of the god games (nor on individual games within this genre), the interconnection between religion as a social and anthropological phenomenon and videogames at large problematized by the god game genre, was at the heart of every contribution.

The 2014 release of a redesigned version of the first *Gabriel Knight* game ‘The Sins of The Fathers’ (originally from 1993 by Jane Jensen) is the starting point of Connie Veugen (Vrije Universiteit, the Netherlands) to reflect upon the game series protagonist. Although the protagonist of the *Gabriel Knight* game series (1993, 1995, 1999) is a modern hero, Gabriel’s journey contains elements we also find in other Hero myths. Furthermore, the series contains many religious elements, supernatural motifs, as well as a more than superficial link with the story of the Messiah. Using Wendy Doniger’s theory of the micromyth as a point of departure, Veugen analyzes all these aspects of the games, as well as at how they are interlinked.

Popular MMORPG’s, like *World of Warcraft* (2004-2014), are full-fledged ‘virtual worlds’ brimming with ancient religious narratives, magic and mysticism. Based on about 25 in-depth interviews, Stef Aupers (Leuven University, Belgium) and Julian Schaap (Erasmus University, the Netherlands) argue in their article that such self-enclosed environments provide the opportunity for self-proclaimed ‘atheist’ gamers to voluntarily play with religion, to freely experiment with religious identity without adopting a pre-defined set of religious values and to experience enchantment without necessarily believing. Having analyzed different types of religious experiments in online games, it is argued that ‘play’ is an epistemic category that transcends the modern dichotomy ‘believing’ versus ‘non-believing’; the ‘religious’ versus the ‘secular’ and ‘re-enchantment’ versus ‘disenchantment’, that is still prominent in the sociology of religion.

Peter Versteeg’s article (Vrije Universiteit, the Netherlands) is also concentrated on Massive Multiplayer Online games (MMO’s) of the fantasy type, which are set in virtual worlds where magic and mystical forces thrive and where powerful creatures wield their otherworldly spells. Focusing on the case study *EVE Online* (2003), Versteeg argues that the religious constellation of the game world is primarily that of a war between different gods and their adherents. At the same

time however, this background narrative of the game seems to have little to do with actual gameplay, which appears instrumental rather than narrative. Similar to participating in a religious performance, Versteeg continues, players can engage in MMO's with different grades of intensity and at different stages, ranging from pawn play to deep role play. The players, rather than following a narrative script, transform the virtual world into an interactive stage where they project their own narratives onto.

Tobias Knoll (University of Heidelberg, Germany) writes about 'agency' in the context of videogames and the dynamics between 'game agency' and 'player agency', which become even more relevant and interesting, when players are faced with choices colliding with or challenging their moral and religious worldview. In his article Knoll makes an argument for a further emphasis on the role of 'agency' within the field of religion and digital games as well as a more differentiated (yet still complementary) approach toward 'game agency' – the degree of agency provided by the game through game mechanics, rules, level architecture and narrative structure – and 'player agency' – the actual agency of the player in the context of the game.

I would like to thank all the lecturers of the symposium for their efforts, especially for editing their lectures into articles, as well as the editorial board of the *Online* journal for granting us literary hospitality.

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Beyond Belief

Playing with Pagan Spirituality in *World of Warcraft*¹

Stef Aupers & Julian Schaap

Abstract

Popular online computer games, like *World of Warcraft*, are full-fledged virtual worlds brimming with ancient religious narratives, mystical worldviews and magical powers. Nevertheless, they are rarely discussed in sociological debates about religion. Online gaming may temporarily invoke a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ but it can, given the fictitious nature of the text, never counter the secularization or disenchantment of Western culture. In this essay it is argued that the emphasis on (dis)belief in sociology creates a blind spot for ‘play’ as an important epistemological strategy to engage with religion. The ambivalent and transgressive nature of play, it is demonstrated, provides the opportunity for young players of *World of Warcraft* to experience spirituality without necessarily believing in supernatural claims; to fully immerse themselves in the ‘magic circle’ without conversion to a pre-defined set of beliefs and to freely experiment with religious narratives without becoming a true believer.

Keywords

spirituality, play, religion, video games, disenchantment, *World of Warcraft*

1 Introduction

The Church of the Holy Light is a full-fledged religious organization with an arch-bishop, a council of bishops, priests and approximately 800,000 members. Followers don’t believe in a transcendent God or deity but rather in a spiritual force that permeates everything. The ‘Holy Light’, as this force is called, enhances human power whereas its advocates embrace the ‘path of the three virtues’:

1 This essay is partly based on fragments from other publications of the first author (Aupers, 2007, 2011, 2014).

respect, tenancy and deep compassion towards everything that lives. The Church of the Holy Light has a long, turbulent history and can nowadays be found about everywhere in Azeroth.²

The Church of the Holy Light is not a ‘real’ religion or spiritual movement but is part of the popular online computer game *World of Warcraft* that is suffused with narratives and tropes about transcendent deities, spirits, animated objects, mysticism and magic (i.e., Aupers 2010). Such ‘fiction-based religions’ (Davidsen 2014), ‘invented religions’ (Cusack 2010) or ‘hyper-real religions’ (Possamai 2005), are increasingly emerging in media texts – in films, series and computer games. The question remains, however, how people engage with such texts and, on a theoretical note, what the implications are for long-standing sociological debates about secularization and disenchantment. Generally (though often implicitly), such debates are informed by a focus on (dis)belief as *the* prime epistemological strategy in the religious field – an approach that seems to be a heritage of the longstanding cultural trajectories of Christianity and modern science in the West. One either believes or one does not – one is either religious or secular; there is hardly a middle position. From this binary perspective fictitious media texts, like those mentioned in *World of Warcraft*, can never have religious significance since, as During (2002) argues, ‘once a particular text is deemed to be fiction, then it is impossible simply to believe in the reality of fictional events, whether they are supernatural or not’ (p. 49). At best, such texts may invoke a temporary ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ or ‘poetic faith’ (Coleridge 1967[1817]) but this does not in any way disturb the typically ‘modern divide’ (Latour 1993) between fact and fiction, truth and fantasy, belief and disbelief.

Based on an analysis of *World of Warcraft* – of its history, text and experiences of players – we want to move beyond this sociological focus on (dis)belief and investigate the significance of *play* as an unacknowledged epistemological strategy in the religious domain. To do so, we firstly use a content-analysis of themes and narratives in *World of Warcraft* and other games like *Ultima Online*, *Everquest*, *Dark Age of Camelot* and, secondly, fragments of about twenty in-depth interviews with Dutch players – collected, analyzed and coded by the first author. The respondents were selected through ‘snowball sampling’. Although different motivations and play styles emerged from the data – varying from ‘social’, ‘achievement’ and ‘immersion’ (e.g., Bartle, 2004; Yee, 2009), we focus in this essay primarily on the latter aspect: the appeal and experience of ‘being’ in the game-world through role-playing that was generally enjoyed by the majority of players but particularly verbalized by six respondents. Based on the analysis we argue, first of all, that playing with religious narratives is a salient practice in the contemporary spiritual milieu while, secondly, the activity of game play provides the opportunity for gamers to experience enchantment without ‘converting’ to a particular set of beliefs.

2 http://www.wowwiki.com/Church_of_the_Holy_Light, accessed 27-10-2014.

2 Pagan Enchantments: From Middle Earth to *World of Warcraft*

2.1 Myth-making

Over the last decades, it has become a mainstay in the sociology of religion that processes of secularization and disenchantment did not result in a decline of religion as such but, rather, in religious change (i.e., Luckman 1967). While the Christian churches run empty – particularly in North-Western Europe – modern esotericism and new forms of spirituality are blossoming that convey a turn from a transcendent perspective on the divine towards a more immanent frame (Aupers & Houtman 2010; Campbell 2007; Hanegraaff 1996). In the words of Lynch (2007): ‘(..) spirituality sees our only hope in a re-enchantment of the world, a renewed vision of the divine presence within the natural order that can generate new respect for nature and new ways of harmonious living within the natural order’ (p. 54). It is from this perspective that people in the spiritual milieu idealize and mimic ‘premodern’ cultures and religions – i.e. those of native Americans, Celts, Cathars, Egyptians, Vikings, pagans, witches, shamans and the like. These ‘authentic’ cultures, it is argued, were still untouched by the cold machineries of modernity and living in harmony with nature. From all the groups in the contemporary spiritual milieu, it is particularly the neopagan movement that embraces this worldview. Neopagans are ‘romanticizing the premodern’ (Partridge 2004, p. 77) and are, various scholars argue, deeply involved in ‘animism’, ‘polytheism’ and ‘nature religion’ with an emphasis on magical rituals (e.g., Adler 1997; Berger 1999; Hanegraaff 1996; Luhrmann 1991; York 1995).

Notwithstanding its rootedness in all kinds of traditions, the question most relevant for this essay is however: do people in the spiritual milieu – particularly pagans – *really believe*? It can be argued that dedicated belief in a deeper, higher or more spiritual reality is suspect. Neopagans often doubt the ontological status of religious or metaphysical claims whereas it is imperative in the milieu to ‘reinvent’ your own pagan tradition (Luhrmann 1991). Neopagans are often aware of the socially constructed nature of reality – it is primarily a literary culture and participants ground their worldview in books that claim objectivity *and* fiction to design, legitimate and authenticate their own invented traditions (e.g., Luhrmann 1991; Possamai 2005). Even *Witchcraft Today* (1954) written by Gerald Gardner – the founder of Wicca – is known to be a fictional ethnography. Pagans, in short, are not real believers but self-consciously and playfully create their own ‘mythopoeic history’ in what they consider to be a ‘disenchanted’, or ‘a myth-impoverished world’ (Luhrmann 1991, p. 238, p. 241).

This existential imperative to construct an enchanting world – brimming with spirituality, myth and magic – also characterizes the famous fantasy writer J.R.R. Tolkien – well known author

of *The Hobbit* (1937), *Lord of the Rings* (1954). His work had a profound influence on the pagan movement and, more recently, on the game industry (Bartle, 2004; Krzywinska, 2008). In 1931 he wrote a poem called *Mythopoeia* (myth-making) in which he rejected the common perception of ‘myth’ as being ‘false’, ‘not true’ or an ‘illusion’ – a connotation obviously fed by secular Enlightenment and the imperative of scientific thinking. Instead Tolkien proposed to understand myth as containing perennial, universal and spiritual truth and advocated the active construction of such meaningful narratives in a disenchanted modern world. In his famous essay *On Fairy Stories* (1938), Tolkien elaborated on these themes: he emphasized that mythology, not unlike religion, provides eternal truth and ‘consolation’ vis-à-vis human suffering and persisted that the creation of a mythical ‘secondary world’ is not a frivolous matter. Although its content should break with modern reality, its form, structure and details should be ‘derived from reality’ and reflect ‘the inner consistency of reality’ (Tolkien 1938, p. 16). A good mythmaker, he argued, ‘makes a secondary world that your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates to is “true”’: it accords with the laws of that world’ (Ibid., p. 12).

Tolkien practiced what he preached. ‘Middle Earth’, the location of his trilogy *Lord of the Rings*, is both fantastic and realistic; both mythical and rational and is by far the most influential work in the fantasy genre. Its main narrative – featuring creatures like hobbits, elves, and wizards as main protagonists – is mainly based on Norse mythology and embraces a ‘polytheistic-cum-animist cosmology of “natural magic”’ (Curry 1998, p. 28). These ‘premodern’ religious worldviews are important, Tolkien felt, since ‘the “war” against mystery and magic by modernity urgently requires a re-enchantment of the world, which a sense of Earth-mysteries is much better placed to offer than a single transcendent deity’ (Curry 1998, pp. 28-29).

Tolkien died in 1973, but around that same time his enchanting world was reproduced in cyberspace. As Sherry Turkle (2002) argues: ‘The personal computer movement of the 1970s and early 1980s was deeply immersed in Tolkien and translated his fantasy worlds into hugely popular (and enduring) role-playing games’ (p. 18). In 1976 a Stanford hacker Donald Woods and a programmer Will Crowther developed *Adventure*, the first text-based role-playing game on the computer. *Adventure* ‘turned out to be one of the most influential computer games in the medium’s early history’ (King and Borland 2003, p. 31). An important shift came in 1980s when Trubshaw and Bartle developed the ‘Multi-User Dungeon’ (MUDs) that made it possible to collectively explore this textual world. Between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s, text-based role-playing games and MUDs were booming. Some examples that are directly derived from the work of Tolkien are *The Shire* (1979), *Ringin* (1979), *Lord of the Rings* (1985), *LORD* (1981), *Ring of Doom* (1983), *The Mines of Moria* (1985), *Bilbo* (1989), *The Balrogiian trilogy* (1989) and *Elendor* (1991). In 1996 and 1997 respectively, *Diablo* and *Ultima Online* were launched on the Internet – generally understood as the first 3-dimensional Massively Multiplayer Online Role

Playing Games. In the last decade the MMORPG genre became immensely popular. Well-known examples are *Everquest* (Sony 1999), *Asheron's Call* (Microsoft 1999), *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment, 2001), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and *Lord of the Rings Online* (2007 Turbine, Inc.).

2.2 Enchanting MMOs

No less than 95 percent of the contemporary Massively Multiplayer Online games are based on the 'fantasy genre' (Woodcock 2009). The main narratives of these games differ, of course, in many respects but all hark back to an imaginary medieval society that is yet untouched by the juggernaut of modernity (Aupers 2007). Not unlike neopagans in the spiritual milieu, then, the producers of online worlds construct, or better, literally design a 'mythopoeic history' by cutting and pasting premodern religions, myths and sagas and by offering it for further consumption. The narratives are often derived from well-known western legends, but also popular fiction varying from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, to J.G. Frazer's *Golden Bow* and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (e.g., Bartle 2004). By using such intertextual references to other popular (fantasy) texts, Krzywinska (2008) argues, designers constitute an appealing 'combination of otherness and familiarity for players' thereby enhancing feelings of immersion and 'being in a world' (p. 138).

In line with the approach set out by Tolkien, in short, MMOs are both extremely realistic and distinctly otherworldly (Castranova 2005, p. 80). This otherworldliness instigated by premodern, mythical and magical content, supports and even enhances the function of play as a 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1950[1938]). It draws strong boundaries between the real world and the game world and, in doing so, contributes to its appeal. On the cover of *WoW* and *UO* one can read:

A world awaits...Descend into the *World of Warcraft* and join thousands of mighty heroes in an online world of myth, magic and limitless adventure (...) An infinity of experiences await. So what are you waiting for?

If you've ever felt like you wanted to step out of yourself, your life, into one that was full of fantasy and adventure – virtual worlds offer you this opportunity.(...) You choose your own virtual life and immerse yourself into the mystical, medieval world of Britannia (...) *Ultima Online* is the place where you can be whatever you want to be.

There are, of course, profound differences between game worlds. The culture of *UO*, for instance, is rooted in specific Anglo-Saxon legends whereas *Dark Age of Camelot (DAoC)* is a good example of a game that is exclusively based on Northern European myth and legend. At the beginning of the game, players can choose to be part of one of three territories that each have their own culture,

religion and customs and are at war with each other: Albion (portrayed as Medieval England and informed by ‘King Arthur legends’), Midgard (portrayed as ancient Scandinavia and informed by ‘Viking mythology’) and Hilbernia (portrayed as ancient Ireland and informed by ‘Celtic lore’). In the manual of *DAoC*, these three territories try to convince players to join them in their battle against the ‘Dark forces of evil’ by promising more magic and enchantment than the others:

Others may tempt you with mighty deeds and fine words, but in Hilbernia we keep closest to the oldest of the spirits of the Earth. Ours is the most mystical, imbued with the spirit of ancient days and long forgotten powers. If you desire to fight with us against the encroachment of evil and darkness, come to the most magical land of all, Hilbernia.

Being ‘the most magical land of all’, so it seems, is an important asset in rivalry in the game as well as in the competition between online game worlds competing on today’s market. In recent applications of the game *DAoC*, new territories are opened up, like the ‘highly advanced civilization’ Atlantis (which is according to legend the pinnacle of spirituality), Stygia (‘a searing desert where adventurers will encounter creatures from Egyptian mythology’) and Volcanus (‘Here you will encounter (...) the warlike Minotaurs’).

Of course there are multiple, more profane features and functions installed in the architecture of the game world, such as the options to socialize in guilds, explore the environment, compete, work, achieve and gain rewards (e.g., Bartle 2004; Salen & Zimmerman 2004). What the prominence of fantasy indicates, however, is that the construction of a mythopoeic setting is pivotal in constituting enchantment and establishing boundaries between profane modern life and the game world. Most MMOs offer, what John Caputo (2001) called, ‘a high-tech religious mythology, a fairly explicit “repetition” or appropriation of elemental religious structures outside the confines of the religious faiths’ (pp. 89-90). Unencumbered by historical accuracy, designers cut, paste and sample various popular legends, myths and religious archetypes and combine them into new idiosyncratic worlds. Time and place are subordinated to this imperative of enchantment. As far as religion concerned, the Christian tradition is downplayed in favor of polytheistic and animistic forms of religion. As to the former: various gods and deities – both good and bad – are prominent in all the games. As to the latter: players are encouraged – or even obliged if they want to proceed in the game – to perform various ‘quests’ to collect spiritual objects, like ‘totems’ or weapons imbued with ‘mana’. Most relevant for the players, however, is the ‘art of magic’. Before the game starts, the players construct a character and choose between various races, classes and professions. Abstracted from the differences, it can be concluded that in every game there is the choice to become an explorer, a fighter *or* a magician. Magicians come in sub-classes. Without being conclusive: in *EQ* one can for instance become a ‘sorcerer’, ‘warlock’, ‘wizard’, ‘enchanter’, ‘illusionist’, ‘coercer’, ‘summoner’, ‘necromancer’, ‘conjurer’, ‘druid’, ‘warden’, ‘fury’, ‘shaman’,

‘defiler’ or ‘mystic’. In *DAoC* one can, for instance, become a ‘cabalist’, ‘rune master’, ‘bone dancer’, ‘spirit master’, ‘healer’, ‘bard’, ‘mentalist’ or ‘animist’. Again, this is just a small sample of the options available. Each subclass has specific abilities and skills. Take the examples of the shaman in *WoW*:

The shaman is an effective spell caster, but can also fight extremely well with mace and staff. The shaman’s line-of spirit spells enables it to perform a variety of useful non-combat actions. It can resurrect allies, turn into a ghost wolf for increased movements, or instantly teleport to town. The shamans unique power is totems. Totems are spiritual objects that a shaman must earn through questing.

