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Table of Contents

- 01 **Towards „a New Province of Humanity“! - Introduction**
Simone Heidbrink & Tobias Knoll
- 06 **'Nothing is true, everything is permitted' - The Portrayal of the *Nizari Isma'ilis* in the *Assassin's Creed* Game Series**
Frank G. Bosman
- 27 **Playing with the legend - Ostension and Extra-Textual Production in *Minecraft***
Roman Ohlendorf
- 45 **Redemption through Annihilation?! - Game Designer's Views on Religion, Culture and Society and Its Influence on Digital Games**
Stefan Piasecki
- 74 **Praise Helix! - Christian Narrative in *Twitch Plays: Pokémon***
Jenny Saucerman & Dennis Ramirez
- 95 **Interview: Mark R Johnson, Creator of *Ultima Ratio Regum***



Towards “a New Province of Humanity”!

Introduction

Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll

On April 4th, 2016 a book named ‘Empires of EVE: A History of the Great Wars of EVE Online’ was released to the public. Funded by an enormously successful Kickstarter campaign¹ in 2014 and written by Andrew Groen, it takes a historical approach towards the science fiction MMORPG *EVE Online*, which launched in 2003 and is still popular to this day. Groen himself sums up the book as follows:

“It’s a story about war and politics and betrayal and of course, internet spaceships. Beyond that, I’ve searched extensively and I believe this may be the first history book ever written about humans living in a digital world.”²

The Foreword of ‘Empires of EVE’ is opened up with a bold statement: “EVE is real”. For Groen – and according to him, many players of *EVE Online* – calling the virtual Space of *EVE Online*’s universe a real one means trying to redefine “what constitutes a real space”:

“The building blocks of EVE Online’s universe – called New Eden – are ones and zeroes rather than ordinary Earth elements, but what Earth and New Eden have in common is humanity. Jealousy, ambition, revenge, greed, hatred, and friendship are at the core of EVE Online. Human emotions and work make up the soul of New Eden, and you’ll find every emotion there that you would in the traditional world.

In that sense, New Eden is very much a new province of humanity, and its history is worth preserving.” (Groen 2016, Foreword)

1 The campaign reached its funding goal of 12.500\$ within 7,5 hours and surpassed it by another 83.200\$, totaling 95.729\$ or 765% of the original goal.

2 See <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/sciencegroen/a-history-of-the-great-empires-of-eve-online/description>.

The editors of *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* wholeheartedly agree with this assessment. We are also convinced, that it is not limited to the world and community of *EVE Online* or the scholarly field of history but rather applies to the whole medium of digital games and all social and cultural sciences, including those focused on religion.

We are sure that our authors (and hopefully also our readers) will support this notion as meanwhile do other authors, publications³ and scientific journals, among them the newly founded journal *Gamevironments* (<http://www.gameenvironments.uni-bremen.de/>).

In their inaugural issue (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe & Zeiler 2014: 14ff), the editors of *Gamevironments* follow a very similar approach to the theoretical outlines we have propagated in our programmatic article (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014) in the first special issue “Religion in Digital Games. Multiperspective and Interdisciplinary Approaches”, namely the combination of actor-centered and game-immanent approaches towards game research. However, in their enthusiasm it seems they have forgotten to acknowledge our paper (however, they did reference the issue at least). But we are positive, the *Gameenvironment* editors and the scientific community are well aware of this lapse, so no hard feelings on our side.

All in all it’s an important impulse to have an increasing number of researchers looking at several aspects of religion in digital games – be it in *online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* or any other journal. And a great variety of new perspectives on the topic we proudly present in this brand new special issue “Religion in Digital Games Respawned”!

The first contribution ‘*Nothing is true, everything is permitted*’ was written by **Frank G. Bosman** and explores *The Portrayal of the Nizari Isma’ilis in the Assassin’s Creed Game Series*. Bosman takes an in depth look on the depiction of the eponymous ‘Assassins’ in Ubisoft’s action adventure game series and compares in great detail the narrative of the series with the historical ‘Assassins’ of the twelfth century.

Following up is **Roman Ohlendorf**’s *Playing with the legend – Ostension and Extra-Textual Production in Minecraft*. Taking both a game and folklore studies approach and drawing on the concepts of fan-production, ostension and remediation, Ohlendorf examines the origin of *Herobrine*, a legend created by the fans and players of Mojang’s enormously popular *Minecraft*.

Stefan Piasecki’s *Redemption through Annihilation?! Focuses on Game Designer’s Views on Religion, Culture and Society and Its Influence on Digital Games*. He presents the results of an explorative study amongst young game developers and addresses questions like “What do game

3 Among others the recently published ‘Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion’, edited by Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor and Suha Shakkour (2015) also contained several articles on the methodology of research of religion in games and virtual reality.

developers think and believe in political and religious matters, what role do they ascribe to themselves and their productions in it? How do developers comprehend their role?”

Next, *Praise Helix! - Christian Narrative in Twitch Plays: Pokémon* by **Jenny Saucerman** and **Dennis Ramirez** examines the influence of Christianity on the religious narrative which was created by the participants of *Twitch Plays: Pokémon* in 2014. Saucerman and Ramirez postulate that drawing from established christian religious symbols, imagery and structure created the basis for a “shared meaning and experience” for members of the community.

Last, we are happy to provide you with an interview with **Mark R Johnson**, game studies scholar at the University of York and creator of *Ultima Ratio Regum*, an ambitious but very successful game project aiming at creating “the most culturally, religiously and socially detailed procedural world ever generated”⁴. Mark also provided the title image for this issue which depicts a temple within *Ultima Ratio Regum*.⁵

We, the editors of *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* hope that you will enjoy this special issue on *Religion in Digital Games*. If you would like to submit a paper for a future issue of *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, feel free to send an abstract or full article to online.religion@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de. We will gladly consider the publication of further articles related to religion and video games⁶ as well as any other topic fitting the scope of the journal.

For further information please see <http://online.uni-hd.de>. If you want to be kept up to date on things like new releases and call for papers then you can follow us on *Facebook* (<https://www.facebook.com/onlinehjri/>) or subscribe to our *Newsletter* by sending an e-mail (no subject) to the following address: listserv@listserv.uni-heidelberg.de. The text must be as follows (case sensitive):

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4 See <http://www.ultimarioregum.co.uk/game/info/>.

5 See <http://www.ultimarioregum.co.uk/game/2015/03/14/procedural-altar-generation/>.

6 Please note that the articles for this issue were drawn from submissions for our regular issue which was released in December 2015. A full issue on religion in digital games is in planning and an official call for papers is already in the works. Of course you can send us your abstracts or full papers for review at any time!

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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.

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‘Nothing is true, everything is permitted’

The portrayal of the Nizari Isma'ilis in the Assassin's Creed game series

Frank G. Bosman

Abstract

Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed does a remarkable – though not flawless – job in presenting a well-balanced game narrative, which incorporates not only a historically justified representation of the Nizari Isma'ilis, but also implicitly corrects one of the most famous Western legends about the so-called 'Assassins'. In doing so, Ubisoft succeeds (at least partially) in discarding the stereotypical representation of Muslims/Arabs associated with Western orientalism, at the cost, however, of a multi-leveled but functionalistic view on the phenomenon of religion in the video game series with regards to the Assassin and Templar fractions.

Keywords

Assassin's creed, islam, assassins, knight templars, nizari isma'ilites

1 Introduction

Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs. (Disclaimer for the *Assassin's Creed* game series)

Before you can start to enjoy your copy of one of the *Assassin's Creed* video games (2007-2014), you first encounter a disclaimer. This stresses that producer Ubisoft has taken all possible precautions to ensure that the game does not violate the religious sensibilities of the public and of players in particular. It could be argued that the number of people who actually play these games is limited in comparison to the consumers of other media, but most of our media consumption is

'second-hand'. This means that the media texts surrounding games can influence even non-players (Gray, 2010).

Disclaimers are not uncommon in video games and movies. They are used not only to protect the producers from legal action by those who might take offence, but also to underline the moral scrutiny to which the producers have subjected the potentially controversial content of their product. Ironically, this kind of disclaimer typically tends to intensify the perception of the game's controversial character by explicitly directing attention to it.

The disclaimer for Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series points to a potential problem with its content. This problem is connected with the game narrative and its main protagonist. In *Assassin's Creed I* (2007) and major parts of *Assassin's Creed. Revelations* (2010) the gamer's avatar is the fictional Assassin Altaïr ibn La'Ahad (1165-1257), a Muslim Assassin from Syria who is caught up in the Third Crusade (1189-1192), which featured iconic figures such as Saladin and Richard the Lionheart.

Given that Altaïr is a Syrian Muslim and a member of the semi-historical 'Assassin Brotherhood', and that the game is set in one of the most terrible interreligious conflicts of Western history (between Muslims and Christians), Ubisoft was perhaps right to fear it might be controversial. Western culture has always been very susceptible to anthropological, ethnic, religious and Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their cultures. The famous Palestinian American literary theorist Edward Said (1935-2003) coined the term 'orientalism' to describe this phenomenon, claiming that 'Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists' (Said, 1978).

These negative stereotypes have also found their way into Western cinema. In his famous book *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001), Jack Shaheen has contended:

The Arab World – twenty two countries, the locus of several World religions, a multitude of ethnic and linguistic groups, and hundreds of years of history – is reduced to a few simplistic images. (...) In countless films Hollywood alleges (...): Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women.

The same can be said about Western video games, as Vit Sisler (2008) has argued. The already stereotypical representation of Muslims/Arabs in Western cinema is even more prevalent in video games, although this could be due to technical reasons. Non-player characters (NPCs) are often depicted by a limited number of reiterated textures, models and other visual signifiers. Sisler: 'Thus technological limitations intrinsically promote schematization, which leads to social stereotyping.' Sisler further differentiates between various game genres and their different levels of complexity of visual and narrative representation.

Adventure and role-playing games typically portray the Middle East in fantasy or quasi-historical manner, exploiting 'Orientalist' imagery, whereas action games and especially first-person shooters present the Middle East in a contemporary and decidedly conflictual framework, schematizing Arabs and Muslims as enemies.

In another article Sisler (2009) has explicitly discussed *Assassin's Creed*, stating that the sensitivity towards religion which the game play and game narrative show 'constitutes rather a pragmatic step aimed at easing acceptance of the product by global Muslim audiences.' Although Sisler is probably aware of the historical Islamic sect on which Ubisoft's Assassins have been modeled, he disqualifies the connection between history and game narrative by contending that it only serves the pragmatic goal of helping the player identify with Altaïr.

This discrepancy between the game narrative and the real, historical background of the Hashshashin Sect could actually serve a marketing purpose.

In this article I will argue differently. Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* does a remarkable – though not flawless – job in presenting a well-balanced game narrative, which incorporates not only a historically justified representation of the Nizari Isma'ilis, but also implicitly corrects one of the most famous Western legends about the so-called 'Assassins'. In doing so, Ubisoft succeeds (at least partially) in discarding the stereotypical representation of Muslims/Arabs associated with Western orientalism, at the cost, however, of a multi-leveled but functionalistic view on the phenomenon of religion in the video game series with regards to the Assassin and Templar fractions.

Some words about methodology. In this article I will regard video games as 'playable texts'. According to Georg Lauteren (2002) games can be regarded as such because it summarizes the two 'structural qualities' of computer games. Videogames are 'texts' because they are mediated sign systems, and are given meaning by their audience. This audience is not limited to the actual gamers and those who watch the gamers play their games, but also includes the larger culture itself of which the players and the watchers are part of. Lauteren:

The vast exchange of signs between the realm of popular culture and computer games, all serve as circumstantial evidence that there is indeed a lot of meaning produced from computer games, that they are *used* as cultural texts.