Resurrecting the dead, healing, draining souls, summoning spirits, telekinesis, teleport, paralyze, creating energy bolts, becoming invisible, shape shifting, causing earthquakes; the spells and possibilities to perform magic in the games are various. In addition, players can develop their magical skills when they are progressing in the game. In fact, they can have a magical career. As *DAoC* states: ‘For those who wish to dabble in the arts of magic and mysticism, there are several paths that lead to a mastery of the arcane.’ In *DAoC* they can do so by joining magical schools and guilds. They can become part of the Academy (‘the school founded by the famous wizard Merlin’), the Guild of Shadows or the Church of Albion. In *UO*, there are eight levels of magic containing 64 magical spells and rituals. The novice starts at the first level (low-magic) and can advance until the eight level (high-magic). In this last phase, one can attain great – and almost omnipotent – magical powers.

‘Why do so many virtual worlds feature magic?’ The first author raised this question in an interview with Richard Bartle and he turned it into a topic of discussion among game designers on the blog Terranova. The answers ranged from explanations that magic is a functional trope enhancing the boundaries between the real and the game world (i.e., to construct the ‘magic circle’ in a metaphorical sense) to speculations about the intrinsic value of magic, myth and mystery and its importance in the modern world. As one designer typically noted:

Magic is growing in popularity. It’s a very compelling way to view the world and can provide more meaning and agency than a viewpoint that is strictly materialist. In a nutshell, we want the magic that was stripped by rational materialism to return back into our lives. Immersive 3D worlds provide a nice playground to this end.

3 Spiritual Play in *World of Warcraft*

3.1 Beyond belief

The question remains if and how players identify with the enchanting forms of spirituality in online game worlds. The ‘disenchantment of the world,’ Weber argued, generates a nonreligious *and* disillusioned worldview. Under the influence of science and technology, he commented, an otherworldly orientation will be gradually replaced by a worldview that is more objective but undermines – at the same time – the meaning of life. Modern astronomy, biology, physics or chemistry can describe the world as it is, but can (and should!) not teach anything about the ultimate meaning of the world. In a totally ‘disenchanted world’, Weber argued, ‘the worlds processes simply are (...) and happen but no longer signify anything’ (1978[1921]), p. 506).

Interestingly enough the majority of players of *World of Warcraft* interviewed subscribe to this existential situation: they are basically nonreligious in a traditional sense *and* disillusioned. First of all, they pride themselves on being atheists incapable of believing in ‘supernatural’ or ‘transcendent’ realms and especially traditional forms of religion. One gamer typically argued that ‘(r)eligions like Christianity and Islam are from the past and no longer relevant for me. They are based on a society from two thousand years ago (...)’. Others state that ‘there’s nothing holy about the Bible’, that religions are just ‘fairytales’ and that ‘only fools believe in God’. They essentially perceive of themselves as too rational and sober (‘nuchter’ in Dutch) to believe and often literally claim that scientific knowledge essentially can solve and de-mystify all mysteries. As self-proclaimed, ‘true atheists’ they accept many secularizing scientific propositions derived from evolution theory, physics and computer sciences. One of the gamers provides the most explicit and radical example of this thoroughly rationalized and disenchanted perspective:

I am completely irreligious. I think a human being is nothing more than an animal – a mechanical organism and you can best compare a human with a computer. The body is like a closet – in this closet you’ll find the hardware, everything we learned is written on this hardware, our brains, and our personality is therefore nothing more than software interacting with the world.

Many of the respondents are not only nonreligious but ‘lost faith’ in a more general sense too. They share, in the words of Caputo, a ‘tragic sense of life’ (2001, p. 118) and overtly complain about the meaninglessness of contemporary modern society: the ‘emptiness’ of politics, the problem of unchecked modern capitalism, relentless consumption and the unforeseen consequences of science and technology. One gamer argues: ‘Society is all about power and status. You need a job, you need money (...) And all those technologies.. (...) We loose sight on what is really important. People forget:

what are you actually living for?’ Another comments: ‘Motivated by the aim for more profits we develop technologies we do not understand. We can not see the consequences for humanity but they will be dramatic, I think.’ And more bluntly: ‘Why should I invest in such a world that is so fucked up?’

The flip-side of this critical analysis of modern, disenchanting society as meaningless is a quite romantic picture of more traditional, premodern society. One gamer notes:

There’s this nostalgic longing for the past when all these things were not there yet. In the old days everything was better. The countryside, sunny summers when everybody was happy. If you walk through the world of *World of Warcraft* this is all there. And you are not constantly confronted with high-tech.

The affinity with the distinctly rural, pre-industrial areas of *WoW* can thus, first of all, be understood as motivated by the disillusion of living in a disenchanting modern society. Like neopagans, many *WoW* players romanticize the premodern past: they praise the simplicity, moral clarity and ‘authenticity’ of ‘their’ virtual world and, most ironically, emphasize the lack of highly advanced technology.

But how do they relate, more specifically, to premodern religion, polytheism, animism and magic that suffuse the online world? As noted, gamers proudly present themselves as too ‘rational’ to believe. But there’s another side to this story – a feeling of loss and disillusion: gamers can not believe in the supernatural but, argue, very much like FBI agent Fox Mulder in the popular series the *X-files* that they ‘want to believe.’ They have a strongly felt religious longing, in short. As one gamer typically confessed: ‘I would really like that there was more than we can see in life. Telepathic connections between people, or special super powers that people are born with – forces that are prominent in everyday life.’ Paradoxically, their disenchanting stance motivates these youngsters to enjoy ‘superpowers,’ magic and spirituality online. In this virtual environment, after all, they can freely *play* with spirituality without believing or without being swallowed up by a belief system. ‘Within these worlds you accept everything as it is’, one gamer typically comments, ‘It is as it is because it is made that way.’ Is this engagement with magic, myth and spirituality online indeed ‘just’ play then – merely entertainment? Things are more complicated than that: play may be understood as an alibi to seriously engage oneself with the meaning of magic, myth and spirituality. More than that: while playing, gamers often *experience* the environment, including its supernatural entities and propositions, as real. Such ontological transformations occur, as we will see, especially through the activity of role-playing.

3.2 The Magic of Role-Playing

It has been assessed in many studies of modern magic in the neopagan movement that ‘play’ and particularly ‘role-playing’ are at the heart of magical rituals (e.g., Adler 1997; Berger 1999; Copier 2005; Luhrmann 1991). In general, magic is used in this milieu to ‘invoke the powers in nature’ but, particularly, to ‘summon the powers within.’ Berger (1999, p. 33) emphasizes the primacy of this ‘magical’ or ‘divine’ Self in ritual performances. Once the ‘divine’ or ‘magical self’ is awake, neopagans assume, one passes the border from the profane world to the sacred world where everything is possible and interconnected.

Luhrmann (1991) argues on the basis of her extensive fieldwork that the model of ‘play’ – or a context of ‘let’s pretend,’ ‘as-if’ or ‘make-belief’ – forms an intricate part of such magical acts. Magic involves role-playing: in rituals, the participants are called by another ‘magical’ name; they often wear exotic, arcane clothes (especially in the tradition of ‘Western mystery’); speak in hermetic vocabularies; formulate archaic sentences and utter strange words. In doing so, modern magicians play and often mimic magical behavior derived from fiction in the media:

Magic involves and encourages the imaginative identification in which the practitioner ‘plays at’ being a ritual magician or a witch; the theatrical setting and dramatic invocations are directed at evoking precisely that sort of complete identification with what one imagines the magician to be. Here the role models are taken from fiction: the magician fantasizes about being Gandalf, not about being his coven’s high priest (Luhrman 1991, p. 333).

Neopagan magic is, however, not ‘just play’, but ‘serious play’ since role-playing is constitutive for genuine, out-of-the-ordinary experiences and motivates ontological transformations: in the process of role-playing, fiction becomes real, make-belief instigates belief and play is gradually experienced as serious magic. Johan Huizinga noted in *Homo Ludens* (1950[1938], p. 13): ‘The disguised or masked individual ‘plays’ another part, another being. He is another being.’ In the context of neopaganism, a housewife becomes the Greek goddess of hunt Artemis, a teacher becomes Osiris and yet another participant a powerful priest of an ancient Mayan cult, a Celtic druid or Siberian shaman.

Role-playing, in short, is a technique to summon the ‘powers within’ and align oneself with an imagined ‘higher’ or ‘magical’ Self. This applies to online gaming as well. Players choose an archetypical ‘character’ or ‘avatar’ which functions as a digital representation of the player. According to Kolo and Baur (2003), the role of the magician is most popular among ‘all players’ (at least in *UO*). By incarnating a role as, for instance, a ‘sorcerer’, ‘warlock’, ‘wizard’ or ‘shaman’, players become active subjects in the enchanting online world. Like neopagans, they are often ‘naming’ their characters and in doing so they are inspired by popular legends, myth and historical

knowledge. As one gamer notes: ‘I gave it a beautiful name derived from history – my character lived during the Roman Empire. That’s what I really like. And that’s the way I experience it in the game’. And more than that: through the act of role-playing, some gamers paradoxically gain access to dimensions of the self and experiences that are not surfacing in real life. Richard Bartle refers to this process as the ‘role-playing paradox’:

You’re not role-playing as a being, you *are* that being; you’re not assuming an identity, you are that identity; you’re not projecting a self, you are that self. If you’re killed in a fight, you don’t feel that your character has died, you feel that you have died. There’s no level of indirection, no filtering, no question: you are there (..) When player and character merge to become a personae, that’s immersion; that’s what people get from virtual worlds that they can’t get from anywhere else; that’s when they stop playing the world and start living it (2004, p. 155-156).

Our own research validates this point to a large extent. Most players of *World of Warcraft* emphasize that they increasingly identify with their avatars – especially since they invested a lot of time, energy and work in it. One gamer typically argues that ‘it has become a part of me’ whereas another states: ‘It [the character] clearly possesses a fragment of my soul (..)’. Once players experience the in-game character as real, they project personal desires and idealized identities on the avatar. Like neopagans, they unleash and play out their ‘better selves’, ‘magical selves’ or ‘higher potentials’ that cannot be expressed in everyday life. ‘A hero that follows his own path and does his own thing – that’s the way I have designed him. And I like playing with the idea that I am him. He is a part of me, something that I would like to be’, one player contends; ‘You can be someone else. I think it is a beautiful world full of fantasy – a world that you encounter only in books. Unlike in real life, you can become a real hero’, says another. While, finally, respondent number three states: ‘It says something about your dreams: you play the person that you cannot be in real life but would like to be.’

While playing *World of Warcraft* several gamers thus immerse themselves in the mythopoeic reality of the game world and unleash, what Berger (1999) calls, the ‘magical self’ through the activity of role-playing. As one gamer stated: ‘The impossible becomes possible. In *City of Heroes* you are a superhero with supernatural powers; you can do there what you cannot do in real life. I can’t lift things with my thoughts, but I can do this in *City of heroes*. Just like *Spiderman* and the *X-Men*. And that is really cool!’ Magic, Sigmund Freud (1999[1913]) argued about a century ago, is all about the ‘omnipotence of thought’; magicians take their subjective and, according to Freud infantile and narcissistic, desires to control the natural world with their thoughts and feeling serious. Online environments provide the opportunity to, literally, play out such magical desires and fantasies.

4 Conclusion and discussion

The academic debate about secularization and disenchantment of Western society is generally informed by a focus on religious *belief*. Believing or not believing – that is the core issue.

We may question this relentless emphasis on (dis)belief in the sociology of religion and argue that it is increasingly a ‘zombie category’ (Beck 2001, p. 261). The concepts ‘religious belief’ and ‘secular disbelief’, in other words, may be ‘living “dead categories” which govern our thinking but are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu’ (Ibid.).

In this essay we explored the practice of play as a new, yet unacknowledged strategy to engage oneself with religious narratives in a disenchanted age. On the one hand, we suggested that contemporary spirituality (particularly paganism) is not grounded in firm ‘beliefs’: spiritual participants are generally quite aware of the social constructedness of supernatural claims and literally play with different religious traditions, assertions and myths to actively shape their own meaningful narrative or ‘subjective myth’ (Possamai 2005, p. 67). Playing an online computer game like *World of Warcraft*, on the other hand, provides the opportunity for youngsters to experience meaningful feelings of enchantment without believing in underlying truth claims. Play, it may be concluded, provides a subtle and complex religious strategy in a disenchanted world. The cultural significance of play should particularly be attributed to its ambiguous nature (e.g., Bateson 1972; Huizinga (1950[1938]; Sutton-Smith 2001). According to Huizinga, for instance, the frivolous dimension of play can easily slide into seriousness, and vice versa. More than that: he explicitly acknowledged the elective affinity between play and religion in his conceptualization of play as a ‘magic circle’: it provides a ‘temporary, a limited perfection (...) into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life’ (Ibid., p. 10). For Huizinga this concept of a ‘magic circle’ is not just a loose metaphor: in the opening chapter of *Homo Ludens* he repeatedly emphasizes the affinity between the activity of play and the sacred – arguing, for instance, that ‘The concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness’ and that ‘The ritual act, or an important part of it, will always remain within the play category, but in this seeming subordination the recognition of its holiness is not lost’ (Ibid., p. 25, p. 27).

In this essay we aimed to demonstrate that such theoretical assumptions about the ‘nature of play’ are significant for the sociology of religion – particularly because they prove their value in empirically understanding the complex relation contemporary youngsters have with religion. The ambiguity of play makes it possible to be both seriously engaged and frivolously detached at the same time. More than that: play – in the frivolous meaning of the word – may also be used as an *alibi* to cover up for the serious, ultimately spiritual dimensions of playing a computer game like *World of Warcraft* (Aupers 2015). Notwithstanding the fact that they have had spiritual experiences

and perhaps reflected on religion while playing, gamers can in the end always say that ‘it’s just play!’ Being in MMOs, in any case, provides the opportunity *par excellence* for ‘disenchanted’ youngsters to experience spirituality without believing in supernatural claims; to fully immerse themselves in the ‘magic circle’ without conversion to a pre-defined set of beliefs; to transcend everyday life without too much personal commitment and to freely experiment with religious narratives without becoming a true believer.

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“Are Those the Only Two Solutions”?¹

Dealing with Choice, Agency and Religion in Digital Games

Abstract

Choice and ‘agency’ are frequently named as key factors in describing videogames and their unique features in respect to other forms of media. Through a multitude of minor and major decisions (or illusions thereof), players are given the impression of being an integral part of the narrative and ludic experience of a game, oftentimes forcing them to face the consequences of their actions in the game world.

This paper aims at providing some insights into academic and public discussions of ‘agency’ in the context of digital games and, drawing on the examples of *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, *The Graveyard* and *Mass Effect 2*. An argument is made for a further emphasis on the role of ‘agency’ within the field of religion and digital games as well as a more differentiated (yet still complementary) approach toward ‘player agency’ and ‘game agency’.

Keywords

agency, methodology, *Mass Effect*, *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, *The Graveyard*, game rules, game mechanics

1 Introduction

Some of my favorite gaming experiences have been those rare occasions when, out of nowhere, a game changes the way you see the world, or teaches you something about yourself. Recently, James told me of such an experience he had: A video game asked him a question he couldn’t answer.

He said he was playing the game. He reached a certain part and then he just had to set the controller down and think. He sat there, cross-legged, pondering for more than half an hour. Then he picked up

¹ This quote is taken from the *Extra Credits* Episode *Enriching Lives*. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2Tp8JopdIc (last access 29/01/2015).

the controller. He knew what to do, or rather what he would do. And in doing so, he learned something about himself.

Today we're going to discuss that one question. That tiny moment in one game, and show just how much impact a single well-crafted scenario can have.

For those of you wondering: The game was *Mass Effect 2*²

The *SSV Normandy SR2* is a fine ship. With her length of 196 meters the small frigate is hardly a match for the bigger cruisers of the *Alliance* fleet, let alone the enormous Dreadnoughts of the *Asari* and *Turians*. What she lacks in firepower and pure size, she more than makes up with agility, the latest and greatest in cloaking technology, as well as the finest crew of the whole fleet. And there is something else which makes the *Normandy* special. Something, which singles her out from every other ship in the galaxy: The *Normandy* is *my* ship. Well at least *this Normandy* in *this* version of the *Mass Effect* Universe is my ship, but more on that later.

Mass Effect is a trilogy of singleplayer digital science-fiction role playing games, developed between 2007 and 2012 by the Canadian studio BioWare. The plot of the game starts in 2183. Humanity has, thanks to the discovery of alien artifacts on mars, finally developed spaceships with faster than light capabilities and reached for the stars. Shortly after they joined the people of the Citadel, a “Galactic United Nations” based on a gigantic space station of the same name. The player takes the role of *Commander Shepard*, a soldier of the *Earth Alliance* and captain of the *SSV Normandy*, who during the course of the first part of the trilogy becomes the very first human *Spectre* (a special operative for the Citadel Council) and discovers a threat from beyond the galaxy which could endanger all civilized life within the Milky Way. Over the course of the three parts of the series (and approximately 92 to 126 hours of play time³) it is Shepard's task to gather a team of specialists, travel the galaxy on board the *Normandy* and face this ultimate threat.

For a scholar of religion the *Mass Effect* universe offers many fruitful areas of research. On the game-immanent level, the world of the game series (accompanied by books, comics etc.) was created with much love for detail and populated with a multitude of alien races, each with their very own history, culture and religion.⁴ Additionally, the main narrative of the game is ripe with religiously charged elements, references and symbolisms which are actively discussed by the players on various online platforms.⁵ On a (more) actor-centered level, the *Mass Effect* franchise has spawned a very active fan community which even three years after the release of the last game of

2 Transcript of https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2Tp8JopdIc (last access 29/01/2015).

3 See <http://www.howlongtobeat.com/search.php?t=games&s=mass+effect> (last access 26/01/2015).

4 See <http://masseffect.wikia.com/wiki/Races> (last access 26/01/2015).

5 See e.g. <http://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/944907-mass-effect-2/56613778> (last access 26/01/2015).

the trilogy seemingly tirelessly takes part in content related online discussions⁶, cosplay events⁷, fan fiction⁸ and various other creative activities signifying their passion and commitment to the series and its already planned successors.⁹ But my own interest lies with another aspect of the series which closely combines both game-immanent and actor-centered perspectives and implications. *Mass Effect* illustrates an important facet attributed to the medium of games: ‘agency’.

It should be noted that it is not the intent of this paper to present extensive research results to the readers. While fitting examples and case studies will be provided where necessary, the main focus of this work lies on considerations on theory, methodology and practical research methods when dealing with the issue of ‘agency’ and digital games, combining both game-immanent and actor-centered perspectives, as was proposed in *Theorizing Religion in Digital Games: Perspectives and Approaches* (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014) and “*Venturing into the Unknown*”(?). *Method(ological) Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming* (ibid 2015).

2 (Player) ‘Agency’ in Academic and Popular Discourse

The term ‘agency’ was first brought up in the context of video games by Janet Murray in 1997 in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, where it is described as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.” (Murray 1997: 126) To her, agency is the main source of enjoyment in video games as “[e]very expressive medium has its own unique patterns of desire; its own way of giving pleasure, of creating beauty, of capturing what we feel to be true about life; its own aesthetic.” (ibid: 94) Murray does not only regard ‘agency’ (or the possibility of a game to provide a feeling of agency to the player) as a “unique” feature of games, she also sees it as a qualitative criterion and “source of enjoyment”¹⁰. A more descriptive approach¹¹ towards the unique features of games (compared to other media) is taken by game scholar Espen

6 See e.g. on *reddit* (<http://www.reddit.com/r/masseffect>) (last access 26/01/2015).

7 See e.g. <https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/mass-effect-cosplay> (last access 26/01/2015).

8 See e.g. <https://www.fanfiction.net/game/Mass-Effect/> (last access 26/01/2015).

9 A new series set within the *Mass Effect* universe has already been announced although details are hard to be found and the release date is still tbd. (see e.g. <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-11-11-mass-effect-4-everything-we-know-so-far>, last access 26/01/2015)

10 It should be noted that the relation of agency provided by a game and the overall enjoyment of said game should be viewed with caution, although this mainly seems to be an issue of game design (see e.g. Johnson 2013). This will also be discussed at a later point in this paper.

11 Still, it should be kept in mind that any kind of discussion about distinct features of video games can and should also be seen in the context of the “ludology vs narratology” debate, especially during the late 90s and early 2000s (see e.g. Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014: 11ff). It is almost ironic (and very telling about the “constructed” nature of the original debate) that key players from both sides – Murray as an ascribed “narratologist” and Aarseth as a convinced “ludologist” - share the same basic notions about the nature and quality of video games.

Aarseth, who in his work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Aarseth 1997) hints at the “configurative” nature of games (ibid: 64). Since then, ‘agency’ has – either explicitly or implicitly – been used by many scholars to describe games with regard to other forms of media or on their own terms. Thomas Apperley identifies “interactivity” as the binding element of games and, building on Aarseth’s critique of the term (ibid: 51), adopts the term “ergodicity”, meaning “the role of the human actor in the process of creating the cybertext; specifically *ergodic* refers to the point that ‘non-trivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text’” and applies the – originally not media specific – concept to video games (Apperley 2006). Thue, Bulitko, Spetch and Romanuik (2010) state that “Agency, being the ability to change the course of one’s experience [...] is a central aspect of video games” and *Gamasutra*¹² author Soren Johnson discusses the game design implications when trying to implement the right amount or “sweet spot” for player ‘agency’ (Johnson 2013).

The latter also exemplifies the shifting of discussions surrounding ‘agency’ from a mostly academic area to a more public space. Additionally to more practical considerations from the perspective of game designers, debates and remarks on ‘agency’ in games – or the lack thereof – can also be found in gaming related online media and open gaming communities on the internet, especially with regard to the quality of specific video games. For example, in 2012 artist David Hellman told the gaming website *Polygon*:

Games are about player agency to a very large extent. [...] And I think the problem we have with the more recent *Zelda* games is that our agency as players isn’t as valued as much as we feel it should be, and that’s sort of against the nature of video games and against what they do best. (Lien 2012)

And in a recent debate on the discussion forums of the popular *Gamers with Jobs*¹³ Podcast, ‘agency’ was (with reference to Murray) described as follows:

Agency is the level of control that a player feels they have in a game world. Games with minimal agency are those like the on-rail shooter where your only choice is either to shoot or die. Games with a lot of agency are more difficult to define. One example might be *Dragon Age* where the choices you make at each major plot point significantly effect the narrative. Another might be a physics puzzle game like *Crayon Physics Deluxe* where multiple solutions for any given puzzle are possible and the player can come up with whatever solution they feel is appropriate.¹⁴

12 <http://www.gamasutra.com/> (last access 27/01/2015).

13 <http://www.gamerswithjobs.com/> (last access 27/01/2015).

14 <http://www.gamerswithjobs.com/node/48645>, answer by user *Latrine* (last access 27/01/2015).

There seems to be a general consensus that games can have varying degrees of agency, with “on-rail ego shooters” like the *Call of Duty* Series at the very bottom and more complex games, which feature a lot of meaningful choices – although the understanding of “meaningful” seems to vary in this context – at the top. Also note, that (at least for some players) narrative impacts of player choices don’t seem to be necessary to convey a feeling of ‘agency’, as is demonstrated by the mentioning of puzzle games – which in many cases lack any kind of narratives – with multiple possible solutions.

To further pinpoint the meaning and impact of ‘agency’ (or rather the lack thereof) in games, I think it is necessary to provide two examples of games which feature an (or even ‘the’) absolute minimal amount of ‘agency’. Namely these are the *Call of Duty* series and *The Graveyard*.

2.1 (Lack of) Agency as a flaw: *Call of Duty*

The games of the *Call of Duty* series, developed by Infinity Ward and *Triarch* and published by *Activision*, have since the release of the first iteration in 2003 been immensely popular¹⁵, thanks in part to their very “cinematic” single player campaigns (covering scenarios like World War II, the Vietnam War as well as fictional contemporary and future conflicts) as well as their fast paced and streamlined multiplayer experiences. At the same time, the games are (additionally to some controversial scenario choices of some parts of the series¹⁶) criticized for the linear level design and the utter lack of player choice during the singleplayer campaigns. Usually the player is confronted with a tunnel-like level architecture filled with enemy soldiers¹⁷ to overcome. Only minimal – if any – deviations from the predetermined path are possible (hence the term “on-rail shooter”) and the straight transition through the level is only interrupted by short, non-interactive cutscenes. The game mechanics themselves are mostly based on quick reflexes and the only kind of ‘agency’ granted to the player is the decision which weapon to use, when to reload and when to take cover to regenerate health.

Arguably this kind of game design is due to the highly action packed and “Hollywoodesque” nature of the story campaigns of the games and is aimed at keeping up the pacing of the main storyline. It is thus addressing a problem of many games trying to effectively communicate a narrative in an entertaining manner, as any player – if allowed to – brings his or her own pacing into the game. This is a problem especially open world RPGs like *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* have to deal

15 See e.g. <http://www.statisticbrain.com/call-of-duty-franchise-game-sales-statistics/> (last access 28/01/2015).

16 See e.g. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversies_surrounding_Call_of_Duty:_Modern_Warfare_2 (last access 28/01/2015).

17 In earlier iterations of the series, enemies would respawn until the player reached a certain point in the level. This was later changed to fixed enemy numbers.

with, where the main narrative (especially pacing, continuity and structure) can be completely disrupted by the player's own free choice of action. For example, user *Enigma777* on *Giantbomb* writes about *Skyrim*:

My problem with *Skyrim* is a fundamental one. Because it's so broad and it tries to give you so much choice, it loses out on the one thing that matters to me the most: great storytelling. Sure you may say you have had great stories like punching a dragon to death with your bare fists or dumping 10,000 cheese wheels from a mountain peak, but those aren't really stories. No, they are experiences. The stories *Skyrim* does tell are the ones in its quests; the Companions, the Thief's Guild, the Stormcloak rebellion and the rise of the Dovahkiin. Yet none of these are engaging or deep enough for me. I simply can't get attached to a voiceless character or the supporting cast of characters around him. The terrible, in-game cutscenes and bad scripting don't help either. It all just feels soulless.¹⁸

So there is an argument to be made about 'agency' as a possible hindrance with regard to effective storytelling in games which somewhat alleviates the notion of 'agency' as a general source of enjoyment. Nonetheless, the reduction of possible player agency can be a difficult balancing act for the game designers and developers as can be exemplified by the opening scene of *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, the seventh iteration of the series (not counting mobile and portable versions). The game begins in 1961 during the "Bay of Pigs Invasion" where the player – in typical *Call of Duty* fashion – has to fight his way out of a Cuban town and into Fidel Castro's mansion to attempt an assassination of the Cuban leader. On the day of the game's release, the 9th of November 2010, players, including *Youtube* Let's Player *Bungle*¹⁹ noticed that this first mission of the game could be completed without actually taking part in it. As the player character is accompanied by several NPC companions who fight the Cuban soldiers on their own and the player's health regenerates very fast once out of combat, the player can just watch the action unfold without partaking in it and still win the mission. Or as *Bungle* describes it:

I'm playing through the entire Cuba mission on the "hardened" difficulty setting, which is the second to highest difficulty setting. I'm not gonna fire a single shot, except during the two quasi cutscenes where the game takes control and basically just tells you to shoot whatever is in the center of the screen. Aside from those two moments in the game it's basically just a movie. All I'm really doing is just watching things happen.

18 <http://www.giantbomb.com/profile/enigma777/blog/storytelling-in-video-games-or-why-i-dislike-skyrim/88971/> (last access 28/01/2015).

19 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RULv6HbgEjY> (last access 28/01/2015).

So while in a “usual” round or mission of *Call of Duty* the player has at least some degree of influence on success or failure (mostly based on sharp reflexes and ‘aiming’ skill), even this minimal amount of ‘agency’ is taken away from him or her by the game in this – to be honest rather comical – instance. What remains to the player is the sole decision if he wants to be an active part of the action (by quite literally “pulling the trigger”) or not, the outcome is the same. Figuratively speaking the player decides if he or she wants to play a game or watch a movie.

2.2 (Lack of) Agency as a tool: *The Graveyard*

While (unintentional) lack of ‘agency’ can and is very well seen as a flaw in some games, ‘intentional’ lack of ‘agency’ can also be a tool by game developers and designers to achieve certain effects or even trigger emotional responses.

It has already been described how the taking away of ‘agency’ is used by the developers and designers of the *Call of Duty* games to control pacing and flow of the story campaign. But there are games which go even further in instrumentalizing lack of ‘agency’. One prime example for this is Tale of Tales’ game *The Graveyard*. The game itself is often described as “walking simulator” (a “genre” of games surprisingly not too uncommon²⁰) and is basically just that. The player takes the role of an elderly woman, traversing a graveyard on a straight pathway. At the end of the way the player can sit down on a bench. Then, a song starts playing (composed by Gerry De Mol²¹), together with a camera closeup of the old woman’s face. The song’s lyrics (translated from Flemish into English) are as follows:

From year eight to year forty. Yes, Irma was still young.
 ’t Was a German with consumption. Too big a heart, too weak a lung.
 Renee, she had fibroids. Auntie Mo, while she was asleep.
 Fell down into a dream. And was never picked up again.

Look that’s Emma, stillborn. Take care you don’t step on her.
 Her portrait is long lost. A little blue cross, never baptized.
 And Roger, that was cancer, grew too big for his own good.
 When ivy gets too tall, there’s too much shadow. Pruned away.

20 See e.g. <http://store.steampowered.com/tag/en/Walking%20Simulator/?l=german#p=0&tab=NewReleases> (last access 28/01/2015) for a list of games on steam tagged with the term “Walking Simulator”.

21 <http://gerrydemol.be/> (last access 28/01/2015).

Acid on granite. White bubbles, yellow foam.
 Steel wool to clean the rust. Scratch away the year and date.
 And a chisel for your own name. For when we come to go.

From between Jesus's legs, I would like to pluck those webs.
 I'd wipe the sand between his toes, if I could still bend over.
 I want a cherub made of china, a black marble bedspread.
 Stone flowers will suffice to keep me nice and warm.

Acid on granite. White bubbles, yellow foam.
 Steel wool to clean the rust. Scratch away the year and date.
 And a chisel for your own name. For when we come to go.

Here is calm, here is safe. Maybe next time.
 Next time perhaps, I will stay. Then I'll be here no more.
 No more. No more. No more. No more. No more.²²

In the freely available demo of the game the player can get up and walk the same way back to the exit of the graveyard after the song has ended, then the game is over. In the full (payed) version of the game, the old woman dies during the song and the game ends. The lyrics of the song only intensify the theme of the game. The graphics are very dated and held completely in gray tones. The elderly woman moves very slowly and therefore the game controls feel unresponsive, leading to a feeling of frustration about these movement restrictions on the player side.

Attempts at interpretation of the game are spread wide over the internet. But there seems to be some consent that the game is about coping with death (sudden or slow, based on the version of the game), growing old and loss of friends or family members. Especially the topic of 'agency' is discussed multiple times with regard to *The Graveyard*. For instance, the online magazine *Wired*²³ writes:

Interactivity is a powerful thing. *The Graveyard* could have been a short film on YouTube and lost none of its presentational qualities, or its message. But the very limited interaction you have with the character — you can walk her forward and backward, or turn — instantly makes the connection deeper and more powerful than it would have been if you were simply watching.

22 The translation is taken from the subtitles of the game. A complete gameplay video (including the song) can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7311VfzeRYY> (last access 28/01/2015).

23 <http://www.wired.com/> (last access 28/01/2015).

One very specific reason for this is that by controlling the woman, you immediately understand how old and frail she is. She hobbles convincingly toward the bench, which seems very far away. After a few steps, she can't keep up the pace on her bad leg, so she starts limping, leaning on her cane for support.

By the time she makes it to the bench, you're glad to be able to just sit down and rest.²⁴

And Wildo Rafael Perallon, in a review of *The Graveyard* shares his view on the specific design choices with regards to 'agency' and their impact on the game experience:

In the end the player has very little to do except act as the games/narratives avatar for the duration of the game. This design decision combined with the vague and little amount of backstory given does however allow the player to come up with their own ideas to fill in the blanks. This could be seen as a form of agency that the player is giving. It would make the player more invested and speaks to their creativity.

[...] Tale of Tales was trying to create a game with little agency. All of the gameplay decisions point to that but in leaving the plot vague they allowed some agency, in the narrative.²⁵

So evidently 'agency' or the lack thereof can be perceived by players and critics as both a flaw and an advantage or even as a design tool, based on scenario, design choices and – of course – individual taste. The question still stands however, how the concept of 'agency' can be made fruitful with regard to the research of digital games and – in this case – religion and digital games.

2.3 'Player Agency' vs 'Game Agency'

Up until this point, the term 'agency' has been used somewhat interchangeable as to its actual nature, source or 'agent', both throughout this paper as well as most of the public (and academic) discussion surrounding the issue. One notable exception being the review by Wildo Rafael Perallon, mentioned in the last section. In recognizing that the lack of 'agency' in *The Graveyard* opens up room for 'agency' from the player side, he makes a very interesting point which I would like to expand upon.

In *Theorizing Religion in Digital Games: Perspectives and Approaches*, Simone Heidbrink, Jan Wysocki and myself (2014) have proposed a twofold approach towards researching religion and

24 <http://www.wired.com/2008/03/the-graveyards/> (last access 28/01/2015).

25 <http://www.northeastern.edu/gamedesignpatterns/graveyard-review/> (last access 28/01/2015).

digital games, consisting of a game-immanent approach, focusing on religion in game narratives, aesthetics, world building, game mechanics and rules and an actor-centered approach, focusing on processes of reception and discursive practice both by players and game producers (developers, designers, artists, writers etc.) (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014). However at the same time we stated, that both approaches should be regarded as complementary, each giving important insights for the respective other:

[...] a strict separation of “game-immanent” and “actor-centered” approaches rarely helps in highlighting the bigger picture of interactions between religion and games. Asking for the constitution of coherency and consistency or the process of “othering” by means of religiously charged narratives, aesthetics or gameplay mechanics is of little use if we don’t involve the game designer, who decided to implement these elements into the game and the player, who is confronted with them, thereby starting his or her own process of reception and occasionally public discourse. Likewise, following the various discourses in the context of religion and digital games is of little use, if we don’t have a solid comprehension of the games in question. Generally speaking, “game-immanent” and “actor-centered” approaches remain a question of perspective, influencing mainly the focus of study rather than its practical methods. (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014: 41-42)

Based on this theoretical and methodological foundation, I would like to give two perspectives on ‘agency’ in digital games:

- ‘Game Agency’: This game-immanent concept focuses on the degree of ‘agency’ provided by the game through game mechanics, rules, level architecture as well as narrative (and even aesthetic) structures directly dependent on these systems.
- ‘Player Agency’: This actor-centered perspective centers on the actual ‘agency’ of the player. This form of ‘agency’ can take various forms and is heavily dependent on individual expectations of a game, personal preferences and of course socialization and in some cases even religious denomination.