Videogames are not just 'texts', but are *playable* texts. Video games incorporated elements of contest; they can be won or lost. The 'pleasure' of gaming is derived from the uncertainty of the outcome of the game. As Lauteren points out:

To make this element of competition possible, computer games utilize an algorithmic rule system, that either governs a contest between two human players, or simply challenges the player through its implementation of algorithms to deduce and apply certain patterns of action.

Treating the video games in this article as playable texts, I will utilize a close reading of the primary sources of my research, the actual video game series *Assassin's Creed*, as well as secondary sources, material provided by critics and scholars treating the same game series. The close reading of the video game series is done by playing the games themselves (multiple times), including all possible (side) missions/quests. This 'Game-Immanent Approach' is further explained by Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki (2015, 68-71).

2 The First Assassin's Creed series

The Assassin's Creed series (2007-2014) is a series of single-player, third-person, sandbox, single-ending stealth games with puzzle and acrobatic elements, that is set in a historical world and can be played on multiple platforms.¹ In addition to the two main games featuring Altaïr – *Assassin's Creed* (2007) and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (2010) – Ubisoft has also published a number of other games in which he is the protagonist, along with a novel and a comic book.²

The first game of the *Assassin's Creed* series has two intertwined plotlines: the story of Altaïr, set during the Third Crusade, and the so-called 'Desmond Saga', which takes place in our own time. The contemporary plotline revolves around Desmond Miles, a 25-year-old bartender, who is kidnapped by a sinister multinational organization called Abstergo, which is later discovered to be a modern-day front for the Order of the Knights Templar. Abstergo (Latin for 'I cleanse') has developed a device called the *Animus* (Latin for 'spirit' or 'soul'), which allows the user to 'tap' into his or her ancestral DNA, resulting in the ability to 'relive' the lives of his or her ancestors.

Abstergo/the Templars have chosen Desmond as a test subject, because he is a descendant of a twelfth-century Assassin called Altaïr; this is the second plotline. Through Desmond and Altaïr, the Templars hope to find an ancient secret artifact which will allow them to attain world domination. Altaïr's part of the game (approximately 90 percent of the actual game playing time) is

1 For an explanation of the games' genre, see: Bosman (2014).

2 The following media provide information about the Altaïr storyline (given in order of narrative chronology): *Assassin's Creed: Altaïr's Chronicles* (game, NDS, 2008), *Assassin's Creed* (game, multiple platforms, 2007), *Assassin's Creed: The Secret Crusade* (novel, 2011), *Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines* (game, PSP, 2009), *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (game, multiple platforms, 2010) and *Assassin's Creed: Memories* (rpg trading card game, 2014). For a detailed account of the individual games and books, see: Veugen (2011).

set during the Third Crusade in 1191. The game's main locations are the Assassins' stronghold in Masyaf (Syria) and the cities of Jerusalem, Damascus and Acre.

Ubisoft, the creator of the *Assassin's Creed* series, has tried to recreate the medieval atmosphere and architecture of these cities as closely as possible. Thus Jade Raymond, producer of *Assassin's Creed*, has explained:

From the start we worked with one historian, who dug up all this very hard to find reference material, like plans of all the cities, the layout of the land at the time, how people dressed, types of weapons that were available, as much info we could find about the actual assassins as possible. (Quoted in Veugen, 2014a)

The historical accuracy of the cities featured in *Assassin's Creed* has been praised by many critics. Commenting on the overall game series, Connie Veugen (2014b) has remarked:

The dedication to historical accuracy is evident from the fact that the *Assassin's Creed* design teams consist not only of writers and designers; they also have a team historian who is an expert on the period and historical events being depicted.

Jerusalem and Damascus are under Muslim rule, so the civilians and soldiers either speak Arabic or English with an Arabic accent. The guards in these cities wear turbans and other traditional garments. In Acre, which was occupied by Christian warriors at that time, the language is English with a British accent, while the players can overhear other Templars or Knights Hospitaller speak English with French or German accents, reflecting their origins. The guards in Acre wear Crusader outfits. In 2008 Seif El-Nasr and her team (hailing from various cultural and religious backgrounds) presented an extensive analysis of the recreation of the old cities in *Assassin's Creed*, emphasizing the accuracy of the building style and local atmosphere.

The only real objection which critics have raised to the *Assassin's Creed* series was the American accent of Altaïr's voice actor. Altaïr's face was modeled on the singer and model Francisco Randez, due to his 'Mediterranean features', while Philip Shabaz (an American of Arab-Iranian descent) provided Altaïr's voice. While Altaïr occasionally speaks Arabic, most of the time he speaks English with an American accent. Developer Jade Raymond defended this choice by arguing that the player hears Altaïr's voice through the 'living memories' of Desmond (quoted in Veugen 2014a). In the subsequent novel *Assassin's Creed: The Secret Crusade* (2011), it is made clear that Altaïr's mother was English and that she died in childbirth).

In addition to the accent, Altaïr's gestural patterns were also criticized for being inconsistent with those of a person of Arab descent. Although the average Western player is unlikely to notice

this inconsistency, people who are familiar with subtle non-verbal conversational gestures in the Middle East did report some highly improbable behavior. Altaïr's behavior is contrasted with that of Malik, another Assassin, whose mannerism and motions are perfectly in tune with local customs. Together with the accent, this has led critics to accuse Ubisoft of having created an all-American super hero in the superficial disguise of an Arab. The reasons for Altaïr's 'strange' behavior, however, are technical in nature. Whereas other characters have been completely motion captured, Altaïr is made up of individual motions so he can convincingly interact with every possible object and surface in the game. Of course there are many cutscenes which Altaïr could have handled in more authentic fashion, but this would have ruined the continuity of the game protagonist in the eyes of the gamers (Veugen, 2014a).

In the next sections, however, I will move beyond these superficial criticisms. In order to compare the narrative of the first *Assassin's Creed* series with the historical 'Assassins' of the twelfth century and the Western legends surrounding them, it is necessary to give a short history of the Nizari Isma'ilis and a more detailed outline of the Altaïr storyline.

3 The Nizari Isma'ilis

The roots of the Nizari Isma'ilis, known in Western legend as the 'Assassins', can be traced back to the beginnings of Islam.³ When the prophet Muhammad died in Medina (632), he was succeeded by the four so-called 'Rightly Guided' (*rashidun*) caliphs: Abu Bakr (+634), Umar (644), Uthman (656) and eventually Ali (+661), Muhammad's nephew and son-in-law. However, Ali's authority was challenged by the Syrian governor Mu'awiya (+680). After Ali's murder, Mu'awiya seized power and founded the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750). But not all Muslims accepted Mu'awiya's authority, some arguing that the Prophet's successor should come from Ali's family. Gradually these Muslims came to be known as the *Shi'at Ali* ('the party of Ali'), or Shiites.

The figure of the imam is paramount for Shia Islam. He is the sole successor of Muhammad, and therefore shares in the same spiritual power. This fixation on Ali's bloodline has caused numerous smaller and bigger schisms within the Shia, two of which are important for the history of the Nizari Isma'ilis. When Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Baqir died in 765, the *imamiyya* ('the followers of the imam') split into two different groups because of a dispute over his succession: the majority supported Musa ibn Ja'far al Sadiq (+799) and developed into *Athna'ashariyyah* (or Twelver) Shia, while a minority backed Isma'il ibn Ja'far (+755), even though Ja'far's son apparently died before his father. Isma'il's followers, designated as Isma'ilis, believe that the true

3 This paragraph is based on: Bartlett (2001), Burman (1987), Daftary (1998, 1994), Lewis (1967) and Mirza (1997).

imam did not die, but went into ‘hiding’. Due to this concept of ‘hiding’, the nature and identity of the true imam is not known by all the faithful (or by none at all). But he nevertheless rules his people from his secret hiding place. This guarantees a continuous line of succession between Ali and a particular imam, even in times of crisis and chaos when it seems that there is no official imam who is in charge.

The second schism took place within the Isma’ili sect upon the death of Imam Tamim Ma’add al-Mustansir bi-Ilah (+1094). The majority chose the side of Tamim’s younger son al-Musta’li bi-Ilah (+1101), while a minority gave allegiance to his elder brother Nizar al-Mustansir (+1095). During Nizar’s rule, though he went ‘into hiding’ in the same year the schism took place, the Nizari Isma’ilis left the Shia Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171), which had been founded by the Isma’ili Imam Muhammad ‘Abdul-lah al-Mahdi (+934). From 1095 the Nizari Isma’ilis developed into the ‘Assassins’ of Persia and notably Syria.

The Nizari Isma’ilis were a small sect within Shia, which was itself a small minority within Sunni-dominated Islam. Constantly on the run from other Islamic rulers, but nevertheless zealous and with a strong missionary outlook, the Nizaris developed a unique strategy which proved to be very helpful in their survival, but also gave rise to the legends that were to surround them throughout their history. In the twelfth century the Nizaris *da’is* (‘missionaries’) captured numerous mountain forts in Persia and Syria, notably the iconic forts of Alamut and Masyaf. These impenetrable forts were places of refuge where the *da’is* could retreat from the outside world in case of danger, while the *fida’is* (‘those who sacrifice themselves’) methodically assassinated anyone who stood in the way of their freedom or independence. Within the forts the Nizaris aspired to be self-sufficient in terms of water and food supplies. They built wells and planted large orchards full of fruit trees.

The history and legends of the Nizari Isma’ilis are closely connected to two legendary leaders: the *hujjas* (chief representatives of the hidden imams) Hassan-i-Sabbah (1050s-1124) of Alamut (approximately 100 kilometers from present-day Tehran) and Rashid ad-Din Sinan (1132/5-1192) of Masyaf (Western Syria). Sabbah was born of Twelver parents but was converted by a local *da’i* just before 1072. In 1088 Sabbah, thoroughly trained as a Nizari, seized Alamut by infiltrating the castle and winning the majority of the inhabitants over to his interpretation of Islam. Until his death, Sabbah sent out *da’is* to occupy other mountain fortresses in Persia, resulting in the capture of two dozen interlinked forts in the region.

While the Nizari Isma’ilis began their expansion into Syrian territory in 1103 with the establishment of a base in Aleppo, they seized their most famous fort, Masyaf, in 1140. Closely connected to Masyaf and its legends is the reign of Rashid ad-Din Sinan (1162-1192/3). Caught between the slowly retreating Crusader armies of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem (1099-1291) and

the advancing power and influence of the Arab General Saladin (1137/8-1193) in the whole region, Sinan succeeded in establishing more freedom, independence and influence than would have seemed possible with an army as small as the one he commanded.

The autonomous state of the Nizari Isma'ilis did not last long. In 1256 the fortress of Alamut was captured by the Mongol army. The Syrian Nizaris survived for some time, however, because of their alliance with the Mamelukes of Sultan Baybars (1233-1277), who successfully halted the Mongol invasion in 1260 at the battle of Ain Jalut. But the Nizaris were increasingly incorporated into the Mameluke state, while Baybars himself acted as chief *da'i*. This marked the ending of the Nizari Isma'ilis as an autonomous power, although they have survived as a community to the present day and are currently under the rule of Prince Karim Al Hussaini, Aga Khan IV (* 1936).

4 The story of Altaïr ibn La'Ahad

The story of Altaïr, the protagonist of the first *Assassin's Creed* game, leans heavily on the history of the Nizaris. Altaïr's story begins in 1165, when he is born to his Nizari father Umar ibn La'Ahad and his Christian mother Maud, who died in childbirth. His name, Altaïr ibn La'Ahad means 'the bird, son of no one' in English, and is a reference to his in-game ability to distinguish between friend and foe (called 'eagle vision'), his ability to climb to vantage points in cities (called 'eagle points') and to one of the possible explanations of the word 'Alamut', i.e. as 'Eagle's Nest' (El-Nasr, 2008).

His father Umar is executed during Saladin's historical first siege of Masyaf in 1176 by Saladin. According to the game narrative, Umar is sent to Saladin's tent in order to bring the general a note of warning. When someone sees him, Umar succeeds in escaping, but not without killing a nobleman in the process. Saladin and Sinan then manage to reach a kind of truce on the condition that Umar is executed. This part of the *Assassin's Creed* story conflates a number of separate historical events: two failed assassination attempts on Saladin, one in 1175 and another in 1176, including 'collateral damage', and Saladin's siege of Masyaf, including the subsequent truce between Sinan and Saladin, the reasons for which are still unclear (Burman, 1987, p. 117) According to some reports Saladin did actually raise the siege at Masyaf because an assassin left a note in his tent without being noticed (Daftary, 1994).

Sinan, referred to in the game only by his historical nickname of *Al Muallim* ('the mentor'), favors the young Altaïr and quickly promotes him to the ranks of the Assassins. However, Altaïr's fate changes dramatically in 1191. The then 26-year-old warrior fails miserably in his attempt to acquire an ancient artifact from the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, and is humiliated by the grand

master of the Templars, Robert de Sablé, who actually held this position from 1191 to 1193. Jerusalem had been occupied by the Crusaders since 1099 when the famous Godfrey of Bouillon (1060-1100) took the city during the First Crusade.

Having returned to Sinan, Altaïr is punished by *Al Mualim* for his failure (which caused the death of one of his brothers and the mutilation of another) and stripped of his rank. Altaïr is given the chance of rehabilitating himself by taking down nine Templar enemies of the Brotherhood, both Muslims and Christians, some of whom are historical figures, such as Garnier de Nablus (+1192), the tenth grand master of the Knights Hospitaller, William V of Montferrat (+1191), lieutenant of Richard the Lionheart, 'Master' Sibrand (+ 1192), first grand master of the Teutonic Knights, and ultimately Robert de Sablé (+1193), who has already been mentioned.

Ubisoft apparently chose these victims because they actually died in the years 1191-93, fitting them nicely into the game narrative as victims of assassinations by Altaïr himself. According to Burman (1987, p. 100), however, only ten assassinations were carried out by the Nizaris in the period 1103-1213 (not including the two failed attempts on Saladin), with only three of the victims Christians. Daftary (1994, p. 94) even claims that 'fewer than five Frankish personalities may have actually been killed by the *fidai's* during the entire period of the Crusaders' presence in Outremer.' From a historical point of view none of Altaïr's assassinations can be linked to the Nizaris. William's son, Conrad of Montferrat was killed in 1292 by two murderers disguised as Christian monks. This murder was attributed to Sinan's Nizaris, but all murders in that period were likely to be attributed to the famous Assassins. Some historical sources even claim that Richard the Lionheart or Saladin himself were the instigators of Conrad's murder (Daftary, 1998, p. 144).

During the game Altaïr discovers that the nine victims – both Christians and Muslims – are not deliberately prolonging the war, as Sinan claims they are, but are working towards peace, although in a very ambiguous way. Veugen (2014a) points out that the two warring factions in *Assassin's Creed* are not Muslims and Christians, but Templars (recruited from both faiths) and Assassins (predominantly Muslims), thus defying the Crusader cliché.⁴

Eventually Altaïr finds out that *Al Mualim* himself is also a Templar, and is trying to obtain the ancient artifact for himself, misleading both Templars and Assassins. After killing Sinan, Altaïr takes over the leadership of the brotherhood, dedicating his life to reforming it and to studying the mysterious artifact, called 'a piece of Eden'. At the end of his live, fearing the invasion of the Mongol hordes, he retreats to a secret vault hidden in the evacuated Masyaf castle, where he dies soon afterwards.

4 There are two exceptions to this rule. Altaïr's mother (Maud) and wife (Maria Thorpe, ex-Templar) are both Christians.

The Altaïr of Ubisoft seems to resemble the historical Nizaris very closely, although some historical elements, names and dates have been adjusted to fit the game narrative. Most importantly, however, Ubisoft has ensured that the game narrative would not become one-dimensional. In *Assassin's Creed*, Altaïr and the NPCs are not divided into 'good guys' and 'bad guys' along ethnical or religious lines. The Muslims of *Assassin's Creed* by no means fit the stereotypes Shaheen and Sisler have problematized. In the next paragraph I will look more closely to the legends surrounding the Assassins, and to the way in which *Assassin's Creed* deals with them, so as to be able to consider more closely the imagery provided by the game series concerning stereotypes of Arabs/Muslims.

5 The Assassin Legends

The Assassins have a very distinct image in Western culture, i.e. as professional, secretive murderers. The English and French word 'assassins' is thought to have derived from this sect. Cultural examples are: *Alamut* (Vladimir Bartol, 1938), *The Walking Drums* (Louis L'Amour, 1984), *The List of Seven* (Mark Frost, 1993), *The Children of the Grail* (Peter Berlings, 1991-2004) and *Prayers for the Assassins* (Robert Ferrigno, 2006). Dan Brown gives a very informative but highly negative and stereotypical description in *Angels and Demons* (2000):

The notorious Muslim assassin ('his people did not celebrate Christmas') has a voice 'metallic and cold, laced with arrogance (...) [and an] accent. Middle Eastern, perhaps?' He has a well-earned reputation for secretiveness and deadliness. 'He [is] a powerful man. Dark and potent. Deceptively agile'. And he has an assassin pedigree of which he is very proud. His ancestors 'were renowned not only for their brutal killings, but also for celebrating their slayings by plunging themselves into drug-induced stupors. Their drug of choice was a potent intoxicant they called hashish', hence the name Hassissin: 'the followers of hashish'. (Compilation by Dunn and Bubeck, 2006, p. 156)

This very negative imagery of the Nizaris is based on reports of Crusader chroniclers such as John Burchard of Strasbourg (+ after 1194), Jacques de Vitry (+ 1240) and Arnold of Lübeck (+ 1211/14). In his report, Burchard, traveling through Syria as the ambassador of the Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (1122-1190) at Saladin's court, writes about a group 'Heyssessini', who terrorized both Muslim and Christian leaders by assassinating their targets in a most spectacular way. Burchard speaks about a 'prince' in an impenetrable mountain fort, who is training peasants' children to become the perfect Assassins. As a reward for their unconditional obedience to him, this prince promises them access to 'paradise'. Burchard also writes that the Assassins knew no law,

consumed pork (forbidden to Muslims) and slept with all women, including their mothers and sisters.

Jacques de Vitry, bishop of Acre, follows Burchard's report, but adds some interesting details. According to Jacques, the Assassins' *senex* (from *sheik*, 'old man'; that is Sinan) promised his pupils that they would go to paradise after they died (*in paradise post mortem*). Those who lost their lives while carrying out a mission were revered as saints and martyrs. Arnold von Lübeck adds another important detail to the already growing corpus of legends about the Nizaris. According to him the 'Old Man' inducted his candidate-Assassins by giving them a certain potion, which allowed them to experience the heavenly bliss promised to them for eternity upon faithful completion of their (suicidal) mission. Both Burchard and Jacques de Vitry claim that the Assassins were trained in all kinds of martial arts, philosophy, ethics, history and a number of different languages.

Arnold von Lübeck also added the famous 'leap of faith' or 'death leap' element to the Assassins legend. The loyalty of the Nizaris to their leader was so great that they were prepared to throw themselves from walls and cliffs to meet a certain death if he so commanded. William of Tyre (1130-1185) includes an interesting anecdote in his chronicle. In 1194 Henry II of Champagne (1166-1197), successor of the Conrad of Montferrat who was allegedly killed by the Assassins, arrived at Masyaf for a meeting with Sinan. To demonstrate his power, Sinan ordered his devotees to throw themselves off the fortress walls. This made such an impression on Henry that he left the Assassins unharmed.

Eventually it was the famous Marco Polo (1254-1324) who gave the Assassins legend its modern form (as it can be found for instance in *Angels and Demons*). Marco Polo visited the remnants of the Persian Nizaris' forts on his travels and wrote a very lively report on the Assassins' 'procedures'. Casually mixing up the Syrian and Persian Nizari groups, he claimed that the Old Man had beautiful gardens in his mountain fort, carefully shielded from the outside world and populated by the most beautiful maidens. After the Old Man had chosen his candidates for an Assassin mission, he would drug them with opium. Deeply asleep the candidates would be brought to this secret garden where they could indulge in all carnal pleasures upon awakening. The happy candidates thought they had reached paradise. But after a number of days, Sinan would let them take the opium again and would bring them back to the public part of his castle. When the candidates awoke, they begged the Old Man to let them go back to paradise. The Old Man then promised them to this upon completion of his assassination mission.

Daftary (1994) distinguishes five different dimensions in the Western legends of the Nizari Isma'ilis: the training legend, the paradise legend, the libertinism legend, the leap of faith legend and the opium legend. In the first *Assassin's Creed* games, all these legendary elements have been more or less interwoven into the game narrative, mostly in a critical manner. The game designers

even hint at Marco Polo himself. When Altaïr builds a huge library in Masyaf, he sends his son Darim to invite Niccolò and Maffeo Polo to Masyaf. When they arrive, Altaïr tells Niccolò stories about his life, which Niccolò later passes on to his son, Marco, in the form of a journal.

Training. Altaïr and his fellow-Assassins are rigorously trained in all kinds of military tactics and fighting skills, but no other training is provided. As Daftary (1994, p. 98) points out, ‘Burchard’s detailed account on recruitment and training of the *fiida*’s has to be taken as an imaginative and exaggerated construction based on rumors.’

Paradise. The legend of the promise of paradise is discussed in the game narrative, but in a very subtle way. In *Assassin’s Creed*, Al Mualim cries to Robert de Sable who is besieging Masyaf: ‘My men do not fear death Robert, they welcome it and the rewards it brings.’ As soon as Altaïr takes over leadership of the brotherhood from *Al Mualim*, he abandons the ritual of ‘the cutting off of the finger’. The amputation of the Assassins’ middle finger was necessary to allow the ‘hidden blade’ (a specially concealed weapon) to function, and it was also used as an initiation ritual. No historical evidence for this practice has been found. Intriguingly, Altaïr removes the necessity for cutting off fingers by redesigning the hidden blade. As a justification, he mentions that this practice was ‘a false promise of paradise’, a well-hidden reference to the paradise legend found in the Crusader chronicles.

Leap of faith. The leap of faith is one of the key characteristics of the *Assassin’s Creed* game play. In every major installment of the series, the player has to control his avatar to climb high buildings, towers, treetops or rock formations in order to get a good indication of the strategic situation in a specific game location. These locations are referred to as ‘eagle points’. Every time Altaïr has scaled an eagle point, he can jump down unto a pile of straw without sustaining any injuries. The sound of an eagle is heard while he jumps.

This is a clear reference to the corresponding Assassin legend, but with a distinctive twist. The chroniclers were convinced that the *fiida*’s were actually jumping to their deaths on the Old Man’s orders, but modern research has suggested that these ‘leaps of faith’ were staged in order to intimidate enemies (Daftary 1994). Leopold Hellmuth (1988) has suggested that the story derives from a late version of the Alexander romance, in which Alexander intimidated envoys of the Jews, whose country he was about to invade, by ordering some of his soldiers to jump into a ravine. In *Assassin’s Creed* the leaps are clearly also staged. At the beginning of *Assassin’s Creed*, Altaïr has to perform such a leap in order to convince the attacking Templars commanded by Robert de Sablé to retreat from Masyaf. Before the three assassins, of which Altaïr is one, jump down, Al Mualim cries out: ‘Show these good knights what it is to have no fear. Go to God.’