The examples provided in the last two sections of this paper are mainly examples for ‘game agency’ in that they describe, how games use (or misuse) agency or a lack thereof to achieve certain effects. ‘Player agency’ on the other hand is a wholly different matter and – like any kind of information based on personal and subjective experience – painfully hard to grasp. Still, from a cultural studies perspective, actor-centered data is most valuable and luckily ‘player agency’ can become somewhat visible when interacting or even “colliding” with ‘game agency’ because both are more often than not non-congruent. While this may lead to frustration for some players, it is also fertile ground for various reactions, both through open discussions on online community platforms as well as various

strategies to actually act out one's own 'player agency' despite or in line with the limitations of 'game agency':

- Players may try to use the game rules to their full advantage to maximize their power or effectiveness within the game, disregarding all narrative implications (if present).
- Players may use 'minor' mechanics of a game to their advantage while choosing to ignore 'main' features.²⁶
- Players may try to use glitches and gameplay "loopholes" to act out their own agency.²⁷
- Players may even modify the game itself to change elements of gameplay, aesthetics, narratives etc. to their liking.
- And players may decide to stop playing a game altogether, because of the discrepancies between 'game agency', 'player agency' and personal morals and beliefs.²⁸

Some (if not all) of these practices have already been recognized by scholars within a religious setting. For instance Shanny Luft, in dealing with evangelical gaming communities, describes how some players from these communities make a habit of making "Christian choices" when being prompted by a video game to make a moral decision. If not possible, then they are trying to navigate around "offensive" elements of the game – without rejecting to play it altogether. (Luft 2014: 162ff). And Kevin Shut, examining "mechanistic" representations of religion in digital games, deals with player creativity or "emergent play" - meaning the playing "against the rules" of a game – and its impact on individual meaning-making (Shut 2014).

And even outside the games, players develop strategies to act out their own 'player agency'. For instance by writing 'fan fiction' (replacing unwanted narrative elements and working outside the confined structures and rules of the game) and 'fan theories'. A great example for the latter one is the "indoctrination theory", dealing with the controversial ending of the *Mass Effect* series and described in detail by Joshua and Ita Irizarry (2014) in their paper *The Lord is My Shepard. Confronting Religion in the Mass Effect Trilogy*.

All of these scenarios are well worth closer analysis, but to effectively analyze the impact of 'agency' on these practices, processes and dynamics, it is necessary to address both 'game agency' and 'player agency' on their respective own terms as both are subject to different (if sometimes

26 For example, a player of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* decided to play a "pacifist" character by refusing to partake in any kind of combat (a main element of the game) and instead leveling up through exploration, mining, herbalism and archeology which are minor skills and occupations and only meant to support the more combative elements. See <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/2661036606> (last access 29/01/2015).

27 This is especially used in the "speed run" scene, where games are to be played in the shortest timespan possible. See e.g. <https://gamesdonequick.com/> (last access 29/01/2015).

28 As was the case with the "baptism scene" in *BioShock Infinite*, described e.g. in Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki (2014).

intertwining) influences and factors. Only then we can draw an accurate picture of contemporary reception and discourse of religious elements within (and outside of) games, negotiation of personal and cultural identity as well as “the complex processes of interaction, exchange, adaption and transformation of cultural and religious practices and beliefs” (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014: 40) involved in dealing with ‘agency’, religion and digital games.

In the next section, I will try to further strengthen my point by returning to the example of *Mass Effect* and more specifically *Mass Effect 2*.

3 ‘Agency’ and the *Mass Effect* Series

Traditionally, games by the Canadian developer studio BioWare offer a great deal of ‘game agency’ to the player. Through their actions and choices within the game, the players influence and configurate the game world. This notion is already present at the very start of the game, the character creation. Players can choose Shepard’s appearance, gender²⁹, first name and personal history prior the the plot of the game. Only the surname *Shepard* always stays the same. This way the players are allowed to have a very individual experience with *their own Commander Shepard*. But the choices do not end here. The game is filled with moments and scenarios especially constructed by the game designers to confront the player with (forced) decisions of oftentimes great ethical and philosophical brisance. The consequences of these choices on the overall narrative or the fate of others (friend or foe) most of the time become very clear. This narrative (and gameplay) structure is complemented and accomplished through a ‘moral decision making system’ which rates “good” (*Paragon*) or “evil” (*Renegade*) decisions made by the player with points on a two-sided scale. The position of the player on this scale again has various effects on dialogue options, relations to members of *Shepard*’s team and *Shepard*’s facial features.³⁰

A great example for a meaningful and much discussed forced decision – or rather a very detailed and specific reception of it – within the *Mass Effect* series is represented by the quote from the beginning of this paper. In this instance the act of playing is not seen as dull “consuming” of content but rather as an active form of engagement of the player (James) with the game (*Mass Effect 2*). The quote was pulled from an online video series named *Extra Credits*. In the episode *Enriching Lives* the scenario in question is described in more detail:

29 This does not influence the choices of romantic engagements the player can partake in throughout the game.

30 A Shepard leaning towards the Renegade side of the morality scale develops scars and overall very “unnatural” facial features (red glowing eyes etc.). These aesthetic effects can be removed through the spending of in-game resources.

There comes a point in *Mass Effect 2* where the player is asked to decide the fate of a faction of the Geth, a sentient machine race. Here's the setup: The Geth were initially one unified group. Then they began to have ideological and religious differences. Now one sect of the Geth has come to believe that it is the will of God to destroy Shepard. That's you. And the other sect believes that they should protect Shepard. The player is given the choice to either destroy the Geth sect that wants Shepard dead or reprogram them in such a way that they share the beliefs of the group of Geth that want to protect you. They won't even know they've been reprogrammed. So yes, there is a clear story line question being asked. But what's really being asked of us, the player here?

On a surface level this is a question of how to deal with religious fundamentalism. It's meant to lead us to consider current world affairs and ask ourselves: "Are those really the only two solutions? Are there options other than total destruction or the fundamental undermining of belief?" But there's another question here, a more introspective one. Just as serious as any question about modern life (if a little more abstract). Fundamentally, the player is being asked: "What does it mean to be human? What is at the core of being a sentient being?"³¹

On the game-immanent narrative level, there are already some very interesting starting points for any scholar of religion. But what interests me most in the context of this paper is how the described decision is integrated into the game systems, how it is used to create 'game agency' and most of all, how it interacts with individual 'player agency'. At least one possible reaction is provided by the creators of *Extra Credits*:

This moment in the game really only falls short in one way: Not embedding the question into the game mechanics. As our medium evolves, designers are learning to embed and reference these sort of dilemmas with all the tools that games provide. *Mass Effect 2* does a brilliant job of making you live the dilemma of choosing between what could well be genocide and the utter subversion of an entire race's free will. Unfortunately the designers missed a great opportunity to reinforce this dilemma at its conclusion. If both choices had resulted in "Renegade" points, instead of one being labeled the "Renegade" and the other being the good "Paragon" choice, this would have been a fully realized attempt at using the medium of gaming to provide the player with a moment of introspection.³²

So on the level of 'game agency' it is noteworthy, that this forced decision is not only related to the overall game narrative, but also closely connected with the 'moral decision making system' of mass effect which forces it into a perceived duality between a "good" (Paragon) and "evil" (Renegade) decision, while at the same time connecting it to other gameplay, narrative and aesthetic elements as

31 Transcript of https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2Tp8Jopdlc (last access 29/01/2015).

32 Transcript of https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2Tp8Jopdlc (last access 29/01/2015).

described above. Based on individual ‘player agency’ this opens up a multitude of possible reactions and conflicts of interest:

A player trying to maximize his or her “Paragon” or “Renegade” meter (to get a better standing with teammates, intensify or alleviate aesthetic effects or just for the sake of “achievements”) might ignore the overall narrative implications altogether, trying to make a ‘strategic’ decision³³ based on his or her own goals instead. For example, on *gamefaqs.com*³⁴, user *gameingkiller69* asks: “Anyone knows the best way to max the paragon bar or at least the way to keep both [miranda] and jack [loyal] so i can keep everyone alive.” He or she is answered by *prrinces*: “Obviously you know about picking all the good guy answers. Talk to every teammate after missions to see if they have any new conversation, each one is a chance to pick up points.”³⁵

While at first this may seem irritating or even “irrelevant” in the context of player reception of religious elements in games, it helps in understanding player behavior and keeping in mind that not every “deep” narrative decision forced by a game also triggers a “deep” emotional reaction for every player, as the degree of implementation and integration of a scenario into the game mechanics and rules can have an important impact on its reception.

On the other hand, a player poised on having a strong and consistent narrative experience, trying to immerse him- or herself into the game world, character and narrative might be annoyed by the seemingly arbitrary “moral judgment” on both choices and painfully reminded that he or she is actually playing a game. Or players might have a problem with the actual narrative choice and forced nature of the decision (there is no way to get around the two possible options), either because of personal moral concerns or because of perceived narrative inconsistencies.

A more comprehensive analysis – together with more empirical data – would be necessary to get into further detail on this topic. But I hope that at this point, the possibilities and implications of taking into consideration both the game-immanent perspective of ‘game agency’ and the actor-centered perspective of ‘player agency’ as well as their interactions and dynamics have become apparent. Especially in the context of the research of religion and digital games.

Last, I would like to share some minor methodological and theoretical considerations when trying to tackle ‘agency’ in digital games.

33 Many games with ‘moral decision making systems’ (including most BioWare games) add a ‘color coding’ (e.g. red for “Renegade” and blue for “Paragon”) to relevant dialogue options. This way – in theory – ‘moral’ decisions can be made without actually recognizing the narrative aspects.

34 <http://www.gamefaqs.com/> (last access 29/01/2015).

35 See <http://www.gamefaqs.com/xbox360/944907-mass-effect-2/answers/245809-how-to-max-paragonthe-blue-bar> (last access 29/01/2015).

4 Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

The research of religion and digital games can only produce worthwhile, credible and relevant results when following a complementary approach of both actor-centered and game-immanent perspectives and methods. This is of course also relevant for the research of the dynamics of ‘game agency’ and ‘player agency’ with relation to religion. However, methodological and theoretical approaches toward the research of religion and digital games have already been thoroughly discussed in *Theorizing Religion in Digital Games. Perspectives and Approaches* (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014) and “*Venturing into the Unknown*”(?). *Method(ological) Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming* (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2015). In my view, they are also applicable to the issue of ‘agency’ in games, as hopefully was shown during the course of this paper. Hence, I would like to point anyone interested in comprehensive theoretical and practical considerations on research methods in that general direction.

Instead, I would like to provide some brief thoughts on two concepts which are – in my view – especially relevant for the topic of this paper, but also for the research of digital games and (including but not limited to) religion. Namely the concept of ‘thick text’ by Roz Kaveney (2005) and my own thoughts on playing as a research method or ‘explorative game analysis’.

4.1 Games as ‘Thick Text’

I would again like to draw attention to the quote in the beginning of this paper, or rather on a short, easily overlooked part of it: “[...] just how much impact a single well-crafted scenario can have.” The scenario in question is seemingly casually described as “crafted” in the sense of “artificially created”. I assume that the creators of *Extra Credits* used this term in its ‘artistic’ sense to express their respect for the designers at BioWare. But from a more scholarly perspective this brings up some very interesting additional viewpoints. When talking about digital games and their impacts one should not lose sight of the fact that they are the result of a (most of the time) highly complex production process, involving – based on the size of the project – from a few to hundreds of people with very different, creative, economic and personal interest. The British author, critic, poet and transgender activist Roz Kaveney coined the term ‘thick text’ in the context of general media productions (Kaveney 2005) – most likely drawing on Clifford Geertz concept of ‘Thick Description’ (Geertz 1973). She describes the concept as follows:

The precondition of reading or recognizing a thick text is that we accept that all texts are not only a product of the creative process but contain all the stages of that process within them like scars or vestigial organs.

The film we first see in the cinema may be further revised to the final form of an extended director's cut; our knowledge of it may be transformed when viewing it on DVD by the presence of deleted scenes – and we may not necessarily agree with the decision to delete them, even where we understand what the arguments in favour of that deletion were.

We have to learn that most works of art are compromises – compromises with imperfectly developed visions, with imperfect technique, with the demands of patrons, studios, the Church or the State. To read a film, a novel, a great choral work in the light of these awarenesses is to see it as a thick text. Reading a film as a thick text encourages us to see it in its context, both chronologically in terms of its being influenced by other films, or influencing later ones, or re-imagined by critics or even its original makers in the light of that influence and its consequences. (Kaveney 2005: 5)

While Kaveney does not explicitly name digital games, the concept is still perfectly applicable to them. In the context of this paper and the case study of *Mass Effect 2*, this means taking into consideration other games by BioWare with special emphasis on design decisions related to 'game agency' as well as other franchises which have led to the current iteration of the game and game systems as well as possible knowledge of these games by players of *Mass Effect 2*.³⁶ It also means regarding a game not as a "final" or "finished" product, but rather taking into account that artistic as well as economic considerations can always lead to a reiteration, modification or extension of a game. In some cases, 'player agency' can also play a role in these processes, as was shown by the decision of BioWare – after massive protests by the players – to extend the original ending of *Mass Effect 3* to include more direct consequences of the players' decisions and actions throughout the game (Irizarry 2014).

Last, taking into consideration the complex decisions, negotiations and possible tradeoffs involved in the production of a game as well as the socio-cultural context of game and designers might actually help in staying clear from too much ascription and intentionalism.

4.2 Playing as Research: 'Explorative Game Analysis'

As a second (and last) point, I would like to give some considerations on playing as a method of research or, as I would like to describe it: 'explorative game analysis'. As was described throughout this paper, 'agency' (both 'player agency' and 'game agency') is a crucial element of digital games. As almost any form of 'agency' in the context of a game involves direct interaction with its systems,

36 Arguably the 'moral decision making system' is an iteration of an earlier game by BioWare: *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. The game (and its morality system) heavily draws on the duality of the "good" Jedi and the "evil" Sith within the Star Wars Universe and also features e.g. aesthetical effects of "evil" decisions. See http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Wars:_Knights_of_the_Old_Republic (last access 29/01/2015).

mechanics and rules. In order to form a basis for any kind of research and analysis on games, it is imperative to get to know this aspect of the game(s) in question. In practice this means a firm examination of all game mechanics, systems and rules of a game as well as of course its narrative(s), aesthetics and overall structure. Simply “trying” a game or even just watching video footage is by no means enough to accomplish this. Especially when the player is presented with more than one possible way through the game (as is the case in the *Mass Effect* series), simple “over the shoulder” watching of a game leads to an overly narrow perspective. ‘Explorative game analysis’ in this context does actually mean playing a game not only once but several times³⁷ without always taking the shortest route but fully using all features of the game and more.³⁸ The goal has to be to “explore” the game(s) in question as thoroughly as possible and with open eyes for elements not considered beforehand. This way, a game is studied “on its own terms”. No (serious) scholar would dare writing about a book he or she hasn’t read or a movie he or she hasn’t watched. Hence a game, in order to be seriously studied, has to be played.

At the same time it is imperative to not lose the analytical perspective when “exploring” a game. This means regarding game elements (scenarios, narratives, game mechanics, rules etc.) not as given but as the result of multilayered processes of production and negotiation to be considered and studied, including the involved actors (game designers, developers, producers, artists, writers etc.).³⁹

Still, while actual gameplay is non-replaceable as a source of game-immanent data, it can only form the basis for any kind of further actor-centered research. It is the dynamics between player and game, or – in the context of this paper – of ‘player agency’ and ‘game agency’ which make the research of religion and digital games so interesting and fruitful for every scholar of religion. On the one side, there are the (self-)reflections and receptions by the players, amplified by their own sense of ‘agency’. And on the other side, there is the complex nature of scenarios, game systems and rule sets on which these processes of reception are based and which again are themselves products of a long row of processes of reception, negotiation a choices. Researching digital games, their impact on players and the role of religion within all of this means taking all of these aspects into consideration.

37 Multiple playthroughs are a common practice of gamers especially in the context of role-playing games.

38 It could for instance be worthwhile to take a look at the modding scene of a game. Especially older games with modding support tend to have one or more ‘recommended’ modifications which improve on the original (“vanilla”) game and have over time developed into the preferred mode of playing for the players.

39 A more comprehensive discussion on playing as a method of research, together with practical implications, can be found in Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki (2015).

5 Conclusio

I hope that throughout this paper, I could make a convincing argument for a further emphasis on the the role of ‘agency’ within the field of religion and digital games as well as a more differentiated (yet still complementary) approach toward ‘player agency’ and ‘game agency’.

And right at the end a little warning, regarding the application of ‘explorative game analysis’, from my own research experience: Consequently following this method of research means a tremendous investment of time, efforts and hard disk space! But it also brings about many valuable insights and most of all the personal realization, that some things grow on you faster and more lasting than expected.

In the meantime I know every inch of *my Normandy*. I could describe with closed eyes the way from the main battery, where *Garrus Vakarian* in solitude does the calibrations for the weapon systems of the ship, to the CIC (Combat Information Center), where *Samantha Traynor* – my expert of communications – keeps me up to date on the newest galactic events. I find myself thinking about *Thane Krios* – the silent assassin – and his lost son, when I pass the room with the life support system. And of *Morin Solus* – the ingenious, eccentric and lovable scientist – when I visit the laboratory. Both gave their lives for *my* mission and died as a consequence of *my* actions and choices. And of course I also know my way to the captain’s quarters, *my* quarters. There, on the right hand side from the entrance, inside an illuminated cabinet, stands a small model of the *SSV Normandy SR2*, not unlike the one standing on my desk right now, reminding me of how fluid, how indistinguishable the borders between the game and the player sometimes are.