Use of intoxicating drugs. The use of drugs is one of the most notorious myths surrounding the Nizaris. As Daftary has pointed out (1994), it is almost impossible to believe that the *fiida*’s

were ‘high’ during their missions, which mostly required very long periods of waiting and observation before the Assassins struck with deadly precision. The reason for the association with drug use can probably be found in Sunni literature on the Nizaris. Apart from more or less neutral terms such as *Isma’iliyya* and *Nizariyya*, the Sunni authors also used more negative designations such as like *malahida* (‘heretics’), *batiniyya* (loosely translated as ‘esoterics’) and even *hashishiyya* (‘hash eaters’). *Hashish* is Arabic for cannabis, which was used intensively in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in many countries in the Middle East, especially among the lower classes. *Hashishiyya* is therefore probably not a reference to the actual use of intoxicating drugs, but a more general term to denote ‘low-class rabble’.

It was in the abusive senses of ‘low-class rabble’ and ‘irreligious social outcasts’ that the term *hashishiyya* seems to have been used metaphorically in reference to the Nizari Isma’ilis during the 12th and 13th centuries, and not because the Nizaris or their *fida’is* secretly used hashish in a regular manner, which in any event would not have been public knowledge. (Daftary, 1994, p. 92)

There is no indication in *Assassin’s Creed* that the Nizaris used drugs, although there are two subtle references to the legend. When *Al Mualim* wants to punish Altaïr for disobeying his orders, he stabs him in the abdomen with a knife. Sinan calls this ‘the sleep of death’, from which Altaïr will only awaken after an indefinite amount of time. This mirrors the effect of the ‘opium’ mentioned by Marco Polo and other chroniclers. In addition there is another reference to the mind-manipulating powers which the Old Man supposedly possesses over his drugged devotees. The ancient artifact which Altaïr has to steal from the Templars (but which is obtained by *Al Mualim* himself) gives its owner the power to control the minds of the people.

6 The 5th legend: ‘taqiyya’ and ‘qiyama’

The last Nizari legend contained in the Christian chronicles is the accusation of libertine behavior. The accusations Burchard made that the Assassins worshiped Sinan as their God (instead of Allah), consumed pork and gave themselves over to all kinds of debauched sexual activities are possibly connected to two (misinterpreted) theological concepts of the Nizari Isma’ilis: *taqiyya* and *qiyama*.

Taqiyya is a broader Shia principle of precautionary dissimulation of one’s true religious beliefs in the face of danger. (Daftary, 1994, p. 6) This concept made it possible for the Nizari Isma’ilis to appear to change sides quickly, as they actually did in their fluctuating alliances with both Christian and Muslims rulers. For their Muslim critics and for the Christian chroniclers this concept led to all kinds of misunderstandings about the true content of Nizari faith and practices.

Imam Hasan II (reign 1162-1166) initiated a religious revolution in the Nizari communities of Persia and Syria. In 1164, in the presence of representatives from numerous Nizari territories, Hasan proclaimed the *qiyama* ('resurrection'). This eschatological concept of the 'Last Days' in which all men would be judged by God, was interpreted by Hasan in a spiritual way, according to the Isma'ili method of *ta'wil* (esoteric interpretation). According to Daftary, the *qiyama* was

...essentially held to mean the manifestation of the unveiled truth in the person of the Nizari imam. Only the Nizaris were now capable of comprehending spiritual reality, the immutable truths hidden behind all religious laws and, as such, Paradise was made real for them in this world. (Daftary, 1994, p. 41)

This proclamation dispensed Nizaris from the obligation to observe the ritualistic ('external') commandments formulated in the Qur'an, such as praying and fasting. The paradise and libertinism legends of the Christian chronicles are likely to have been distorted echoes of this concept of *qiyama*. The Nizaris' 'paradise', however, was a 'heaven brought to earth' rather than a traceable *locus* where devotees could experience all kinds of physical pleasure. Burchard's view of the Islamic paradise, for example, was based on a very 'carnal' interpretation of the concept of 'paradise' in the Qur'an (Daftary, 1994, p. 99). Not even all the Nizaris themselves seem to have fully understood the content of this doctrine. Thus Muslim sources relate that Sinan had to deal personally with a group of Syrian Nizaris who had misunderstood the *qiyama*, and were indulging in libertine practices (*idem*). Nevertheless the Nizaris annually celebrated the proclamation of the *qiyama* with great festivities (Mirza, 1997, p. 81).

The Nizari doctrines of *taqiyya* and especially *qiyama* have been taken up in an interesting way in the *Assassin's Creed* game narrative, namely in the *Assassin's Creed* itself. The Creed emphasizes three simple moral tenets that focus on ensuring a successful mission, on achieving mastery of emotions and on the safety of the brotherhood:

1. Stay your blade from the flesh of an innocent.
2. Hide in plain sight.
3. Never compromise the brotherhood.

These tenets cannot actually be found in the historical documents of the Nizaris, but have been derived from the novel *Alamut* (1938). In all of the installments of the game series these three tenets are summarized by the so-called 'Maxim': 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted'. This maxim seems to be a far cry from the *taqiyya* and *qiyama* doctrines of the historical Nizaris. In *Assassin's Creed II*, protagonist Ezio Auditore da Firenze explains that the maxim is not a doctrine to be followed, but merely a conclusion reached from observing the world.

To say that nothing is true, is to realize that the foundations of society are fragile, and that we must be the shepherds of our own civilization. To say that everything is permitted, is to understand that we are the architects of our actions, and that we must live with their consequences, whether glorious or tragic.

Altaïr himself, after taking control of the Assassin brotherhood, develops a critical view of his own creed, calling it ‘the three ironies’:

1. The Assassins seek to promote peace, but commit murder.
2. The Assassins seek to open the minds of men, but require obedience to rules.
3. The Assassins seek to reveal the danger of blind faith, yet practice it themselves.

Assassin's Creed does not feature libertine Nizaris as the old chronicles did, but transform the accusation of libertinism into a kind of postmodern liberalism, which allows a modern audience to embrace the Assassins as medieval champions of individual freedom and autonomy. The defining point of difference between Templars and Assassins in the *Assassin's Creed* series is that the former want to establish world peace by forcing order and discipline onto society, while the latter accept that chaos and anarchy are necessary to guarantee individual freedom and liberty.

Although the games [sic] takes place within a historical context which draws attention to the 'Occident' versus the 'Orient', the writers of the story circumvent that altogether by making the main character, an extension of the player, stand for something outside of that binary: freedom. (Mesri)

7 Religion in ‘Assassin’s Creed’

The Nizari concepts of *taqiyya* and *qiyama* do have a certain place within the game narrative of *Assassin's Creed*, but in the games they do not function on a theological level.⁵ In the *Assassin's Creed* game series revolving around Altaïr religion has a rather difficult and differentiated position. There are three different kind of levels on which religion is addressed in *Assassin's Creed*: on the level of Altaïr's story, on the level of Desmond's story and on the level of the meta narrative of the game series itself.

The first level of ‘religion’ in *Assassin's Creed* is used in the context of the historical setting of the game series. Using the historical background of the Third Crusade, Ubisoft cannot avoid utilizing the institutionalized religions of the two fighting fractions: Islam for the Assassins/Nizaris

5 I would like to thank Tobias Knoll for his thoughts on the subject of religion in the *Assassin's Creed* game series.

and Christianity for the Crusaders/Templars. If Ubisoft would make a game set in the middle ages and even during the Third Crusade, the omission of religion altogether would make the setting implausible (to say the least). Jade Raymond has remarked on the topic of religion in *Assassin's Creed*:

Knowing that our subject is controversial by nature we have dealt with religion as a purely historical background element. We cannot completely avoid religion because it was the impetus for the war. We have, however, worked with cultural experts throughout production to make sure that we treat sensitive topics with respect. As the Saracens and Crusaders battle one another for control — the Assassins are working to find a way to end the hostilities. They see the war as pointless. There is no reason Crusaders and Saracens should not co-exist in peace. The Assassins are not allied with either side of the conflict, nor are they driven by a desire for profit or power. In *Assassin's Creed*, Crusaders (and the Saracens) are not the Assassins' true enemy. War is — as are those who exploit it. (Quoted in El-Nasr, 2008, p. 13)

At this level, (institutionalized) religion is used by Ubisoft as an integral element of the historical setting, but also as a source of conflict (between Muslims and Christians) and as a tool of power. It is however *not* used as a signifier or identity marker for stereotyping the Muslim or Christian characters of the game's narrative. The nuance of Ubisoft's game narrative is exactly, as I have pointed out earlier in this article, that religion is not the prime reason for the ongoing conflict between Assassins and Templars. The Muslim and Christian identity of the Assassins and Templars is not set in stone (some Assassins are Christian, and visa versa), and is presented as more or less coincidental. Ubisoft does not describe the Assassins as 'the bad/good guys', nor as Muslims per se; nor the Templars as 'good/bad guys' or as Christians per se.

The second level on which religion has its place in the game narrative of *Assassin's Creed* is as seen through the eyes of Altaïr/Desmond, that is, the player. Because of the complex game narrative of *Assassin's Creed*, three epistemological levels can be differentiated: a) the player, who controls (b) Desmond, who is reliving the memory of (c) Altaïr. The view on religion by (or through) this 'trinity' is more postmodern. Altaïr is skeptical about the creed of the Assassin brotherhood, claiming it is not a (religious) doctrine, but more a way of live. To quote Jade Raymond again:

[Altaïr] does not have any religious beliefs. He is more of a spiritual guy. And I think that is also your role in the game, you are not taking sides. As an Assassin, you are a third party. And the Third Crusade is really this feuding for power with all of these guys on both sides of the fence and you are on the outside trying to stop the Third Crusade. (Quoted in Veugen, 2014a, p. 12)

Altaïr is no Muslim, he is not religious, as Raymond makes perfectly clear. The same applies to Desmond who has no pronounced faith either. This almost ‘atheistic’ or ‘agnostic’ characteristic - based on the player perspective - of Altaïr/Desmond makes it possible for players of any religious denomination to play and enjoy the game narrative, because it takes no sides. The same principle that helped Ubisoft to overcome the Hollywood stereotype of Arabs/Muslims, helps the game company to attain the largest group of potential players.

The third level on which religion is used in the *Assassin's Creed* game narrative, is the level of the meta narrative of the game series. While the meta narrative of the *Assassin's Creed* series is revealed in *Assassin's Creed III* (no longer featuring Altaïr, but another ancestor of Desmond), numerous hints are given in the Altaïr-games. The ‘apples of Eden’ (also called ‘pieces of Eden’), which are the ‘treasure’ Altaïr is trying to find (and through him and Desmond both the Assassins and the Templars), are a reference to the ‘forbidden fruit’ of the Biblical garden of Eden. According to the book of Genesis, the first men – Adam and Eve – were flung out of paradise by God because they transgressed on of his prohibitions, not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

In the *Assassin's Creed* series up to number 3 a meta narrative unfolds itself about the history of the earth. Eventually Desmonds finds out that mankind was made as a slave race by almost omnipotent beings from space, called ‘Those Who Came Before’. Due to cosmic disaster, mankind freed themselves from slavery by stealing powerful technology from these super beings: the Apples of Eden. When Desmond is wondering about the greatness and incomprehensibility of Those Who Came Before, Desmond’s father says:

‘We saw the Nephilim there. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.’ [Numbers 13:33] Imagine trying to explain all of this to a two-year-old. To a grasshopper. When they said the will of the gods was unknowable - they meant it. Literally.

Assassin's Creed links the First Civilization to the mythological *Nephilim* of Numbers 13:33 and the mythical *Elohim* of Genesis 6:1-5. These ‘supermen’ were not real gods, but an advanced human race which created mankind in its own image for the purposes of slave labor.

On this third level, Ubisoft’s meta narrative is highly critical on the phenomenon of (institutionalized) religion. Religion is mainly a man-made, immanent tool of power for the alien super race in order to maintain control over their creatures even when their own society has collapsed by cosmic disaster. There is no supernatural truth behind (institutionalized) religion, nor any metaphysical basis.

8 Conclusions

I have attempted to argue in this article that Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* game series does an excellent job in presenting a balanced narrative about the historical Nizari Isma'ilis during the Third Crusade. Ubisoft has refrained from using the stereotypical Hollywood cliché about 'the' Arab/Muslim – the stereotyping that was problematized by Said, Shaheen and Sisler. It has done so by eschewing one-dimensional identifications of ethnicity and religion, and by deliberately constructing a more complex moral framework for both Templars and Assassins. The in-game Templars are not identified exclusively with the Christians, nor are the Assassins with the Arabs. And while the game narrative sometimes seems to suggest that the moral high ground belongs to the Assassins, the Templars also are given more than enough narrative space to make the player consider the justice of their motives.

Assassin's Creed refuses to use the stereotyped division between good guys and bad guys based on ethnical or religious divisions. Altaïr and the Assassins, as well as most of the Templars, are multilayered personalities who are not reduced to cultural clichés. And while the developers sometimes mix up places, names and dates to match Altaïr's game narrative, the broader historical context is maintained in a mature fashion, honoring the rich and complex history of the Nizari Isma'ilis in Syria at that time.

In doing so, *Assassin's Creed* debunks almost all of the traditional Assassin legends, thus adding to a more realistic and historically viable view of the Nizari Isma'ilis. There are hints of the traditional legends 'invented' by the Christian chroniclers of the Third Crusade and afterwards – paradise, leap of faith, use of intoxicants, training - , but these are corrected to reflect the insights of modern research on their historical antecedents: Altaïr who forbids the amputation of fingers because it is a 'false' promise of paradise, the staging of the death leap to impress enemies, and the substitution of alleged use of drugs by the mind-controlling abilities of a power-hungry tyrant.

However, the depiction of Rashid – *Al Mualim* – Sinan as the power-hungry tyrant is far removed from the historical figure and the nature of the actual obedience which the *fidai's* gave their leader. The game narrative is not friendly to Sinan, but Sinan being one of the most revered figures in Nizari history, his evilness is not reduced to the fact that he 'belongs' to the Islamic faith or that he is of Arab ethnicity.

Religion, especially in its institutionalized form, is handled differently by Ubisoft. I have differentiated three levels on which religion has its role in the game narrative of *Assassin's Creed*. On the first level, religion is used in the historical context of the Third Crusade in which the game narrative takes place. On this level religion – may it be Islam or Christianity – is not used as a

signifier or identity marker. And this last part is exactly the reason Ubisoft succeeded in overcoming racial and ethnical stereotyping.

On a second level, the level of Altaïr/Desmond/the player, religion is treated in a more atheistic, agnostic or even skeptical fashion. Altaïr seems to criticize the traditional ways of the Assassin Brotherhood when he is growing older. Desmond has no religious affinities at all, or at least, the game makes no comment on this. This broadens the opportunities for players from different religious, ethnical and cultural backgrounds to identify with the game protagonist (Altaïr/Desmond) more easily.

On a third level, the level of the meta narrative of *Assassin's Creed*, religion is treated in a very critical way. Religion is nothing more than a power tool of the omnipotent beings who created man and religion for the sole purpose of ensuring a race of obedient slaves. No 'real' religion is present, that is, there is no reference to a God (only fake godheads manipulating mankind), to the sacred, the transcendent or the numinous. Ubisoft, on this level, has a very functionalistic, postmodern and almost scientifically 'external' view on religion.

In short, Ubisoft has succeeded very well in overcoming the ethnical stereotyping of 'the Arabs' that is perpetrated in most Western cinema productions and video games, but it has failed to do the same with regard to religion. While Ubisoft has resisted the all-too-simplistic identification of 'race' (Arab) and 'religion' (Muslim), religion is treated as nothing more than an ingredient of a historical background for the game narrative, or as tool of mass control by powerful beings. This functionalistic approach to religion mismatches the careful and well researched approach towards the Nizaris which is so characteristic for the rest of the game series.

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Biography

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Playing with the Legend

Ostension and Extra-Textual Production in Minecraft

Roman Ohlendorf

Abstract

Combining game studies and folklore studies, this article examines the origin of *Herobrine*, a fan-created legend in the popular video game *Minecraft*. By linking the creation and dissemination of the legend to both fan-production in game studies and the semiotic concept of ostension as utilised in folklore studies the article will give an overview of the different methods of remediation that are being employed in the spread and retelling of the legend. Addressing the nature of virtual game space, the article will discuss the relationship of space and legend creation and thereby comment on the productive potential of the act of play. *Minecraft's Herobrine* is of special significance in this regard because, in a rare occurrence, this legend was conceived not by the developers of the game but emerged from the player community itself. As such it is ample evidence of player production and gives insight into the player-driven creation of meaning in video games and how their creations renegotiate the concept of the real within the liminoid space of the game.

Keywords

Folklore Studies, Game Studies, Legends, Ostension, Fan production, Gamespace, Creepypasta, Game culture

1 Introduction

When the Beta 1.9 version of Minecraft released, it ended the debate about whether Minecraft was a game or a toy by introducing a culminate challenge for the player to overcome: the Enderdragon. However, the Enderdragon and the new player progression system were met with a lukewarm response. This was not due to unpopular visual design or high difficulty, but rather because these challenges failed to involve the feature of Minecraft that players found most fascinating: The

borderline endless possibilities in crafting and building, through which they express themselves within the game and beyond.

Instead of the Enderdragon, fans had already conceived an antagonist more fitting to Minecraft's unique gameplay and were already battling this foe in their minds: *Herobrine*. Herobrine is a fan created legend that describes the character as a ghostly avatar who haunts the world of Minecraft and, depending on the variant of the legend, meddles with the players' creations, commandeers normal enemies to do his bidding, or even outright attacks the player himself. This behaviour, in line with some of the normal enemies in the game, is in direct relationship to the modes of creative expression in Minecraft and thereby the main draw of the game. As an antagonist, Herobrine has eclipsed both the Enderdragon and the later introduced Wither in popularity as well as in mechanical terms despite being 'just' being a legend.

To understand how legends such as Herobrine can impact play, we must understand the nature of legend creation within games, and the how legends can be enacted and remediated in regards to the specifics of video games as a medium. This includes, more so than in other media, the inclusion of para-texts and fan creations, the player – game relationship and the possibilities of the medium for re-enacting legends. As an emerging phenomenon, players seek out and fabricate mystical tales that incorporate video games. Unlike other forms of folklore, games possess a unique potential for transporting and reproducing legends. Therefore this essay aims to shed light on this new development in games, explain the link between folklore creation and gameplay and follow up on the particularities that define game-based folklore.

1.1 Legends and Games Studies

“The otherworld is not a playful possibility to be manipulated by the real, as it often is in utopian fiction; rather, it is the absent and controlling hand that guides the present situation.” (Stewart, 1982)

“*In games,*” as Huizinga reminds us, “*there is something “at play” which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action*” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 1). Like fairy tales, games have the ability to conjure an effect that can have meaning beyond its own micro cosmos and impact the whole of our being and lives. Even after engaging in the immediate act of play we still ponder on the experience and carry with us the marks of encounters in the game space. This becomes especially visible when informing our daily lives, our conversations and our stories.

The impactful nature of play experiences has been analysed from different angles, ranging from the infamous discussion about aggression and violence (Kontour, 2009) to recent studies on shifting worldviews through play (Laycock, 2015) and emergent religious motifs that sprawl out of the game space they were once conceived in (Lindsey, 2015). Additionally the immediate

surroundings of the play activity have come into focus of game scholars and anthropologists alike and more often than not, they exclaim “playfulness” for those activities that performed outside of the game space but are inseparably linked to game experience (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007; Malaby, 2007; Taylor, 2009; Bergstrom, et al., 2015; Hong, 2015).

The link between the *actual play* and the *meta-play* (Downs, et al., 2013) is of varying degrees of importance depending on the game, and can take many shapes and forms. Some games actively entangle both forms of play, making it part of the game. In others it becomes an additional layer of world building or a social dimension in which players engage with each other outside of the game. In an increasingly common scenario, it contextualises the productive practices that players engage in related to the game (Pearce, 2006; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007; Gu, 2014).

Huizinga, as well as Caillois, has stated that play is fundamentally unproductive (Huizinga, 1949; Caillois, 1961). The separation between work and play has consequentially been a cornerstone of games studies for a long time. Recently however this notion has been contested more and more as scholars aim to redefine games and play (Pearce, 2006; Malaby, 2007; Bergstrom, et al., 2015). In that spirit it is worth mentioning that, Taylor’s call for a holistic analysis of games (Taylor, 2009) is still an important guide for games research: Her application of Latour’s *Assemblage* enables a much needed widening in scope for game studies and directs us to investigate beyond the narrow focus of controller and screen.

1.2 Legends and Games

“Games and digital media are increasingly significant, or even primary, modes of exposure to present pasts.” (Hong, 2015, p. 36)

There are plenty of legends and rumours surrounding video games. They originate from speculation about *easter eggs*¹, *creepypastas*² or are based on pre-existing stories (Krzywinska, 2006). The majority of folklore that is mediated in games has been consciously implemented, utilising the potential of games to remediate and expand the folkloristic body of a certain legend. Some legends and myths however, are the product of a game and its surrounding culture. And curiously enough some have even been fabricated by players without any direct incentive from within the game itself. Thusly, there is a general distinction to be made between the game related legends that are

1 *Easter eggs* are hidden objects or scenes in published videogames. Often in-jokes or references to other games, they are put in by the developers to be eventually found by explorative players.

2 Derived from the narrative form *copypasta*, the *creepypasta* is a scary short story that is circulated on special interest sites and forums on the web.

circulating in their respective communities: There are legends that have spawned games, and legends that have arisen from within existing games.

As they are inherently prone to transgress the borders of the game, either by referencing an existing legend or conceiving its own, a holistic approach to these phenomena has to be multifaceted. Previous research has located this at the intersection of game studies and folklore studies (Cragoe, 2015) and this essay will follow this trail while highlighting the useful concepts that shine light on the greater context that informs play and vice versa. In particular the concept of *ostension* (Eco, 1979; Bird, 1994; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007), that uniquely enables us to adequately describe the ways in which myths are reproduced and remediated in games.

Since the existing research has so far focussed on how existing legends and myths carry over into games and are remediated, presented and utilised (Krzywinska, 2006; Hong, 2015), this paper will focus on the latter category of player created myths. Searching for the origin of legends in games we also come to ask questions about the games that they rise from, and about the players that create them. This essay aims to shed some light on both of these questions while also examining the remediation and retelling of legends itself.

Since video games and digital media (together with the television) became an increasingly important part of the collective conscious, folklore has begun to involve these forms not just as a means of retelling and dissemination (Cragoe, 2015; Hong, 2015), but also as the subject of its tales (Manivannan, 2012; Henrikson, 2013). There is an observable evolution of media in folklore that develops in parallel to the real life technological advancement. A movie like “Ringu” (Ringu, 1998), for example, portrays a VHS cassette as cursed and evil, today’s Creepypasta attribute the same characteristics to “smile.jpg”, a data format (Henrikson, 2013). While Jumanji (Jumanji, 1995) featured a magical board game, similar properties were soon attributed to video games. See for example an episode of the popular television show X Files centred on first person shooters (X Files - First Person Shooter, 2000). So we see that the invasion of techno-horror has not spared the domain of video games (Pearce, 2006; Conway, 2010). Creepypasta that feature games are abundant and prove effectual on those familiar with the games in question (Conway, 2010). But in some cases, these stories take advantage of the mediums specific features and transgress into the sphere of interactivity by making the horror playable.