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Biography

TOBIAS KNOLL is a junior researcher and PhD candidate at the Institute of Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany as well as an avid podcaster on all things related to gaming and geek culture. Having majored in Religious Studies and Political Science of South Asia, he received his Master's degree in 2012. Tobias is currently working on his doctoral thesis on religious implications and reception of moral decision making systems in digital games like *Mass Effect*. His general focus of research is contemporary religion and player agency in video games as well as reception of and discourse on religion in popular "geek and nerd" culture. Together with Simone Heidbrink and Jan Wysocki, he is also planning a research project on Religious Studies and digital games as well as working on bringing the issue of religion and digital games to the *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag* 2015.

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Revisiting Gabriel Knight

Troubled Hero and Unknowing Servant of the King of Kings

Connie Veugen

Abstract

Although the protagonist of the Gabriel Knight game series (1993, 1995, 1999) is a modern hero, Gabriel's journey contains elements we also find in other Hero myths. Furthermore, the series contains many religious elements, supernatural motifs, as well as a more than superficial link with the story of the Messiah. Using Wendy Doniger's theory of the micromyth as a point of departure, this article will take a closer look at these aspects of the games, as well as at how they are interlinked. The release of the remastered version of the first game also gives room to a ponder whether a new generation of players will comprehend such aspects.

Keywords

Gabriel Knight, Hero myth, religion, supernatural

1 Introduction

In 1993, the game *Gabriel Knights. Sins of the Father* was released to critical acclaim both from the adventure game community, as well as from the game critics. *Sins of the Father* was not the first adventure game to target an adult audience, but it was the first one to show that adventure games could hold their own in comparison to books and films. Mostly set in New Orleans and featuring a troubled hero who not only has to deal with his own nightmares but who also has to atone for the mistakes of one of his forebears, this game was a far cry from the dungeons and fairy tales encountered in the game genre until then. This was *Angel Heart* (1987) in a game format.

Sins of the Father (GK1) is the first game in a series that also includes *Gabriel Knight. The Beast Within* (GK2, 1995) and *Gabriel Knight. Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned* (GK3,

1999)¹. The protagonist of the games, Gabriel Knight, is a down on his luck author of occult murder mysteries and the owner of an unsuccessful bookshop in New Orleans. In every game in the series, Gabriel investigates a case involving the supernatural: voodoo, werewolves and vampirism, respectively. On October 15th 2014, a remake of *Sins of the Fathers* was released, bringing the game to a new generation of players. Outwardly, the game has had a complete makeover. The original 256 colour 2D graphics have been replaced by high-resolution images and the original soundtrack has been completely remastered, using new voice actors and updating the music for a 21st Century audience. ‘Inwardly’ the game is still the same. It basically uses the same script, as its original author, designer, and director Jane Jensen lead the remake. The original fans of the game as well as critics, on the whole, have greeted this remake favourably. The fans enjoy the fact that they can indulge in nostalgia replaying one of their all-time favourite games. Many fans, as well as Jane Jensen, also hope that a new generation of players will rekindle the game series.

Whether new players will appreciate the games on a similar level as the previous generation remains to be seen. On the surface, the supernatural themes – voodoo in *GK1* werewolves in *GK2*, and vampires in *GK3* – would likely appeal to an audience that indulges abundantly in the same themes in modern popular media, such as the television series *The Original* (2013 – present) which includes all three and is also set in New Orleans, like *Sins of the Fathers*. However, these supernatural themes are but one level in the *Gabriel Knight* games. One level of three that all centre on religion, as will be argued. First, there is the already mentioned supernatural ‘evil’ represented by the main antagonist of each game: voodoo queen Tetelo in the first game, werewolf Baron Friedrich von Glower in the second game, and head vampire Excelsior Montreaux in the final game. Then there is Gabriel himself who embodies a particular subset of the Hero archetype. Lastly, we have Gabriel as the last descendant in a long line of *Schattenjäger* (‘Shadow Hunters’), literally a line of ‘Knights’ whose task it is to fight the supernatural. In the last game *Gabriel Knight, Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned* we, the player, finally find out where Gabriel’s vocation as *Schattenjäger* originated. A revelation that not only brings the three games together, but also the three levels. In this article, building on Wendy Doniger’s theory of the micromyth and on a close reading of the games, I will explore these three levels, starting by exploring Gabriel as a particular instance of the Hero archetype.

1 It should be noted that, apart from the name of the protagonist, the titles are connected because they all link to Bible verses or passages that refer to the flaws of humanity. As we will see this is a significant element in Gabriel’s story.

2 Gabriel Knight the Hero-King

The archetype of the Hero has been researched and described abundantly, especially in Western society in the 19th and 20th century. Psychoanalyst Carl Jung was one of the first to recognize that stories, legends and myths from different cultures and times contained common elements and common character types. One of these common character types or archetypes, as he termed them, is the Hero². Arguably, the most well-known comparative study into the Hero is Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). However, Campbell focusses on the communalities in the journey/quest every Hero has to undertake, not on common elements that distinguish the character type. In her book *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth* (1998) Wendy Doniger looks at recurring elements in myths from different timeframes and different cultures. As she points out, her theory is not limited to classical myths alone:

I do not wish, for instance, to limit myths to stories involving supernatural beings (though many myths do), and though there are important differences among myths and epics, legends, history, and films, in many ways I think these texts function similarly and should be studied together. I certainly would not limit myths to written texts, let alone ancient written texts; they may be written or oral, ancient or contemporary. (Doniger 1998, 1)

These common elements are a fundamental part of the myth, legend or story that cannot be left out:

We often feel that various tellings of a much-retold myth are the same, at least in the sense that they do not disappoint us by omitting what we regard as essential parts of the myth, without which it would lose at the very least some of its charm, and at the most its meaning. When we say that two myths from two different cultures are 'the same' we mean that there are certain plots that come up again and again, revealing a set of human concerns that transcend any cultural barriers, experiences that we might call cross-cultural or transcultural. (, 53)

A scholar can use this fact to construct what Doniger calls the micromyth:

It is an imaginary text, a scholarly construct that contains the basic elements from which all the possible variants could be created, a theoretical construct that will enable us to look at all the variants

2 Others who looked into these common patterns and character types were fellow psychoanalyst Otto Rank in *Der Mythos von der Geburt der Helden* (1909), Russian formalist Vladimir Propp in *Морфология сказки* (*The Morphology of the Folk Tale*, 1928), independent scholar Lord Raglan in *The Hero, a Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (1936) and French comparative philologist Georges Dumézil in *Mythe et Épopée II, Types épiques indo-européens: un héros, un sorcier, un roi* (1971).

at once and ask questions of all of them simultaneously. It minimizes, though it cannot entirely exclude, the expression of any point of view. (ibid., 88)

The micromyth cannot only be used to compare two myths from different cultures or times, but also to see if a particular myth belongs to the overall set:

[t]he micromyth is the ‘third thing,’ the scholar's own defining interest, which serves now not just as the pivot of two things being compared but as the hub of a wheel to which an infinite number of spokes may be connected (ibid., 88-89).

Moreover, although Doniger does not mention them, the micromyth can also be applied to narrative computer games³. Using several Hero myths, legends, stories and films, as well as Campbell's Hero monomyth, and Raglan's and Dumezil's Hero studies, I formulated what I dubbed the Hero-King micromyth (Veugen 2005, Veugen 2011)⁴:

- (m1) The hero (who can be female or male) is separated from her/his parents at an early age; in many Hero-King myths, this is because one or both parents are slain by an enemy.
- (m2) The hero is fostered either in the normal chivalric tradition or because (s)he is an orphan.
- (m3) The hero initially does not know her/his heritage or the destiny (s)he has to fulfil.
- (m4) The hero has certain assets, which make her/him stand out from other people.
- (m5) The hero distinguishes herself/himself by her/his acts and deeds.
- (m6) The hero receives as heirloom an artefact with ‘magical’ properties (in West-European legends this usually is a sword).
- (m7) The hero has a (non-human) guardian.
- (m8) The kingdom suffers because of the absence of the rightful king.
- (m9) To become king the hero must proof that (s)he is the true heir.

A simple inspection of this list shows that many modern day (super) hero tales base their protagonist on this myth, for instance Harry Potter, Katniss Everdeen⁵ or Ezio Auditore da Firenze⁶. However, despite this continued popularity, we should not forget that the Hero-King protagonist occurs even in the oldest recorded stories, those of the Sumerian shepherd Dumuzi (ca. 2500 B.C.)

3 Games of progression in Juul's terminology (Juul, 2005) or story-structured games as I call them (Veugen, 2011)

4 Also see these texts for a comparative use of this micromyth both between two myths as well as between versions of one myth in five different media.

5 *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010).

6 Protagonist of several *Assassin's Creed* games. His ‘transformation’ from Hero to King is told in the three main games *Assassin's Creed II* (2009), *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* (2010) and *Assassin's Creed Revelations* (2011).

and the Indo-European hero Gilgamesh (ca. 2000 B.C.). The myth can also be found in the hero tales from mediaeval literature, for instance those of Charlemagne, Arthur or Siegfried.

As will be argued Gabriel Knight is a Hero-King. His name already tells us that he is not an ordinary man. His first name alludes to the Archangel Gabriel, God's messenger. This is acknowledged in the games themselves, in *GK2* von Glower, after hearing Gabriel's name, actually remarks: 'Gabriel, like the Angel', and in a Tarot reading in *GK2*, the name is identified as 'a name of power'. Finally, in *GK3*, Gabriel himself, upon seeing a tapestry depicting the Angel, says that the Angel looks like him. His last name Knight is a literal translation of his original German family name Ritter, defender of the weak and oppressed. Just as other Hero-Kings Gabriel does not know that he is special (m3), in his case the last descendant of a long line of Schattenjäger, shadow hunters, chosen by God to fight evil.

When we first encounter him in *Sins of the Fathers*, he is a failed pulp crime writer and owner of a bookshop called St. George located on Bourbon Street New Orleans. He was able to buy the shop with money he inherited from his mother Margaret Templeton, and it seems that this inheritance is what keeps the shop running because none of the rare books in the shop sell. Gabriel is plagued by nightmares that become more and more articulate throughout the game. He is in his early thirties, and was raised by his grandmother Rebecca Wright as he lost his parents in a car crash when he was eight (m1 and m2).⁷ It gradually becomes clear that Gabriel is not the only family member to suffer from the nightmares, his grandfather Harrison as well as his father Philip suffered from them as well. Harrison was the first Ritter to come to the United States at the age of twenty-one. As it later becomes clear, he came to America to escape the Ritter family curse. This is also the reason he changed his name from Heinz Ritter to Harrison Knight. Part of the curse are the recurring nightmares, but all male family members suffer from what they refer to as bad luck (m8). Harrison is a poet but he has to take on other jobs, which he cannot hold on to for long according to Gabriel's grandmother. Harrison meets Rebecca at a church revival and they instantly fall in love. Philip is their only son. Harrison dies at thirty-six after being hit by a streetcar. Like Gabriel, Philip is eight years old when this happens. Philip himself is an unsuccessful painter. Therefore, the family has to live on his wife Margaret's money. The car crash in which Gabriel's parents die was allegedly caused by 'a deer in the road – or a wild cat' that startled Philip and made him swerve. Like his father, Philip is in his mid-thirties when he dies.

7 There are some differences in story line between the game narrative and the book written by Jensen (1997). In the book Gabriel is 33, but in the third game his passport suggests that he is born in 1963, which would make him 30 in the first game. In the book, the grandmother is called Esther, in the game Rebecca. In the book, Gabriel is one year old when his parents die, in the game eight. And in the book Harrison dies from a heart attack, in the game it is a car accident.

As a character, Gabriel does not seem to have many redeeming qualities. He is a macho and a womanizer (in his own eyes these are assets).⁸ His life's motto is *carpe diem*; seize the day, living from one day to the next.⁹ As we will see later on, growing morally is an important, perhaps the most important criterion for him to become a true *Schattenjäger*. In the course of the games, we also see his strong points: Gabriel is fiercely loyal to his family and friends. Furthermore, he does not shy away from difficult tasks and once he is committed to a case, he will see it through even though he might suffer himself. This is where we see his courage and honesty (m4 and m5).

Like other Hero-Kings, Gabriel has a non-human guardian (m7), the Virgin Mary. This is not very obvious in the first game, even though we see quite a few references to the Madonna. In the remastered *20th Century Anniversary Edition*, the connection with the Virgin is a little more explicit, for instance Gabriel owning a small Virgin statue himself, even though it was a present from his grandmother¹⁰. This suggests that Jane Jensen wanted to make Gabriel's connection with the Virgin more obvious. In the second game, *The Beast Within*, the connection is apparent. This game takes place in Bavaria. One of the locations Gabriel visits early in the game is the Marienplatz, Munich's central square. Here he comes across a statue of the Virgin. When the player clicks on the statue Gabriel mutters: 'She almost seems to be watching me'. In the game Gabriel's assistant, Grace, also prays for Gabriel's health at the shrine of Our Lady of Altötting, which in German is called the *Gnadenkapelle*¹¹. Praying to the Madonna is part of an elaborate puzzle; still the game makes it clear that Grace's prayers for Gabriel are heartfelt. In the final game, due to the subject matter, the Virgin is less visible.

In modern versions of the Hero-King myth, the guardian does not necessarily have to possess special powers (as Wotan did in the Siegfried Saga or Merlin in the Arthur legends). Apart from the Madonna, there is another woman who constantly watches over Gabriel, his assistant Grace

8 Gabriel is portrayed as the typical romance novel male lead. A man women love to hate, but who also has a kind of animal magnetism that women find irresistible, cf. Red Butler in *Gone with the Wind* (1963). In the remastered version, Gabriel does seem to recognize that these are not assets but flaws as he confesses them to a priest in St. Louis Cathedral, especially having impure thoughts of women and having slept with more than forty. The priest advises him to seek professional help on which Gabriel replies that he has done so on a regular basis.

9 In the book, it is suggested that he does this because he does not expect to grow old as both his father and his grandfather died in their thirties.

10 There is a statue to the Virgin in the Ritter chapel in Schloss Ritter in the first game, but this can also just be a reference to the fact that the Ritters were Catholic. One of the characters Madame Cazaunoux, a devout Catholic, calls on the Virgin Mary for assistance even when her malady is Voodoo related. She also has a large picture of the Madonna hanging in her sitting room. The small Virgin statue Gabriel owns in the remastered version is in a cabinet in his bookstore. When the player clicks on it, Gabriel remarks: 'That's from Gran. She likes to think it means that someone's watching over me'. There is also a statue of a coloured Madonna with a coloured Christ child in the Voodoo museum.

11 The Chapel of Grace dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Nakimura. Grace is the brain to Gabriel's brawn¹². Again, her name is an indication that she is more than just an assistant. In all three games, Grace actually saves Gabriel's life.

This brings us back to the Ritter curse, and *Sins of the Fathers*. This well-known and often used Biblical phrase refers to Gabriel's 17th century ancestor Gunter Ritter. In the graphic novel that accompanied the original release of the game¹³, Gunter has come to Carolina by request of its Mayor Crodwell. The town has been plagued by mysterious deaths and the Mayor suspects witchcraft. In the course of his investigations, Gunter encounters the Mayor's black slave woman Eliza and falls in love with her. Although Gunter as well as Eliza, or Tetelo¹⁴ as she is really called, know that they cannot be together, Tetelo strongly believes that they were brought together by faith to fulfil some, as yet to be revealed, purpose. Several weeks later, urged on by the Mayor, Gunter sets a trap for the witch and her coven. As intended, Gunter is captured. While fighting with the witch he seeks protection from the Ritter talisman and calls on God to help him. This is when he realizes that the witch is Tetelo. At that moment his men arrive and Gunter lets Tetelo escape. He finds her in her cabin where she reveals that she is the daughter of a powerful African shaman, a Bokur. Her father was asked by the gods to sacrifice his daughter, but he tried to outwit faith by binding Tetelo's soul to another girl. The gods would not be cheated, the village was overrun by slavers and those who were not killed were transported to the West Indies, including Tetelo. The recent victims of the slaves are all members of this original transportation crew. Gunter is appalled by her story and leaves. Tetelo calls on the ghost of her father, to free her from her obligation to the tribe, but he refuses her. Desperate and disorientated she lets herself be captured by the townspeople. Together with her coven, she is to be burned at the stake. She appeals to Gunter to help her, but confronted by the Mayor and the angry townspeople he cowards away. Gunter's ultimate betrayal forces Tetelo to call upon the Loa¹⁵ of her ancestors, but her powers are not strong enough. This is when Gunter's conscience sets in and he offers her the power of the talisman. The combined powers unleash a great storm killing many of the townspeople. The rest are slaughtered by the slaves. Tetelo confronts Gunter for the last time. She cannot forgive him the betrayal of their love. Now in possession of the Ritter talisman she has become her father's true daughter: a powerful Voodoo Queen. In a letter¹⁶, Gunter confesses his weakness and the loss of the talisman to his father:

12 The relationship between Gabriel and Grace can best be compared to the female-male partnerships typical of TV series of the 1980s, such as *Remington Steele* (1982-1987) and *Moonlighting* (1985-1989).

13 In the remastered version, the graphic novel is digitally included in the game. Interestingly, the player is advised not to read the novel before Day 6 (in the game) to avoid spoilers. In the original version, the graphic novel was a small booklet and there were no instructions on when to read it. It can be assumed that many of the players read the booklet before playing the game.