There are a number of examples of *spooky* folklore that has formed from play, including eerie children gatherings in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and Bigfoot sightings in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Rockstar Games, 2004). In either case, players had observed or claimed to have observed unusual behaviour of the computer controlled entities that were inexplicable by game logic. With little or no comment on part of the developers, players made up their own theories on the nature of these occurrences. However, the by far the most prominent

legend is the tale of *Herobrine*. Unprecedented in its spread and scope this legend has eclipsed most of the other stories that emerged from Minecraft (Mojang, 2010) and is one of the major identifiers of the game. Never before has player folklore from a game gained so much widespread attention and thusly it serves as an extraordinary example to discuss the legend creation process with.

Before discussing the Herobrine example in detail, the following section will introduce relevant concepts and terms from games studies and folklore studies. Following onward, the concepts will be tested against the traces of remediation that are left by the various means of retelling legends and folklore in games. For the purpose of this study, accounts of play in various formats (write-ups, audio-visual recordings) were examined as well as public statements about the existence and “sightings” of Herobrine.

1.3 Extra-textual production

“By scrutinising the practises and activities that support and surround videogame play, we begin to glimpse the creativity that emerges from play, and the new forms of playfulness that sustain videogames and give them longevity beyond the ever-decreasing shelf-lives that characterise the contemporary industry.” (Newman, 2005, p. 65)

The discussion about playful engagement with video games outside the designated game space has become increasingly harder to put off: The rise of fast, ubiquitous internet access and the broadening of certain platforms have led to an increased visibility of alternative modes of *playing (with) videogames* (Newman, 2005). This in turn led more and more scholars to challenge the separation of play and work into different spheres and to merge established concepts with the integration of production (Juul, 2011). Analysing the productive practise, they comment on the way video game consumers materialise their fantasies (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007) as a way of “actualizing” the products they want.

Newman comments on the commercial implications of the manifest player creativity and takes a critical look on the player – developer relationship in respect to players policing the canon of a game franchise (Newman, 2005). He offers an overview of the different outlets of player creativity that manifest outside the game with a focus on video production. Many of the small scale efforts mentioned by him have since been transformed into areas of interest for a greater audience as many emergent YouTube channels that enact and commodify these pursuits have been met with great commercial success (Gu, 2014; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Examining the particular case of Minecraft (Mojang, 2010), McCallum describes the “*new type of gaming experience*” (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014) that has emerged from fusing recordings of video games with commentary and narration. It is undoubtedly with Minecraft (Mojang, 2010) that this form has reached widespread

dissemination (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). This form is a crucial part of gaming “*beyond the game*” (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014) and one of the main forms of transporting the legend of Herobrine (Gu, 2014).

1.4 Playful ostension and re-enactment

“Such legend quests constitute a sort of ostensive play, an improvised drama in which the players, visiting the site of a haunting or the scene of a crime, take on, by turn, the roles of legend villains and victims as they both recreate the storied events and simultaneously expand the tale by adding their experiences to the core narrative” (Lindahl, 2005, p. 165)

Folklore studies’ concept of ostension can serve as a means of tying together the different forms of *extra-textual* and *actual play* when it comes to the mediation of legends and general folklore. While fan-produced para-texts show one level of engagement with the legend, they in turn enable multiple other levels of interaction with the legend in a game specific way.

Adapting Eco’s take on *Ostension* (Eco, 1979), Dégh and Vázsonyi describe four types of sign-less presentation in the transportation and dissemination of legends³: *pseudo-ostension*, *quasi-ostension*, *false ostension* and *ostensive action* (Dégh & Vázsonyi, 1983). Using these four definitions, any form of action that is inspired by folklore, either consciously or subconsciously, can be classified as an ostensive act. The concept has since been reiterated by folklorists (McDowell, 1982; Ellis, 1989; Bird, 1994) and sequentially been adapted by media scholars for describe folkloristic performance in ‘vernacular media’ (Bird, 2006; Koven, 2008; Tosenberger, 2010), but the basic formula remains:

Pseudo ostension describes the telling when it is through a fake performance of the legend in order to deceive an observer.

Quasi-ostension is happening when the performance is in fact imaginary and therefore only perceived subjectively.

False ostension describes when the performance is knowingly fabricated and the retelling is a conscious, but not necessarily malicious, lie.

Ostensive action means a performance that is true to the legend and therefore indistinguishable from it.

3 In line with common conventions in folklore studies, I follow Bascoms definition of *legend* as a potentially ongoing narrative (Bascom, 1984), a tale that describes happenings after the *myths* of the creation have concluded. While the term is defined differently throughout folkloristic literature, one undisputed attribute is that the legend is always potentially true (Bascom, 1984) (Bird, 1994) (Lindahl, 2005).

Of the many acts that classify as ostension, the phenomenon of “legend tripping” deserves special attention. It describes the act of voluntarily seeking out a location of folkloristic importance in order to experience the legend first hand (Bird, 1994). As legends, per definition, always have an inherent potential for truth (Bascom, 1984; Bird, 1994; Lindahl, 2005), they are most prone to evoke this kind of behaviour (Bird, 1994; Lindahl, 2005; Koven, 2008). As with any form of ostension, the participants become part of a re-enactment (Bird, 1994; Lindahl, 2005). This performance, also called *playful ostension*, conjures a liminal state which “[...] *suspends the normal laws of the real world, and [to] enter a world of heightened reality, or fantasy, much as dedicated players of fantasy games do*” (Bird, 1994, p. 202).

1.5 Realness, space and the arrivant

Tapping into the discourse in contemporary game studies regarding *realness* of game space and Turner’s concept of *liminoid spaces* (Corliss, 2011; Green, 2011; Hong, 2015) we see that legends offer a chance for re-negotiation of this *realness*. While the degree to which rampant computer ghosts and multimedial horrors can be conjured in “reality” is admittedly debateable, the actual, or tangible, *realness* might not be the most important factor. Evoking Baudrillard, Hong discusses what Žižek calls the “*effect of the real*”:

“*The passion for the Real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular effect of the Real . . . [and] the “postmodern” passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real.*” (Hong, 2015, p. 37)

The *realness* is also discussed by Henrikson’s work on creepypasta. Stating that the reference of the real is a common cliché in these stories, by which they bridge the space between the virtual and the real, or as Henrikson calls it: “*the meatspace of flesh-and-blood creepypasta readers*” (Henrikson, 2013, p. 416). The readers then, in tune with the protagonists of the stories, engage in a “*danse macabre*” with the “*arrivant*” they summon (Henrikson, 2013). This dance is accompanied by a loss of control on part of the readers whose initial decision to seek out the story becomes the story itself (Henrikson, 2013). This then, leads us back to ostension, where the stories precedes the manifestation and monsters turn *real* (Dégh & Vázsonyi, 1983) as the participants experience a limited loss of control (Bird, 1994).

2 Discussing Herobrine

Herobrine isn't real in any way, no.

Markus Persson – 8. January 2011 (Persson, 2011)

Removed Herobrine

Minecraft Changelog v1.6.6 – 31. May 2011 (Mojang, 2011)

2.1 Herobrine – The phantom of Minecraft

Minecraft (Mojang, 2010) was a forerunner in community accompanied production. Officially released as a full game in 2010, it had already millions of players before that, as its alpha and beta versions were sold in a model that would soon become known as “early access”. About a year prior to the game’s first full release the first “sightings” of an unknown entity called *Herobrine* in the game were uploaded to YouTube. Herobrine has since gained unparalleled popularity in the Minecraft community, going as far as to being described as an “icon” (MinecraftWiki, 2015), and being featured in official promo art (MinecraftWiki, 2015).

Herobrine’s appearance is one of the most constant features of the legend: Eerily similar to the default skin that every new player started out with at the time of Herobrine’s conception. The notable difference is that he is missing the black pixels that resemble pupils and has instead completely white eyes (MinecraftWiki, 2015).

The original source that described Herobrine heavily implies him to be Markus Persson’s, Minecraft’s designer, deceased brother’s ghost that is haunting the gamespace. The motif of the deceased returning to interfere with the living is of course a commonly encountered trope in legends, but with the connection to the developer there is also a connection to common structures in fan texts: Newman noted that the involvement of game developers in fan produced para-texts mirrors established patterns in other media and fanfiction (Newman, 2005).

In the main legend body, Herobrine’s role in the world of Minecraft is to stalk and maliciously harass the players. Additionally he is attributed to be the ‘Lord of the mobs’, commandeering the various harmful creatures that roam the world in Minecraft and cause damage to the players and their creations (MinecraftWiki, 2015). In this function he resembles a classic cliché of video game antagonists, which are more often than not an evil overlord with a number of minions at their disposal.

Another prominently attributed behaviour of Herobrine is the act of destroying player’s creations in the game. While also common to a few mobs that behaviour is most is most

prominently exhibited by fellow players on multiplayer servers. This form of play that is commonly called ‘*griefing*’ is considered to be extremely deviant and is routinely sanctioned; often resulting is the players in question being prohibited from further play on that server (MinecraftWiki, 2015). Again this is a property that constitutes a mechanical antagonism to the pursuit of the player of creating structures and expressing themselves with the means of the game, much like a main video game antagonist would.

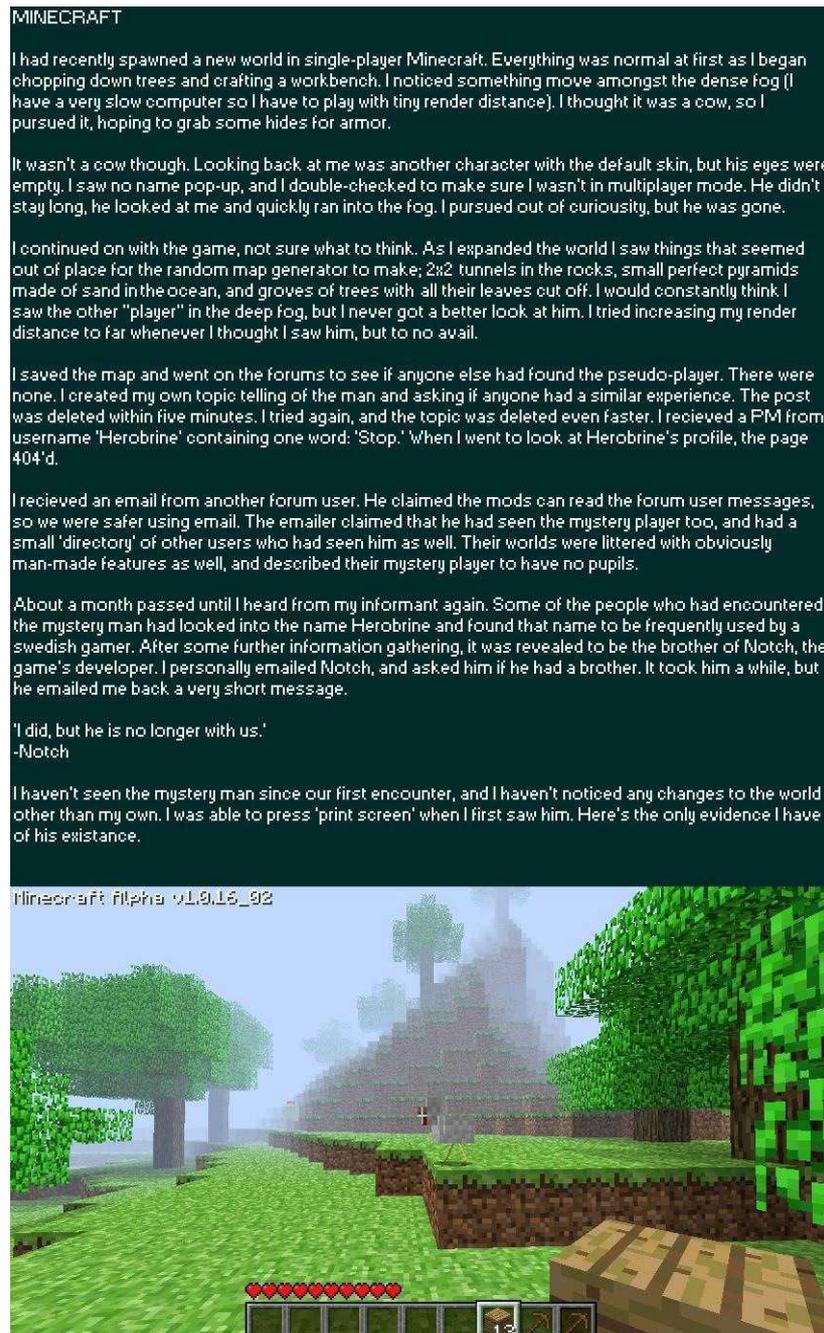


Figure 1

The first documentation of Herobrine was posted on the /v/ discussion board of 4chan (Figure 1). It was presented as an account of an encounter by a player in single player mode. The anonymous player posted a description of his or her play session that suddenly gets intruded by a mysterious and eerie figure that lingers at the border of visibility and watches the player. The author utilises a well-known format, the written account of a play session, to transport the disturbing narrative. This approach links the document to the popular narrative format of creepypasta, that often make use of the same structure (Henrikson, 2013). The story itself gives an unsettling narrative in which the author starts out chasing the mysterious figure, only to be evaded in the process. It is then that the roles switch and the author finds him or herself unable to shake off the surveillance of the self-identified *Herobrine*. Much like other protagonists of creepypasta, the initial curiosity dooms the protagonist to an ongoing relationship, or *danse macabre*, with the *arrivant*.

In a curious twist, the dance continues outside the game as the protagonist seeks information on the phenomenon in forums. The mysterious figure transgresses the boundaries of the game, escaping the confines of the porous game space because such is the nature of the *arrivant* (Henrikson, 2013). The protagonist's inquiries lead him or her to learning about the lead developer's deceased brother. The write-up closes with an ominous screenshot that shows the faint figure in the fog. The author thereby plants the seed for further inquiry and implicit self-inflicted doom on behalf of the readers (Henrikson, 2013).

While the original post did not immediately spawn widespread interest it caught the attention of the YouTube producer Copeland. After an initial appearance in one of Copeland's videos that was met with huge interest, Herobrine proved to be hugely popular. He was then featured as a story element in more and more Minecraft YouTube videos (Gu, 2014; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Expanding into other forms of creative expression from there, he is now found in a multitude of media related to Minecraft (Gu, 2014). Just like the dissemination of myths and legends in print culture, the technological transmission unhinges the connection between the recipient and the transmitter (Cragoe, 2015). While the origin of the narrative is not obscured, but is in fact much more retraceable than it used to be in an offline culture, the individual finds itself in a situation of ubiquitous confirmation (Tolbert, 2014).

While the core of the legend of Herobrine remains largely unchanged, the individual details of the depictions vary from retelling to retelling. Additionally the context and the perspective from which the retelling arises are informing the nuances of each reproduction. The most prevalent forms of telling the tale of Herobrine are YouTube videos (Gu, 2014; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Far more than mere video recordings of play (Newman, 2005) they also transport the legends. Depending on the recording, this retelling can take the shape of *pseudo-ostension*.

In a common form of video, the ‘sightings’, viewers are following the performer(s) (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007) in either a seemingly normal play session that is interrupted by the appearance of Herobrine or an attempt to summon Herobrine through an elaborate ritual. While some of these videos address the fictitious nature of the performance in an accompanying comment or in the video itself, some omit this caveat and aim to present an ‘honest account’. Due to its deceptive nature the latter category is a case of *pseudo-ostension*. Another widespread form of video is closely related. In this the video producers lure others players onto their server and perform as Herobrine in that world. Here the viewer is complicit with the performers and other players are the victims of the deceit. Therefore this format can also be classified as *pseudo-ostension*.

After the release of the first mods, Let’s Plays have surfaced that explore the mods and comment on the relation between mod and legend. Hence the mediation takes on a triple layered quality: The authored version represented by the mod, the version carried into the mod by the (let’s) players and the viewer’s own, represented by the ever present comment section (Friedman, 1995; Gu, 2014). Let’s plays and related video formats have been very important in popularising Minecraft (Gu, 2014; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Players use recordings of their play sessions to show their creations and, implicitly and explicitly, teach others their way of playing the game (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Remediating the legend in these video adds another layer of play onto the activity (Newman, 2005; Taylor, 2009).

Due to its open structure Minecraft lends itself well to being modded⁴. Before long, Herobrine mods were published that introduce an artificial intelligence into the game that plays the role of Herobrine. In making these mods, the producers solidify a particular instance of the legend. Authoring a mod becomes a statement that can be hugely influential in the mediation of the legend by offering experiential proof of the legend (Friedman, 1995). By providing “*the rules-bound, participatory framework of play and ritual*” (Hong, 2015, p. 37) they set the scene for a creative interplay between player and AI. This form of retelling the legend is unique to games. Players are able to interact with the legend on a systemic basis – they can *play* with the legend. This interaction then becomes part of the retelling again as it commonly spawns new videos of players recording themselves playing these mods.

In this situation the players are able to contrast their own version of the legend with the one presented by the mod, re-negotiating their imagination (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007). Despite the fact that users are aware of playing a mod, and therefore are not encountering the “real” Herobrine, this represents factual ostension nevertheless. Players are wilfully engaging in *pseudo-ostension* with the program on a highly interactive level. By entering the liminoid space of the mod

4 From *mod*, short for modification: A fan-made alteration of the original game that changes the visual experience or key gameplay mechanics that is usually freely available and distributed through the internet.

they wilfully inquire into the nature of the legend, thereby evoking the accompanying, transgressive nature of the imagined monster: “*the Real can be something we dream of, a manufactured effect, which is effective precisely in its difference to lived, everyday reality.*” (Hong, 2015, p. 37). By being in the virtual but liminoid space, the Herobrine encountered in the mod is as ‘real’ as it needs to be.

Mojang has repeatedly fuelled the legend of Herobrine. While continuously denying its existence, Minecraft’s lead designer Markus Persson has often stated his appreciation for the legend and hinted at a possible inclusion of the entity in a future update, thereby suggesting a potential ostensive action on his part (MinecraftWiki, 2015). Fostering the legend is certainly in the commercial interest of Mojang. As stated by Newman, fan-produced para-texts have the ability to extend a game’s lifetime and are crucial in sustaining a large fan base (Newman, 2005; Krzywinska, 2006; Corliss, 2011; Bergstrom, et al., 2015; Hong, 2015) . Consequentially, Herobrine has been featured on a number of promotional posters and artwork, often depicted in the background without special highlighting, therefore being in tune with the legend’s supposed lingering presence. But most importantly, as a running joke, several update logs of the game have included variations of the phrase “Removed Herobrine” (Mojang, 2011). Thus further perpetuating the mystique of the legend and in turn inspiring more believe on part of the players, eventually triggering a cycle of mutual reinforcement.

Through this elevation on part of the developer, Herobrine has become an effectual sign that can be decoded by those “in-the-know”. Thereby it enables a sense of belonging through common knowledge, that is often a characteristic of folklore (Cragoe, 2015). There is a vast amount of additional para-texts through which the legend gets continuously reshaped and reiterated. These forms are common also in general folklore as they fall into the more traditional categories of remediating legends in non-verbal but instead written forms such as fanfiction or discussions in forums and social networks (including Minecraft’s own *Minebook*) (Tosenberger, 2010).

Herobrine has become the subject of several novels, and countless stories posted online. The quiz and fanfiction portal *Qoutev* lists a number of stories and self-evaluation quizzes in regards to Herobrine. Furthermore there are forums, wikis and social network pages dedicated to the character. These forms, though not exclusively related to the video game medium, still factor into the general “playful activity” that is the remediation of the tale of Herobrine (Newman, 2005). They present different takes and variations on the character, such as suggesting the potential for friendship or romance with Herobrine. Akin to the transformation that is often observable in other fan-, and slashfiction, the character is interpreted differently by emphasising their sexuality, while often renegotiating their gender in the process (Tosenberger, 2010). In this they transform the malicious character, and reinterpret the ‘arrivant’ as a pleasant companion (Henrikson, 2013).

3 Space, video game folklore and the case of Minecraft

Minecraft lends itself to Hong's description of a wide, intertextual, liminoid space. The game has been noted for its "*blankness*" (Gu, 2014). The game provides neither narrative, nor backstory; it presents itself as an untouched canvas that can be used at will. As noted by folklorists, the structure of space has a large effect on the emergence of folklore and myths (Green, 2011; Cragoe, 2015). As a form of mediating shared experience, folklore is often observed to arise from groups that share a space or common history (Cragoe, 2015). While video games usually offer more individualistic experiences, Minecraft has nevertheless evolved into a state of constant telling and retelling of adventures, achievements and experiences. The staggering amount of fan-produced para-texts offers a shared backstory to the potential of experiences in the game, creating a body of tales and backstories that, unlike in many other games, is entirely crafted by the players themselves (Myers, 2014; Cragoe, 2015). Much like creepypastas function as a means to pull in the reader and making the monster transgress into their reality (Henrikson, 2013), the *porous* quality of the liminoid space allows for the same spatial violation in video games. Minecraft's emphasis on the player – game space relationship makes it especially prone to an invading force on this intimacy – like the *arrivant* (Henrikson, 2013).

Players of Minecraft experience this vast world individually or collectively. Even in single player, through the ubiquitous accounts of others play experiences, playing the game becomes a shared experience of many (Gu, 2014). This is essential to the collective haunting of the intruding arrivant (Henrikson, 2013). In addition to establishing a common background and lingo (Bascom, 1984) the shared space is enabling a sense of connectedness that allows for the intertextual web woven by the players (Green, 2011; Cragoe, 2015).

As it is the case with unchartered territory, there is an ambiguity of curiosity and caution on behalf of the explorer (Henrikson, 2013) and players in Minecraft are explorers by default. More than that, in remodelling the space and building shelter, players are effectively conquering the land, domesticating a part of the world in an "*explorative choreography*" (Henrikson, 2013). It is in this action, that they are likely to encounter an arrivant, that plays, or dances, with them (Green, 2011; Henrikson, 2013).

4 Conclusion

“To assume that the text does not have consequence in the world of the everyday, that its outcomes will not in turn affect the shape of the real, is a necessary fiction by which we gain free access to the fiction itself. “ (Stewart, 1982, p. 36)

The mediation of folklore in video games is an important subject for the further exploration of games. Not only does it show the specific potential of video games in direct comparison with other forms of mediated communication, it also leads to interesting conclusions on the very nature of the play experience. As evident by the emergence of Herobrine and similar entities, video games are not merely consumed but inspire extra-textual production that can influence other forms of media, leading to a pan-media phenomenon. In an act reminiscent of accidental ‘playbour’ such occurrences can be fostered by developers for promotional and commercial purposes (Bergstrom, et al., 2015). Games have a unique potential for players to interact with legends, thereby re-negotiating their version of the legend in a way that no other medium provides. The virtuality of the experience does not diminish the effect, as the interaction itself is as real as it needs to be in the liminoid space of the game.