14 According to the *Sins of the Fathers Design Bible* (Jensen, 1992) the African name means 'filled with fire'.

15 In Voodoo (or Voudoun) Loa are gods.

16 In the game, the letter is the last entry in Gunter's diary.

Dear Father,

I offer these final words as apology for the harm done to our sacred office. The woman I wrote of, Tetelo, was the witch I sought. I have committed terrible crimes. I loved this witch, then betrayed her, and then used our sacred family power to free her and aid her in destroying this colony.

The talisman is gone – Tetelo took it. I can but pray for thy forgiveness, for thy swift recovery of the talisman, and that my punishment in Hell will be long and bitter.

Thy undeserving son,

Gunt(h)er

The loss of the talisman marks the beginning of the Ritter curse, and unbeknownst to him, it is up to Gabriel to retrieve the talisman and break the curse (m3). It turns out that Gabriel still has one living male relative: his great-uncle Wolfgang Ritter. He too has been plagued by the Ritter curse. His only son died at a very young age and like his brother, nephew and great-nephew Wolfgang has been troubled by financial difficulties throughout his life (m8). Wolfgang contacts Gabriel to warn him that he is in danger, but Gabriel is not convinced so Wolfgang sends him Gunter's journal. The journal ties in with the Voodoo murders that Gabriel started to look into in *Sins of the Fathers* and with the images from his nightmares. In search of the truth, Gabriel secretly attends a Voodoo ritual. The Voodoo priestess is possessed by the Loa of Tetelo, who instantly recognizes Gabriel as a descendant of Gunter. Gabriel barely escapes with his life, and realizes that he has to recapture the talisman. He travels to Germany, but his great-uncle has already left for Tetelo's homeland in Africa to search for her remains and to find the talisman. What immediately strikes Gabriel when he has arrived in the Schloss is the terrible state of disrepair the building is in. The Ritter housekeeper Gerde tells Gabriel that since the end of the 17th century the family's luck has turned. From that time on, the Schloss, as well as the village of Rittersberg, have been deteriorating (m8).

In the Schloss, Gabriel has to undergo the initiation ritual of the Schattenjäger, which takes place in the Ritter chapel in front of a large stained-glass window depicting Saint George and the Dragon. Gerde likens this ritual to the ordination priests undergo. She also sees the Schattenjäger as a kind of priestly order, although not as strict. In the second game the emphasis of the Schattenjäger as priestly order is emphasized several times¹⁷, as well as the fact that they 'work' for God¹⁸. Now that Gabriel is initiated as Schattenjäger, he has to undergo the final test (m9). He travels to Africa, where he finds his great-uncle in Tetelo's burial mount. Now that they finally meet in person, Wolfgang says: 'You will make a wonderful Schattenjäger ... It is quite a long path, my boy. I,

17 For instance, the woman who does the Tarot reading, Meryl Smith, talks about them as soldiers of God.

18 Similar to Gunter, Gabriel's ancestors Victor and Christian in their diaries thank God for helping them.

myself, have still the last of my three ‘quests’ to meet.’ (m9). Taking a more careful look at these words, they reveal that a) Gabriel is not a Schattenjäger yet and b) it will take three quests to ‘become King’, in other words, he will only become a true Schattenjäger at the end of the third game.¹⁹ The first quest is the first game, regaining the talisman and defeating Tetelo. To get to the talisman a human heart is needed. Recognizing that his time as Schattenjäger is over, Wolfgang sacrifices himself so that Gabriel may retrieve the talisman (m6). Back in New Orleans Gabriel learns that his hometown has been hit badly by severe storms, that crime rates have increased enormously in the past three days and that fifty people have suffered from food poisoning (m8). To save his ‘kingdom’ and prove that he is a true Schattenjäger, he confronts Tetelo and destroys her and the coven’s idol, thus breaking the curse (m9).

3 Fighting evil in the name of the good

In *Sins of the Father*, two plots are interwoven. On the one hand, we have Gabriel’s quest to break the Ritter curse and fulfil his destiny, on the other hand, we have the modern day story of the Voodoo murders, which Gabriel investigates for his new crime novel. He is assisted by Grace, who does his research. While investigating the murders, Gabriel encounters Malia Gedde, a beautiful black woman who heads Gedde Enterprises²⁰. Although Malia is totally out of his league, they are attracted to each other and start a passionate love affair. For the player who has read the graphic novel it is evident that history repeats itself. Therefore, it is no surprise to find that Malia is the present Voodoo priestess and a descendant of Tetelo. However, Malia does not know the evil she wreaks once she is possessed by Tetelo’s Loa. Nor does she know that her company is used as a legitimate front for illegal operations, especially the trafficking of drugs.

At the Voodoo ritual, there is a short moment of recognition between Malia and Gabriel, before Tetelo takes over. This of course echoes the moment when Gunter recognizes Tetelo as the witch/Voodoo priestess in the graphic novel, and just as Tetelo initially tries to save her love Gunter, Malia tries to save Gabriel. To bring about the final confrontation Tetelo has abducted Grace and demands that Gabriel hands over the talisman for her safe release. To rescue Grace, Gabriel infiltrates the hidden headquarters of the Voodoo cartel. In an added scene in the remastered version, while searching the premises, Gabriel witnesses Malia summoning Tetelo to beg her to be

19 This reading of Wolfgang’s words may seem farfetched, but we will come across more instances where events in one game already hint at or foreshadow parts of one or both of the other games.

20 Again the name is significant, Malia, from mal – evil. Gedde is Danish for pike. It also is reminiscent of Getty, suggesting enormous wealth and influence. Malia’s family are very rich and Malia herself is interested in the fine Arts. Amongst other works of art, she owns Michelangelo’s *Rebellious Slave*.

set free from her duties. She can no longer go through with it. She loves Gabriel. Tetelo refuses her: ‘He will! As Gunter betrayed me. Blinded by the light, he will despise your darkness!’ This is, of course, a more explicit reference to the fact that Gabriel and Malia’s story repeats Gunter and Tetelo’s, making it clear that Gabriel has to atone for Gunter’s sins.

During his investigation, Gabriel finds a similar altar to the one in Africa. It soon dawns on him that Grace’s heart is going to be sacrificed. However, to enter the ceremony he must disguise himself. He chooses the mask of a wolf.²¹ At the ceremony, Malia is already ‘ridden’ by Tetelo, so Gabriel sees no other option than to fight her using the talisman. He rescues Grace and entrusts the talisman to her so that she may safely leave. Now Gabriel has to confront Tetelo without its protection. Fighting for his life, he appeals to Malia, but she is not strong enough to fight Tetelo. In the course of the fight, the sacrificial altar has opened so that Gabriel can destroy Tetelo’s idol. This causes an earthquake and a big rift into which Malia/Tetelo falls, just being able to grasp the edge. Tetelo taunts Gabriel to abandon Malia, as Gunter did her. However, unlike his ancestor Gabriel chooses to save Malia, even though this means saving Tetelo as well. Recognizing this, Malia chooses her own death, strengthened by the fact that Gabriel would not abandon her.

Apart from the religious elements in Gabriel’s *Schattenjäger* plot, the Voodoo plot also contains links to the Christian faith, especially Roman Catholicism. This is not surprising as New Orleans itself, as well as the specific version of Voodoo (or Voudoun) that is found in the city, have strong links to this religion, as is explained in the game in a university lecture on Voodoo Gabriel attends²². Therefore, it is also not surprising that Gabriel both visits places that are linked to Voodoo (the Voodoo museum, the Dixieland drugstore) as well as places that are linked to Roman Catholicism (St Louis Cathedral, Cemetery #1²³) in New Orleans. Gabriel even poses as a Roman Catholic priest to gather information. *Sins of the Fathers* is not the only game with Roman Catholic places of worship. In *The Beast Within* we have the St George church in Rittersberg, where the crypt of the *Schattenjäger* is situated, the chapel in the Ritter Schloss, the pilgrimage chapel in Altötting,

21 Obviously, he sees himself as a lone wolf. However, turning into a wolf also foreshadows what will happen in *The Beast Within*.

22 Jane Jensen is known for the fact that she researches her games very thoroughly. In the games, there are always sources of information (books, diaries, experts, and in the last game a computer) where the player has the opportunity to learn such facts as are helpful or even necessary to bring the games to a successful end. In the lecture, professor Hartridge, a university professor of religious studies who specialises in African religions, mentions that all sub-cults of African Voudoun worship a pantheon of spirits. This makes it easy to adapt or mingle with already settled religions: ‘This spirit-worship is what makes Voudoun so easily adaptable. With all those spirits, it’s no problem to add a few more. Say, for example, the Virgin Mary.’ This explains why many traditional citizens of New Orleans, like Madame Cazaunoux in the game, have no problem with being Roman Catholic and at the same time believing in Voodoo. New Orleans’ most famous Voodoo Queen Mary Laveau, who’s tomb plays a major role in the game, was a devout Roman Catholic as well and is buried at New Orleans’ Cemetery #1. The other person with extensive knowledge of Voodoo in the game is Dr. John, the proprietor of the Voodoo museum.

23 The latter, because of popular media texts, now is probably more often linked with the supernatural than as a Roman Catholic cemetery.

and King Ludwig II's chapel in Neuschwanstein. In *Blood of the Sacred*, we have the church of Rennes-le-Château as one of the main locations of investigation.

As already mentioned *The Beast Within* mainly takes place in the south of Germany, in Bavaria, itself a Catholic region. Gabriel now resides in Schloss Ritter. His help is sought by the villagers, especially the innkeeper of the local Gasthof *Zum Goldenen Löwe*, whose nephew's daughter was snatched just meters from their farm. The police have linked the case to similar murders and suspect two wolves that 'escaped' from the zoo in Munich, but the girl's father Tony Huber, suspects that the real culprit is a werewolf. Gabriel takes on the case and moves into the Huber's farm²⁴. He soon finds out that the girl is indeed captured by a creature that does have wolf features, but it is much bigger and heavier than a normal wolf. His investigations lead him to an elite hunting club, led by Baron Friedrich von Glower. Gabriel is susceptible to Glower's charisma and hedonistic lifestyle. Von Glower's 'back to nature' and 'being led by your natural instincts and needs' philosophy appeal to him. Von Glower himself also takes a special interest in Gabriel. Still, through his investigations, Gabriel is able to link the recent murders to one of the members of the hunting club, von Zell, but while on a hunting expedition, he is bitten by von Zell in wolf form and even though Glower forces him to shoot the wolf, Gabriel will become a werewolf unless the Alpha wolf is killed.

Parallel to Gabriel's investigations Grace is also involved in the case. At the beginning of the game, she is visited by two Americans, the Smiths, who claim to be demonologists and have come to visit the Schattenjäger. Meryl Smith is a clairvoyant and she warns Grace about the 'Black Wolf'. When laying Tarot cards for Grace she also predicts the struggle Gabriel has to face between good and evil²⁵, foreshadowing his transition to a werewolf. Grace's dreams and the Black Wolf lead her to King Ludwig II of Bavaria. She discovers that Ludwig was also bitten by a werewolf, and that Ludwig was fighting the transition as well. Ludwig's assailant was his, until then, best friend Louis. While attending one of Wagner's operas, Ludwig discovers that the music almost makes him turn into wolf form. So together with Wagner, he plans a new opera and a special lighting arrangement to make Louis turn to have him arrested. However, before the plan can be set in motion, Wagner dies and Ludwig is committed to an asylum. Afraid that he might turn into a werewolf and actually kill someone, Ludwig commits suicide²⁶.

24 On the farm, we also see elements linked to the Catholic faith, such as a crucifix and the letters IHS (Jesus Christos) with a cross above the H on a glass pane (the emblem of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits). When Gabriel examines the crucifix, he remarks that the Hubers must be Roman Catholic.

25 The card that she draws for Gabriel's present situation is Death, a transition card: 'dying to one thing and being born to another'. Next, she draws the two of Wands indicating that the struggle has two possible outcomes: turning to good or turning to evil. As Gabriel's companion card, she draws the High Priestess. This is not Grace's card but someone trying to communicate with Gabriel, someone who represents deep wisdom. This card probably refers to his non-human guardian, the Virgin Mary, although it is not explicitly stated in the game.

26 In this way, the game gives an explanation for Ludwig's bouts of madness and the strange entries in his dairies

As the player, by then, has already grasped, von Glower is the Black Wolf, Ludwig's downfall. Von Glower's intentions were not malicious, however. In his loneliness as an immortal creature, he was looking for like-minded friends. Ludwig was one of the first, but as he explains to Gabriel in a letter he sends him during Gabriel's transition, his early attempts failed. Those he wanted to turn, either went mad, like Ludwig, or they died. So over the years he became more cautious. With the hunting club, he first used his philosophy 'of tooth and claw' to test possible candidates. Von Zell had seemed the most promising, but recently he had become increasingly more violent, selfish and arrogant, hunting in broad daylight, and no longer killing loners, drawing attention to the club and its members. Von Glower also wanted to turn Gabriel, but von Zell in his eagerness to do away with Gabriel, bit him first. Still, von Glower is convinced that Gabriel will pass the transition: 'But you are different. You're a Ritter. Your Blood is already supernatural. [...] You have an enormous streak of the beast in you and you are innately strong in the Occult.' To show his faith in Gabriel, he even returns the talisman²⁷, which Gabriel lost in his encounter with von Zell. In the letter, von Glower argues that being a beast is much better than Gabriel's current life: 'It [being a wolf] is glorious much more so than the priestly life the Schattenjäger offers.' The letter ends as follows:

Don't confuse yourself with ideas of good and evil. Nature shows us that there are no such distinctions. You and I both inherited something of our fathers. Is your legacy any less of a curse or blessing than mine?

Join me.

Your Friederich

The content of the letter links the plot of the second game ('streak of the beast') directly to the first game ('You and I both inherited something of our fathers'). With the letter, von Glower tries to tempt Gabriel to the dark side. This temptation is also part of the Campbell's Hero's quest²⁸. It shows that Gabriel's transition to Schattenjäger is not yet complete, but continues in the second game.

In the final part of the game, Grace has located all the parts of the missing Wagner opera. The opera house has also been adapted to the special lighting arrangement. During the performance, von Glower is indeed affected and in a final chase Gabriel, also in wolf form, traps von Glower and kills him. In the game's final scene, Grace confronts Gabriel with his inherently dual nature, but he assures her that his choice was well thought-out: 'I made my choice. I guess when it comes down to

towards the end of his life. And, of course, his mysterious death.

27 Von Glower is aware of the power of the talisman. One night when Gabriel sleeps over at von Glower's, he comes to Gabriel's room and examines the talisman.

28 Cf. the emperor tempting Luke in *Star Wars* (1977) or Lord Voldemort tempting Harry in the *Harry Potter* series.

where the buck stops I don't want to be like that I don't want to be like that Gracie', showing the gamer that he has set a further step on his path to becoming a real Schattenjäger.

The story of the final game, *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, starts in an accompanying graphic novel. Grace and Gabriel are charged by prince James of Albany, the current Stewart heir, to protect his baby son Charlie from what he refers to as 'Night Visitors', vampire-like creatures. James tells them that these creatures have fed on him when he was a child and the baby has bite-marks as well. Despite their efforts, the baby is kidnapped and the trail leads Gabriel to Rennes-le-Château in France. Searching for the kidnappers gets Gabriel involved in a tour group whose members are all hoping to solve the mystery that allegedly made the priest Abbé Berenger Saunier a very rich man. Gabriel gradually realizes that the mystery and the kidnapping are linked to the 'Sangreal'²⁹ in which it is claimed that Christ's bloodline survived and that the Stuarts are now the last in the line. It turns out that the baby was kidnapped on order of Excelsior Montreaux, head of the Night Visitors, who believes that the boy's blood holds special powers. Together with Grace, who has also arrived in France, Gabriel has to solve several (geographical) puzzles to find the location of an underground cavern where the treasure, by now identified as the Holy Grail, is located, but where Gabriel has reason to believe the baby is also kept. Grace uncovers the location and Gabriel is able to free the kidnapped boy. In the third game Gabriel's dreams show a Unicorn being chased by the Night Visitors. We also see grapes and grapevines³⁰. In a later version of the dream the Unicorn's neck is severed with a ritual dagger, the creatures collect the blood in a chalice and one of them drinks it. His face distorts, and then a beam of light emanates from his forehead, followed by a unicorn horn. When Gabriel apparently wakes up, he sees one of the creatures about to bite Grace, but he cannot intervene because his legs are not working. When he regains power over his legs, the creature is gone and Grace seems to be unharmed. Gabriel, wanting to give Grace the protection of the talisman, gets into bed with her. He puts the talisman on her chest and then kisses her. Subsequently, they spent the night together. The next morning they both feel very awkward and Gabriel decides that it is best to pretend that nothing happened.

29 The mystery first came into public notice when BBC presenter Henry Lincoln did three documentaries about Rennes-Le-Château and 'the lost treasure' for the BBC Two *Chronicle* series: *The Lost Treasure of Jerusalem* (1972), *The Priest, the Painter and the Devil* (1974) and *The Shadows of the Templars* (1979). During this time, Lincoln met American fiction writer Richard Leigh and New Zealand photojournalist Michael Baigent. The three turned the mystery into the 1982 best-seller *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, the book that Jane Jensen used as part of her research for the game: 'Da Vinci Code was based on the same research material I used, yes, Holy Blood, Holy Grail and a whole bunch of similar books. I doubt he [Dan Brown] ever played GK3.' (Jensen, 2014).

30 In Medieval Art and literature, the Unicorn is an accepted symbol for Christ. The grapevine is used as a metaphor by Jesus himself. In John 15:1 he says: 'I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.' Montreaux owns a vineyard and when Gabriel questions him about viticulture, he notices that Montreaux's discusses these matters, including wine, in an odd way.

4 Servant to the King of Kings

Gabriel's initiation as Schattenjäger takes place in front of a stained glass window depicting St. George fighting with the Dragon. This is no coincidence. St. George is the Patron Saint of the Ritter family. Like St. George, the Ritters fight against (supernatural) evil. The church in Rittersberg, where the family crypt is located is also called St. George, as is Gabriel's bookstore. When visiting the Ludwig II museum in the second game, Grace discovers that Ludwig was the grand master of the knights of St. George, an aristocratic society dedicated to acts of chivalry. In the remastered version of *Sins of the Fathers* Gabriel owns a small statue of a dragon. When the player clicks on it, Gabriel remarks: 'I always had a thing for St. George, the one that slew a dragon.' In addition, when Gabriel talks to the Saint in the stained glass window he remarks: 'I named my shop after you. You've always fascinated me, I never knew why until now'. Furthermore, for the Schattenjäger ritual, Gabriel has to repeat the following lines:

St. George, patron of the light,
 who hunts the shadows of the night...
 upon my blood I call thee now,
 purify me, for I avow...
 to set my feet upon thy road,
 the sword I take up for my own.

When he has finished the ritual, it seems as if nothing has happened. However, that night in his dream the dragon steps out of the stained glass window. The dragon is huge and quite menacing. The following dialogue ensues:

Dragon: Your soul smells Gabriel Knight. You seek to be Schattenjäger?
 Gabriel: I do.
 Dragon: You must first burn away the past. How much sin do you have to burn?
 Dragon: You have used people all your life. Never committed to anything. Turn back now and I will forget that you asked for this.
 Gabriel: No!
 Dragon: There are only two things that redeem you. First, that you have Ritter blood in your veins. Second, that three women have loved you purely³¹.
 Dragon: You asked to start on the path; so you shall... But you will not be Schattenjäger until you have **earned** it!

31 His grandmother, Malia, and Grace (Jensen, 2014)

Gabriel: How?

Dragon: I can not show you the path. But I will tell you that you will have to let go of the greater part of yourself, Gabriel Knight.

Gabriel: Yes, no problem.

Dragon: Yes... Now, you asked for purification. You shall have it!

Gabriel: Oh, No!

The dragon torches Gabriel with his fiery breath. A glass sword appears in Gabriel's hand, and he stabs the dragon. But the dragon turns into a distorted version of Gabriel, who laughs maniacally, withers, and turns into the dragon's pupil. In the final images, we see a key appear. This is the key to the Schattenjäger library, a library that can only be entered by Schattenjäger³². This brings us to the dragon and snake imagery. As Grace explains in the first game, dragons and snakes are linked:

Hmmm. Did you know that medieval legends about dragons and giant worms are actually based on snakes? You know, dragons, devils, sea monsters—they've always been associated with snakes.

Especially in the first game, dragons and snakes abound. There are dragons/snakes in Gabriel's dreams, in his father's painting and sketches, in a poem written by his grandfather, on a banner in the Ritter library³³, and a dragon/snake is part of one of the most challenging puzzles in the game. Gabriel's shop even has a statue of a dragon gargoyle. Moreover, as one of the pieces of evidence of the crime is a snake scale and snakes are an important element in Voodoo, the game also features some 'live' snakes Gabriel has to examine. In the remastered version of the game, the small dragon statue, already mentioned, has been added, as well as a shield or plaque with a dragonhead atop the landing of the staircase in Schloss Ritter.

Another animal that recurs in the first and the second game is the lion. We find it in Schloss Ritter as a statue at the foot of the stairs, as a head hanging on the landing (were the dragon is, in the remastered version) above the door to the Ritter library (in the second game it has moved above the headboard of Gabriel's bed), in the Ritter library³⁴, on the doors of the St. George church, etc. Even the local hotel in Rittersberg is called *Zum Goldenen Löwe*. In the remastered version of *Sins of the Fathers*, the connection between the Ritters and lions is made more explicit. There is now quite a large painting of a Lion hanging at the head of Gabriel's bed. According to Gabriel, it is called 'Let Sleeping Lions Lie' [sic], he bought it at a garage sale. Then he admits that he has always had a thing for lions. Later when he calls his great-uncle Wolfgang, Wolfgang says that the Ritter family

32 This is contradicted in the second game because Grace can also use the library.

33 In the remastered version, the banner is replaced by one bearing a cross and several small symbols resembling fleurs-de-lis.

34 In the remastered version it has gone. It is replaced by a puzzle involving a shield with as its emblem the talisman.

is associated with the image of the lion. Interestingly Damballah, the Voudoun snake god, is one of the primary Loa of the Geddés. In addition, in the first game in the corners of the game's menu we see the sculpted heads of a lion and a snake.

The combination of the lion and the snake is depicted on the Schattenjäger talisman in the form of a lion fighting a serpent. Even to a non-religious person, this struggle is understood as a struggle between good and evil. In religious imagery, the snake often represents the devil, whereas the lion refers to the lion of Judea, Christ. Both interpretations were confirmed by Jane Jensen when I asked her (Jensen, 2014). The talisman is believed to be as old as the Schattenjäger. As Wolfgang explains to Gabriel, its power should always be used for good, not for evil; for defence, not for offence. When asked why this should be so, Wolfgang simply replies that it is the Schattenjäger's duty. When Gabriel asks about the when and how of the Schattenjäger, Wolfgang answers that no one is sure when the vocation started or how. They have records going back to the 13th century, but nothing beyond that. There are rumours but as they are talking over the phone there is no time to delve deeper.

Before going into the origins of the Schattenjäger, it is necessary to reveal more of the story of the third game. One of the members of the tour group is a man called Emilio Baza, apparently a Middle-Eastern tourist. Emilio reveals to Grace that he once was part of a group called the Magi, a group tasked with protecting the bloodline descendants of Jesus from the Night Visitors. The creatures were originally also Magi but now want the blood for their own ends (cf. the Unicorn in Gabriel's dream). Emilio reveals that he has come to Rennes-Le-Château because of the secret. Later Emilio reveals a darker truth. Originally, he was just a devoted member to the Messiah, but on the day Christ was crucified, Emilio took some of his blood and drank it. Despite immediately regretting his action, he was consequently forced to walk the earth in anonymity, earning him the name of 'Wandering Jew'.

When Gabriel is in the underground chamber, before being able to free baby James he has to fight a gruesome creature that Montreaux has summoned. This creature is Asmodeus, the demon of lust, sometimes also referred to as a king of demons or one of the seven princes of Hell. In the game, Asmodeus appears in numerous images, seemingly taking the place of the dragon/snake in the earlier games. The most notable is the statue of Asmodeus in the church of St. Mary Magdalene³⁵. In game terms, Asmodeus is of course the ultimate end-boss and he is indeed quite difficult to defeat. In comparison, Montreaux is easy; he just perishes in the same fight. When Gabriel is fighting Asmodeus, he is standing on a large stone tomb. After Asmodeus is defeated, Gabriel notices the tomb and opens it. A bright light emanates from his forehead, and then we see a

35 The sculpture in the game is an exact copy of the real one in the church. The same goes for the rest of the churches interior.

clouded sky. A raven flies into the picture, lands and starts picking away flesh from an unknown source. The camera tilts, moves, and we see the edge of a wooden beam, followed by a hand. The screen flashes and we see the face of Christ on the Cross, quickly followed by a shot of Gabriel's face, but it is different, he is wearing a roman helmet. From what ensues, it becomes clear that Gabriel's ancestor was one of the Roman soldiers who nailed Jesus to the Cross. He now repents his deed and asks Christ for forgiveness:

Soldier: Can you forgive me? I did not know... may the Gods have mercy, I did not know.³⁶

Christ: You are already forgiven.

Soldier: Please, is there anything I can do? For...for your family, perhaps?

Four beams of light emanate from behind Jesus and the music (a chorus) swells.

The beams dim and the chorus falls.

Christ: Yes, I will need a service from one of your descendants. If you will allow it? Will you be a servant for the light?³⁷

Soldier: Yes, anything.

Christ: Then raise the end of your sword to my lips.

The sword floats upwards and Jesus kisses it. The handle turns to gold.

Christ: Carry the gold with you; it will protect you from evil. Now go in peace and love God.

The cross tilts and floats into the now golden clouds. With a flash, Gabriel is back in the reality of the underground chamber. He is dazed, but also awed and humbled. Emilio appears. He takes the shrouded body from the tomb and carries it away into a tunnel of bright light.

Not only, does this scene reveal the origins of the Schattenjäger and the gold out of which the talisman would later be forged, it also shows Gabriel's final transformation. At last, he has let go of the greater part of himself, committed to a cause, and does not put himself first. This is not only shown in his willingness to risk his own life to save baby James, it is even more clearly shown in his changed attitude towards Grace. He is now willing to admit that he loves her. Therefore, when he returns to the hotel, Gabriel runs to their room³⁸ to tell Grace how he feels, even spurning the female tour guide he had been trying to get involved with throughout the game. Unfortunately, he finds that Grace has gone. The fact that Gabriel now actually has changed morally confirms that he

36 This, of course, echoes Luke 34: 'Jesus said, "Father, forgive them [the Roman soldiers], for they do not know what they are doing."'

37 Cf. Tetelo's words to Malia in the remastered version 'Blinded by the light, he will despise your darkness.'

38 Because of a shortage of hotel rooms, Gabriel and Grace have had to share. But Gabriel has been sleeping on the couch whenever they are both in the room at night, apart from the one time.

has earned the title of Schattenjäger. In the last scene, shown after the end-titles, we see the walls of the vineyard where the Unicorn was trapped crumble and the animal runs towards its freedom.

5 Conclusions

Gabriel is a true Hero-King, but as in many more modern tellings of the myth, his tale has a twist. His kingdom is not a literal realm, but the right to become the new Schattenjäger, hunter of the supernatural. The dragon he had to slay was his own defective nature as a human being, his own flawed morality, foreshadowed in the scene with St. George's dragon and hinted at by the titles of the games. However, the cost Gabriel has to pay seems high. It is not usual that a Hero-King myth ends without a resolution, not even the modern ones. Of course, Gabriel has proven that he is worthy of being a Schattenjäger; he has earned the title. Still the game ends on a low for him personally. When he has finally changed, the one person he loves, the one person he is willing to commit to, has left. Grace did not wait for Gabriel. After the eventful night and Gabriel's handling of it, she is ready to choose her own path. Emilio is with her in the room, when Gabriel has gone to rescue the baby. Grace is waiting anxiously for news. Emilio, who appears to have a telepathic link to what is happening in the chamber, reassures her that Gabriel is well. When Emilio leaves, he says to Grace: 'Remember, when one path to your destiny is blocked, another will appear.' After he has left, Grace looks at a photo of a friend, a Tibetan Lama, who has invited her to come and spend some extended time at his monastery.³⁹ Apparently, she has already chosen her new path. Intriguingly, Emilio also says something else to Grace: 'Goodbye, dear one. You must take very good care of yourself now.'

Having examined the games on all three levels, this leaves the question whether or not a new generation of players will understand and accept the religious themes in the game. In view of the fact that some of the elements have been made more explicit in the remastered edition, it seems that Jane Jensen also has her doubts about that. In addition, even when made more explicit, it still is difficult to predict which religious references this new generation will understand. One final question that some may have is why Jane Jensen chose to approach the religious aspects in the particular way she does in the games? Fortunately, she recently answered this question herself:

I think it's ingrained in me both by nature and nurture. My family tree has a lot of preachers in it. I guess there's just a part of me that is fascinated by the meta questions--what happens when we die,

39 In the second novel, Gabriel is writing a new crime adventure. In it his hero, Blake Backlash finds a mysterious packet in his mail 'postmark: India'.

why does evil exist, etc, just like my ancestors. But instead of that leading me to a religious belief, though, I've always been more interested in philosophy and the paranormal. I grew up as a minister's daughter and so I saw a lot of hypocrisy and bigotry in the church. And that made me question religion itself. It generally doesn't fare too well in my stories. I guess it's a love/hate relationship. Sorry for the weird answer! (Jensen, 2014)

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Biography

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Playing with Religion in Digital Games

Extensive Review

Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll

What does religion have to do with digital games? How can the intersecting fields of discourse of those two at first glance contradictory areas of cultural practice be properly analyzed? The long awaited volume *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, edited by Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieve, two renowned scholars of the field of religion and media studies, and published in spring 2014, attempts to provide answers to this quest(ions) which has bothered many researchers of disciplines such as religious, cultural, media and game studies for quite some time now. An introductory essay by the editors and 12 case studies by authors from different academic backgrounds address a variety of aspects concerning religion and games in an interdisciplinary and multimethodical perspective.

According to the introduction, the main goal of the book is to highlight and emphasize the importance of digital games for contemporary research of religion in popular culture. Digital games often rely on cultural and religious content to steer the narrative as well as the gameplay and as such both reflect and shape contemporary religiosity. Consequently, the contributions in the book focus on different layers of how religion shapes digital games as well as gaming experiences (and vice versa) but also the institutional and public responses. Thus the importance of games as emerging media genre cannot be underestimated; as per the editors “digital games now depict the religious within the twenty-first century” (p. 2).

The book is subdivided into three parts. Part 1 (“Exploration in Religiously Themed Games“) focuses on the deliberate use of religious narratives and themes as basis for gameplay design and asks for the impacts of digital gaming on the presentation and perception of religious game content in the context of contemporary culture. The contributions assembled in this section seem rather eclectic in its focus and academic quality.

Jason Anthony’s paper “Dreidels to *Dante’s Inferno*: Toward a Typology of Religious Games” (chapter 1) tries a practical approach towards the commonality of digital games and religion. By means of a typology which is supposed to highlight the religious dimensions of digital

games by looking at the history of pre-digital games in religion, the author with a background in journalism and game design tries to show how and why “games are exploring ways to tap the mind’s capacity for transcendent experience” (p. 26). Even though the games he uses to emphasize his assumptions are fascinating and show a broad knowledge of the field, his view on games, gaming and game-related topics (such as his use of rather outdated approaches in ritual theory) as well as his typology is rather rigid, inflexible and reductionistic. Instead of applying heuristic and pragmatic small-scale categories for the respective contexts (which would be one possible state-of-the-art approach in religious studies), the general perspective seems to be a normative generalization postulated by the author without considering the positions of the actors (that is, the players of the respective games) or the different socio-cultural, geographical, medial and time contexts where the games are embedded in. So Anthony’s hope that his “typology’s value might outweigh its limitations” (p. 27) is certainly as debatable as the practical applicability of his approach. In how far Anthony’s typology might prove helpful for game designers in creating more sophisticated religious content however is beyond the power of judgment by the reviewers.

Chapter 2 is a game-immanent and (in parts) an actor-centered approach towards “Locating the Pixelated Jew: A Multimodal Method for Exploring Judaism in *The Shivah*” by Isamar Carrillo Masso and Nathan Abrams. Based on the observation that even though the image of “the Jew” has been examined over many formats like art, film, TV, cartoon, comic, etc, it has still to be researched in the context of digital games. Consequently, the authors with a background in film and new media studies apply the Jewish point and click, single player detective video game *The Shivah* as case study to analyze the representations of Judaism and questions of religious-based beliefs, behaviors, values and ethics in the context of video games. By taking an exceptionally well documented semiotic approach derived from film studies combined with a corpus-based critical discourse analysis they reveal the multitude of discourses on religion present in the *The Shivah* and show how players enact them. The main focus of the paper lies on the discussion of the method, a multimodal approach which considers among others the perspective of the designers and the researchers’ own playing experience. The well-balanced study concludes, that in *The Shiva*, Judaism serves as backdrop, setting and reason for the game which results in a non-monolithic nuanced depiction of contemporary American Jewish faith and identity. The method seems well-balanced, sophisticated and applicable in practice, as the results of the case study clearly shows.

The key aspect of Xenia Zeiler’s chapter on “The Global Mediatization of Hinduism through Digital Games: Representation versus Simulation in *Hanuman: Boy Warrior*” (chapter 3) lies on the negotiation processes of Hindu authority and identity in gaming contexts. After recounting the background of digital games in India, the author focuses on the case study of *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* (published for PS2 in 2009) as first entirely India-developed digital game based on Hindu

mythology, namely the highly popular legend of Hanuman. Zeiler who has a background in South Asian Studies illustrates the content of the game and describes the heated debates on the appropriateness of incorporating Hindu deities in gaming environments which were triggered by the game's release. Zeiler makes a point in attributing the disputes to the different conceptions of 'simulation', 'performance' and 'representation' in different types of media: In digital games, the deities were controlled by the player's whim and thus not always in accordance with the mythological tales (Zeiler refers to the theoretical concepts of 'simulation' and 'performance') whereas in films they were represented along the lines of 'correct' Hindu mythology ('representation'). The author further contextualizes her findings by localizing and identifying the debates on *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* as one aspect of the mediatized negotiations of religious authority within global diaspora settings. The material as well as the findings of this fascinating case study which highlights many aspects of religion and globalization beyond the context of the digital game prove to be sophisticated, highly relevant and firmly based on a solid theoretical and methodical background.

In contrast the paper "*Silent Hill and Fatal Frame: Finding Transcendent Horror in and beyond the Haunted Magic Circle*" (chapter 4) by Medieval historian Brenda S. Gardenour Walters appears to be of a somewhat speculative nature. Focusing on "supernatural horror" in the gameworlds of two digital games which are both featuring a number of ritualistic settings, the author recounts both Western and Japanese players' experiences of terror, abjection, and (ultimately) "religious transcendence". - Without presenting any reference for having indeed questioned actual players. Drawing (among others) on Salen and Zimmerman's 'ritual sphere of play', Huizinga's 'magic circle' and Rudolf Otto's concept of 'the Numinous', the author detects digital game worlds as ritual spaces where players (which the author terms as "player-pilgrims") can experience spiritual transcendence through the experience of horror. She concludes:

For the religiously minded, then, horrifying digital gameplay might become in and of itself a spiritual action, a sacred conduit to transcendence and communion with the divine. Such transcendent experiences do not remain locked within the ritual sphere of the game, however, but reside in the mind of the player-pilgrim, tracing the memory of and facilitating connections between the sacred virtual world and profane reality until each is imbued with elements of the other. (p. 91-92)

In addition to the normative and in its core exotizing depiction of "Christian" and "Japanese" 'religiosity' in the analysis of the in-game setting, the analysis on the (potential?) reception of the game is also flawed. Without any proof by actor-centered research the author's claims and conclusions seem mostly speculative and do not suffice the standards of modern scientific procedure. Thus the argument is neither valid nor convincing and lacks any empirical groundwork.

Part 2 is titled “Religion in Mainstream Games”. The highlights of this section are the contributions by Vít Šisler (chapter 5) and Shanny Luft (chapter 7), both giving excellent insights into their respective fields of study while at the same time demonstrating the value of incorporating actor-centered perspectives and methods into the research of religion and digital games.

Šisler’s “From Kuma\War to Quarish” describes three layers of representation of Islam in Arab and American video games: audiovisual, narrative and procedural. In addition to analyzing these layers in several relevant games by both American and Arabic game development studios (including the highly popular *Age of Empires 2* and *Civilization IV*, as well as the lesser known *Kumar\War*, *Special Force 2*, *Quaraish* and *Arabian Lords*), the author also provides information and statements by the game producers and designers themselves drawn from the games’ manuals, online resources and interviews. While statements of the actual players of these games would be an interesting and most welcome addition to this chapter, it still stands as an effective example of both game-immanent as well as actor-centered (in this case the games’ designers) research on processes of othering, stereotyping and remediation of schematized images of Islam.

A very player-centered perspective is provided by Luft’s “Hardcore Christian Gamers. How Religion Shapes Evangelical Play”. Based on research on “christian gaming” communities and websites as well as an online survey conducted within these communities the author tries to tackle the questions of how these self-designated “christian gamers” compare to and emulate the broader “mainstream” gaming community (“Christians as Gamers”) and how they differentiate themselves through ‘self-identification’, ‘gameplay behavior’ and interpretation of game content (“Gamers as Christians”). The very interesting and highly relevant results and well reflected conclusions are only slightly tarnished by some terminological inconsistencies (i.e. the interchangeable usage of “Christian” and “Evangelical”) and the author’s insistence on drawing on the notion of games as implicit religious practice (a recurring theme in many chapters of the volume) at the very end of the chapter, both of which luckily do not affect the quality of the rest of the chapter in the slightest.

Unfortunately, this can only partially be stated with regards to Rabia Gregory’s “Citing the Medieval” (chapter 6). The basic premise of the chapter – drawn from Umberto Eco’s concept of ‘neomedievalism’ – seems convincing: medieval religious imagery and references are regarded as ‘narrative technique’ and ‘world-building infrastructure’ which ease transition into a fantasy gaming world through familiar tropes and themes. Unfortunately in some parts the chapter suffers from an overtly normative perspective which clouds the otherwise very promising approach. The author jumps between very pragmatic considerations concerning the repetitive nature of many tasks given to the player in MMORPGs and religion as one tool to give (narrative) meaning to these tasks, and (again) the notion of gaming as an implicitly religious practice, drawing comparisons to 15th century Burgundian devotional practices based on Johan Huizinga’s *Herfsttij*. These allegations,

lacking any kind of empirical evidence through e.g. statements by actual players or game designers, can best be summed up through a quote from the last paragraph of the chapter:

Rather than simply asking “what is religion in gaming worlds?” or “what is being reconstructed out of medieval history in these faux medieval worlds?” I hope others will join me in considering the coincidental similarities between body and avatar and body and soul, between ascending the spiritual ladder and grinding the gaming treadmill, between achieving salvation and leveling up, between meditating on a hand-painted woodcut while spinning and playing an MMORPG while making dinner. (p. 151)

Coincidental indeed.

The last chapter of this section is “Filtering Cultural Feedback” by Peter Likarish who gives a very interesting historical overview of censorship of religious symbols and references in Nintendo games during localisation from Japan to the US market. Likarish argues that this self-imposed removal or alteration of religious elements (especially in the early nineties) was aiming at preventing cultural feedback within the US market as many of these references in Japanese games were drawn from Judeo-Christian sources. While this chapter is also suffering from some minor normative tendencies (in trying to explain why there seemed to be a bigger problem with religious references in games compared to e.g. movies) and a lack of statements by e.g. game producers in question, it albeit provides very valuable and much needed information and groundworks on the topic of transcultural gaming and economic considerations when dealing with religion in digital games.

The third and last subdivision of the book is titled “Gaming as Implicit Religion”. On the assumption that seemingly ‘secular’ practices may in some peoples’ lives serve ‘religious’ aims and purposes (p. 8), the contributions discuss the ways in which digital games and gaming environments facilitate or encourage forms of religion-like practice and in which ‘secular’ activities take on religious roles or meanings for individuals. The act of gaming itself, the consequential meaning-making process by the gamers and the intersections of in-game experience with the physical ‘reality’ are subject to research in this part of the book.

The first paper “The Importance of Playing in Earnest” (chapter 9) by Rachel Wagner, who is a scholar of religion, focuses on the similarities of religion in games with regard to its order- and meaning-making potential on the premise that players / practitioners obey and play by those rules. As such, religion (mainly as religious practice, or rather ritual) and games can be seen as parallel concepts both striving for “crafting rules, shaping worlds, creating spaces in which predictable ordered systems shape our experiences” (p. 196). Even though Wagner ‘rehabilitates’ Mircea

Eliade's concept of 'holy' and 'profane' for explaining how order is being imposed on (digital game) spaces via rules and structure" (p. 200) she acknowledges the constructivist nature of both religion and games, the rules of which are man-made:

All play, all rules, all order-making is at its root a human constructive activity, a human attempt at meaning-making. (p 210)

On the assumption that the quest for order is a (kind of) anthropological constant and based on a mainly phenomenological theoretical groundwork on rules in game and religion / ritual, Wagner determines that ('secular') gameplay shows aspects of religious practice.

(...) the desire for rules, for order, for cosmos, is nothing more nor less than the desire to play a meaningful game, to live in a world governed by knowable and predictable rules. This desire might be visible in existing religious practices, but may also be visible in the cultural practices of ordinary gameplay, and it is certainly present in many manifestations of religious ritual. It even allows us to see deeply immersive secular gameplay as a kind of sacred practice. (p. 201)

The paper is a creative approach towards the similarities of digital gaming and ritual. However, the lack of empirical data to prove and confirm the author's point is subject to criticism and along with the strong and thus rather reductionistic focus on rules and order-making as reason and driving force for religious interpretation of digital gameplay presents a weak point in Wagner's line of argument.

In the paper "'God Modes' and 'God Moods': What Does a Digital Game Need to Be Spiritually Effective?" (chapter 10) Oliver Steffen wonders if certain categories of games satisfy the same psychological needs as religion and suggests that the feelings associated with 'flow' and '(dis-)empowerment' might be religiously relevant to some users. Starting point of Steffen's musings is the fact that digital games tend to offer a "god mode" which refers to the structures of empowerment which cause a state of in-game digital 'immortality' by altering the game rules. Thus, the intervention with the rule system and the ludological structure towards achieving digital omnipotence leads to an altered game experience for the player which Steffen calls "god mood", comprising the change of the player's consciousness by playing a deity. From a ludologically influenced religious studies approach to digital games and by means of his case study on *The Path* Steffen discusses those basic structural elements of games that according to his elaborated framework generate religiously relevant experience in players. Steffen concludes that the spiritual efficacy of digital games he detects in different aspects of gameplay and player experience are an essential aspect of the implicit potential of digital games which – using the example of *The Path*

“might be religiously relevant to some users” (p 231). Due to the fact that Steffens research is based on a data set derived mainly from scientific and journalistic publications which reference to religious terms, metaphors and themes and presumably his own playing experience his conclusions must remain vague and – from the perspective of empirical research – questionable. Thus, evidence is needed to verify (or falsify) Steffens assumptions which – if proven valid – might shed interesting light on psychological states of play.

On a much sounder theoretical base stands Michael Waltemathe’s contribution “Bridging Multiple Realities: Religion, Play, and Alfred Schutz’s Theory of the Life-World” (chapter 11) which focuses on the relationship between playfully experiencing symbolic universes and transposing those experiences to other parts of the ‘life-world’. Applying a socio-phenomenological approach which allows the adoptions of the individual player’s perspective as well as concepts of sociology of knowledge, Waltemathe examines the relationship between play, religion and virtual worlds and discusses the basic nature of different areas of the ‘life-world’ and the place computer worlds take in it. He states that digital games represent a bridge between different ‘provinces of meaning’ and as such gain specific potential to be used in individual processes of meaning-making:

What makes a video game ‘religious’ is not only the occasional mention of a deity or other overtly religious aspects, but the relation between the mode of playfully experiencing symbolic universes and transforming those experiences to other parts of the life-world. (p 239)

Whereas Waltemathe’s contribution focuses on implicit religion in terms of individual experience and meaning making processes by interconnecting virtual world experience with the ‘paramount reality’ (according the Alfred Schütz), Media Scholar Kevin Shut examines the technological preconditions that influence religious representations in digital games. In “They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality” (chapter 12) he traces the question if the construction of the digital medium itself has an impact on the manner in which games handle religion. By researching a multitude of different games and applying state-of-the-art theories from game studies, he detects a bias towards a somewhat mechanical, demystified representation of religion as common element (mostly due to the rule-based game mechanics) which he criticizes for showing a tendency towards an ‘impoverished’ and unidirectional vision of individual religious experience. Following an account of several aspects how religion is employed in the context of game mechanics he presents games, where the rich and complex narratives or subtle intertextual references (like e.g. religious symbolism) lead to a multifaceted presentation of religion in games. Furthermore, Shut identifies players’ creativity which he calls “emergent play” (when players play against the rules and do things not provided for in the game setting) as important factor for individual meaning-making.

The models of religion presented in some games may indeed be mechanistic, but that does not mean players will necessarily understand religion that way. Emergent play means divergent interpretations and real creativity. (p 270)

The study is a creative and well-balanced approach towards in-game religious systematization, based on a strictly interview-based actor-centered approach which considers the game mechanics, the narrative structure and the aesthetic. Furthermore, Shut also incorporates the underlying and overarching socio-cultural discourses into his excellent work which in the view of cultural studies offers a promising reflection on an emerging research field.

While in theory, anyone can understand anything from any text or cybertext, in practice, genre conventions, cultural traditions, and the choices of the makers of texts constrain the likely interpretations of readers, viewers, listeners, and players. (p 273)

In conclusion, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* is a multifaceted book which deserves a lot of praise, but also some criticism. Naturally, due to the newness of the research topic(s), the viewpoints and approaches towards the field are quite diverse. The book is the attempt of a general overview of the current state of research – and as such is a great achievement and a milestone in the context of religion in digital games research. However, from a cultural studies point of view the collection somewhat lacks papers based on empirical social research and player-centered approaches. As it is, the absence of empirical data causes the impression that the authors of some of the papers lose themselves in what seems to be speculative musings rather than serious academic research. “Religious-like experiences or gaming encounters can indeed be described in religious terms,” as the editors state (p 9). In the light of the empirical void one has to ask whose “experiences” and “gaming encounters” are indeed the focus of analysis – those of the players or rather those of the researcher?

However, even though the book offers some structural flaws (the organization of the book and the rather arbitrary assignment of the chapters into three different sub-divisions has been criticized elsewhere) as well as some theoretical and methodical weaknesses, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* is an important and informative account of contemporary scholarship on religion in digital games. It is definitely worth reading and merits critical reflection in the research context of religion in digital games – and beyond.

Playing with Religion in Digital Games

Heidi A. Campbell & Gregory P. Grieve (eds.) 2014

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Religion in Play: Games, Rituals, and Virtual Worlds

Review

Jan Wysocki

Philippe Bornet and Maya Burger, the editors of *Religions in Play* present us with a collection of essays that consciously wants to diverge from certain parts of classical academic enterprise. Instead of looking at beliefs, they want to tackle the notion of practice. Instead of texts, the editors confront us with the importance of materiality and objects. And most importantly: Instead of going along the well taken path of ‘serious’ academic topics, they want to focus on the often disregarded cultural element of play.

At the time of its publication, this volume was one of the first that discussed the field of games or play and its relation to religion and vice versa. Collecting an extremely broad spectrum of approaches toward the topic, this work stands out in a number of ways. There is something in it for everyone, be it historiographical works, ethnological fieldwork studies or media analysis. But with so many different themes and approaches, it is hard to stay in control over this wealth of thoughts.

The editors seem to be aware that in order to ‘quell’ the diverse inputs of the authors and to bring some order into it, they have to build certain categories in which the essays will be aligned. Every one of these chapters containing three to four essays is preceded by an introduction that gives the reader an overview over the following works. This is enormously helpful not only by giving short abstracts but also by making the reader familiar with the overarching topic of the specific chapter. It binds everything together so that the quite diverse works however often fit nicely into the respective bigger thematical framework.

In ‘Part 1’ this specific framework is history and ‘ludic practices’ therein. We learn about gambling houses in medieval Spain from Ulrich Schädler, self-romanticizing knightly tournaments by Valérie Cangemi and Alain Corbellari and the diverging positions on the origins of chess by Philippe Bornet. Especially Bornet’s introduction to the chapter has a great point in explaining how and why games have been neglected by academic thought and practice for such a long time. He advances the theory that the history of religions has had an impact on how games have often been ostracized from society and therefore also science and academia. Among other things, early

Christian theologians, then the Reformation, and finally utilitaristic ideas in the early industrialization were forces that devalorized games. It is important to know something about the history of the negligence of games in order to appreciate and expand the newly found interest in this field of study.

The second chapter has a more abstract topic in that it explores the connection of chance (or the absence thereof) and religion. Here we see in parts an approach to contemporary objects of inquiry. Burger talks about historical as well as modern decks of Tarot-cards while Thierry Wendling visits a Bingo-event in Neuchâtel in Switzerland and tries to discern through observation and conversation what religious markers one can find in even such a place. Jens Schlieter describes the Tibetan Buddhist board game of ‘Ascending the Spiritual Levels’, better known to us as ‘Snakes and Ladders’. He explains that although the game is played with dice and therefore it is possible for the playing monk to fall back in the ascension the game can’t be lost per se but stops eventually with reaching the goal of the spiritual path. This observation leads to very interesting possible discussions about the mechanics of chance and its implications on religious meanings in games. The chapter topics of chance, randomness, and luck are discussed in the introduction by Maya Burger but without giving it too much of a theoretical positioning. This is understandable due to the character of such a volume: it is more a collection of different analysis than a group effort streamlined on the basis of theoretical coherence. Here we see that it is hard to put every essay retrospectively into a perfectly shaped theoretical structure. The reader has to be satisfied with quite general statements about concepts like chance or luck in the context of religion and games.

The third chapter “Play and Ritual” offers among others two actor-centered essays. One written by Ute Hüsken explores the learning of Brahmanic rituals in South India through means of play. Florence Pasche Guignard authored the other one that has also a similar focus on children’s play by looking at religious toys and how they are used to school children in the right ritual behavior. These works fit perfectly together giving the reader interesting ethnographical accounts about certain human actions. Here we see how the editor’s thoughts on researching practice rather than text and playfulness rather than classical material (that is often regarded as more ‘serious’) are pursued. Both essays fit better in the proposed research direction than e.g. Johannes Bronkhorst’s thoughts about the possibility of play in ritual based on textual analysis of classical Indian literature. His strict theoretical ruling on the predetermined aspects of ritual and the exceptions he makes from this theory do not seem to follow the editor’s research proposal.

The final and fourth chapter closes the book with the theme of virtual worlds featuring digital games, analogue role-playing game, and movies. Oliver Steffen’s work analyzing the computer game *Risen* was likely one of the first religious studies projects in this new field and has to be given credit in making the first step into a very important direction. Due to opening up such a new field it

is not unusual that Steffen's interpretation is not without problems. He rightly works with a ludological framework starting with the thoughts on game-elements such as 'hit points'. He claims to find direct connections between 'hit points' or 'mana points' and classical academic ideas about 'life energy' formulated by e.g. religious scholar Gerardus van der Leeuw. Steffen tries to show the reception of this concepts by the designers of the game. But unfortunately he can only give rather speculative interpretations without any substantial clues about how the reception history of these symbols, ideas, and semantics really unfolded. This first and very important effort presented by Steffen has to be further polished and refined and put through a comprehensible methodological program. A more compelling study on digital games in this volume is proposed by Julian Kücklich where he describes how players 'break' games or use cheats. Although religion is only a side issue here Kücklich makes good points theorizing the inner fabric of games and their possible methodical research.

Bornet's and Burger's task was not an easy one. They delivered a much needed book about the academically underrepresented topic of games, play, and religion and gathered many interesting scholars for this enterprise. The book delivers a plethora of diverse material from different perspectives using a multitude of research questions and methods. This interdisciplinary effort has to be praised. But simultaneously the work lacks a heuristic definition of games and play and only brushes the surface of theoretical discussions. The chapter forewords try to compensate for this but have a hard time to fit retrospectively every article into a joint framework.

But despite the critique this is overall a great resource for every scholar of games and religion in that it exemplary shows the reader on how many levels games are an important part of religion as well as general culture. If one can select the most useful articles and does not bother with a concise theoretical framework that connects all essays this volume will offer a lot of inspiration for possible own projects. Hopefully we will see a lot more volumes that show us examples of how games and religion can be studied. But I also strongly hope for works that tackle the more theoretical part of this cultural connection. This emerging field will have to use thorough reflection of categories, historical data, and implicit assumptions about religion and games in order to grasp and reconstruct the complex cultural dynamics in a scientific valuable way.

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