Legend creations in games suggest that the liminoid and the productive process don’t exclude each other. Much like other forms of para-text production, legend creation in games is evidence of the productiveness in play and in fact resembles the “actualization of imagination” described by Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007). Furthermore as a description of space, the liminoid serves as a viable model to describe the curious relationship between players and their established legends, akin to Henrikson’s “*danse macabre*” (Henrikson, 2013).

Herobrine may have never been coded into Minecraft the software, but it is clear that he has encoded himself into Minecraft the shared experience. The effects are broad and ubiquitous, and he transgresses from the virtual into the *real* as he shapes discussion, perception and fuels an ongoing relationship between players, fan-producers and developers offering a shared experience for all.

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Redemption through Annihilation?!

Game Designer's views on religion, culture and society and its influences on digital games

Stefan Piasecki

Abstract

While video games have been under public observation for approximately 30 years, focus has hardly ever been put on the creators, designers, developers, or other creative staff.

The “Game Developer Demographics Report” of the *International Game Developers Association* (IGDA) from the year 2005 was one of the very few attempts to survey game developers regarding their personal motivation and outlook on life but it explicitly excluded inquiries on religious aspects; even asking about sexual preferences caused considerable complications.

Who game designers are and what they think is however not unimportant. Video game players are confronted with ethical and moral decisions, quite often set into a background story with multiple references to religious (or “magical” for that matter) topics. The content and the scope of game-experiences reflect the player's personal input – based on the game designers ideas and plans and content, shaped by their very own personality.

According to Gräß, religion certainly is not confined to churches but permeates other public spheres, the media not being the least of these. Religion still primarily deals with the major issues in life – not only in holy books or movies, but also in video games, which are traditionally settings for myths, enigma, legends and also religion.

Hitherto, the following questions remain unexplored: What do game developers think and believe in political and religious matters, what role do they ascribe to themselves and their productions in it? How do developers comprehend their role? This article will present the results of a first explorative study amongst young game developers.

Keywords

Religion, Game Studies, Survey, Computer Video Games, Game developers, Games Academy, Mission, Extremism, Game industry, IGDA International Game Developers Association

1 Religion in Video Games: Field of Existential Questions, Mission or a Contentless Pit?

Who, as a gamer, enters one of the many fantastic video game worlds (from this point forward, this term will be used as a synonym for all on-screen-games) will inevitably be confronted with religious elements. Be it as part of the background story or the rules of the game. Religious basic conditions for rituals, Holy Scriptures, magical or cultural phenomena's are used in games as a basis and explanatory model for artificial environments and are accepted and understood as part of the set of tools and framework to enroll the entertaining experience. To participate is not only welcomed but necessary to survive and proceed in the virtual world. Without an active player there is no game.

But is the usage of religion equivalent to acceptance? Are religious symbols in a game a sign of religious content or could they even be a religious statement?

Video games contain religious symbols, which are displayed and shown in procedures, amulets, magical swords but also religious and ideological extremism, as seen in many background stories to portray adversaries and enemies, both on Earth or in outer space; they also release individuals from something (reality) and call to something (a purpose, a higher calling, a search, "everything you do in Halo adds up to something bigger" (McGonigal 2011, 102)): The player experiences himself taken out of the reality of education and work constraints. He is pushing his own transformation into a fundamentally controllable virtual world.

Also meaningful: In games there are often religious pictures and messages used, as they are rarely found these days in the real world - These often demand a statement, acceptance and submission by the player, that is the only way of becoming and staying part of this very exclusive (virtual) reality. Usually such religious topics and stereotypes were influenced by very different traditions and religions – a substance amalgamated from different sources (O'Donnell 2015, 142) that sometimes even coexist in a single game (O'Donnell 2015, 145). Religious directives and political / social positions, which would be heavily criticised in our real world, are viewed as normal and are tolerated within that fictional framework – yet they originate from realworld-topics, conflicts and discourses (O'Donnell 2015, 151).

Video games, just like teen literature, movies or pop-music are eligible to reveal the "fertile potential" which is latent in the user and gives them space to evolve (Siedler 1995, 32). They also address a multitude of senses and connect players around the world through their linkage to social media. These games can be used as enlightenment for education, as well as missionary work, but also for political propaganda (Bogost 2007, pp. 99). Of course video games are also able to show and teach the premises necessary for living a fulfilled social life - also cross-cultural through scenic and mimicking basic knowledge.

Regarding video games, religious education and social sciences are mainly interested in how they influence players, what kind of personality factors they form (Hartmann / Klimmt 2006, pp. 117), what the players actually do in the virtual world and to see if in the end it is only about wielding power over others (Oerter 1997, p. 60).

By contrast there has only been very little questioning about religion in video games and the intention behind the doing so by the creators: The existence or the potential lack of religion could be the consequence of rational development-decisions and are a reason for a research of motifs and intentions of authors and designers, leading to the ultimate question of who is going to design and create the virtual world, who they are and what fuels them and most importantly *why* they put *what* into their games. In spite of the decades of discussion about violence in video games, these questions have never been raised before although it is the developers that make a game entertaining or persuasive, let the player take part in a real conflict (e.g. to fight “Israeli occupants” (Piasecki 2003, 42) or submit religious messages (Jacobs 2015).

It is because of this reason that in 2012 a survey was directed about programmers and game creators and the results have been evaluated in context of religious education and social-sciences. The paper was submitted under the heading of “Erlösung durch Vernichtung?! Unterhaltung, Technik-Faszination und Muster des Religiösen im Videospiele – eine explorative Studie an Schnittpunkten von Religionspädagogik, Sozialwissenschaften und Game Studies” (*Redemption through Annihilation?! – an explorative research on Game Designer’s views on religion, culture and society and its influences on digital games*) as a state doctorate at the university of Kassel (Hesse, Germany) and was accepted in May of 2015.

The title is a play on two things: Firstly on the totality of binary reality, which can only move between the two extremes of ON or OFF, all or nothing. Furthermore it reads itself as the goal of the very most recent video games to date, which only know the triumph of the player or his demise. For decades games have often been about saving the entire world, which either has to be freed, preserved or delivered from something - often from earthly as well as alien species, which don't have to be intellectually outplayed, but openly “beaten”. Often in a game the “triumph” over enemies is equivalent to their “annihilation”, these enemies more often than not are members of militant cultures, ideologies and religions, which makes the game a venue of a fictive cultural war.

2 A Cue: The Capcom-Incident and “Moschee Baba”

Video games can, just like any other form of media, polarise in political, cultural or religious ways. A conflict known even beyond the gaming world occurred in 2012 and was caused by two titles of

the “Resident Evil” franchise, which was successfully introduced to the market in 1996: “Resident Evil: Part 5” and “RE: The Darkside Chronicles”.

The mentioned games display classic horror scenes, the world is overrun by zombies and the players’ objective is to fight back against them and ultimately destroy them. The game “Resident Evil: The Darkside Chronicles” started a debate about the relevance of criticism by the church¹. Part 5 on the other hand caused muslims to get really angry.

Many clergies in England were concerned that these games could possibly awake an interest in the occult in a certain target audience, especially youth. Other debates occurred, once there was a book identified as a Qur'an spotted on the floor in Part 5², also there were accusations of racism as most of the zombies were of dark skin colour.³

The producers reacted differently – whilst the criticism by the Anglican church was ignored as incompetence by the church to review video games, the racism allegations were met by understanding and a promise to be more sensible in the future.

It is not surprising that social discourses and re-evaluations of religiousness and other themes and motives (like homosexuality, permanent observation etc.) have become subject to video games, as they already use historic and contemporary discourses, myths, traditions and Holy Scriptures.

However: With the religion contemptuous words of the manufacturer Capcom in the “Resident Evil debate” an industry representative has explicitly rejected church opinion. Are religious groups really able to judge and pass sentence in this regard? Or, asked in the words of Manfred Pirner: Are churches using the credit (and the support) they actually (for now) still have from the youth (Pirner 2012, 245)? Do they consult them? Do they organise majorities? Otherwise: Do theology and religious groups actually offer themselves as dialogue partners? Do they even want to take part in constructive debates or do they only criticise? Would their council be sought-after and accepted?

Even some novels take facts of history or society and geography and display them wrongfully and cause contradiction. Remember the “Satanic verses” by Salman Rusdhie, for which he was placed with a death-fatwa. For video games this field of conflict occurs as much if looking at inter-religious conflicts and islamic riots caused by islam critic media productions i.e. cartoons and the like (Piasecki 2015, pp. 239). A wrongfully displayed situation, a misinterpreted symbolic (burning Qur'an's) can, in the language of the internet, cause a hugely emotional “cultural shit-storm”. This

1 <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/96380-Capcom-Responds-to-Resident-Evil-Religious-Criticism>, 19.7.2015.

2 <http://www.onlinewelten.com/games/resident-evil-5/news/empowerung-boden-liegenden-koran-114766/>, 19.7.2015.

3 <http://www.onlinewelten.com/games/resident-evil-5/news/capcom-rassismus-debatte-lehren-gezogen-88009/>, 19.7.2015.

goes for unintentional wrong doings in the content development and especially when there is an intention in causing this effect as the production “Moschee Baba” shows.

The game comes from the Austrian party “FPÖ” and is a combination of elements from popular games like “Moorhuhn” filled up with a political statement.⁴ In the mentioned game one objective is to “stop” minarets as a way of giving / showing foreigners the red card. There is no direct force at play and the game is holding back on direct political phrases, but the game works on the emotional level by using unambiguous characters and symbolism to take the player’s already existing knowledge and emotions and channel them and give him the tools in the game to do what he wishes would happen (“stop islamisation” or “foreigners out!”) which he is then able to do in the next elections. The religious level is rather weakly displayed and used. It takes quite a bit of knowledge by the player to judge religiously on the content or finding a reason for his acting.

3 Short Overview on the Games Market

How is the economical and societal relevance of video games and the potential from the creative designers to be understood?

Since 1997 the ACTA (computer and technology analysis from Allensbach, Germany) is being conducted to monitor the acceptance and usage of digital media.⁵ Games and the appropriate market are also considered. The authors’ opinion is that the market is changing on the technology level as well as the demographic. For that exact reason a new study in 2013 considered the strongly growing market of mobile phone games and the age group of up to 70 years of age.⁶

The market councillor Pricewaterhousecoopers also conducts similar surveys (Pricewaterhousecoopers 2012 - PWC). Equally interesting is what the German federal-association of the gaming industry (Bundesverband Interaktive Unterhaltungssoftware - BIU) publishes, which conducts its own surveys much like movie and music associations.

The increasing heterogeneity of the German market is not only reflected in content, but also in sales and distribution: Less physical volumes in stores and more digital downloads. The overall video game market increased in 2011 by 3.5% to 1.99 billion EUR (BIU 2012, p. 1).

4 <http://stmv1.orf.at/stories/466595>, 27.7.2015.

5 http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/fileadmin/ACTA/ACTA2012/ACTA2012_Codebuchauschnitte/ACTA2012_Spiele.pdf, 25.7.2015.

6 http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/uploads/tx_reportsdocs/PD_2013_09.pdf, 24.7.2015.

The PC-gaming crowd still plays a major part: 17.2 million players use a PC, 9.2 million use a gaming console in addition or as a standalone. 6.7 million use a mobile gaming console (BIU 2011, p. 4).

With time content for “mobile gaming” becomes more relevant: In the first term of 2012 a total of 3.5 million games were sold for mobile consoles (Revenue: 83 million EUR / average unit price of 24 EUR) and 10.8 million Apps for Smartphones. (Revenue: 20.4 million / average unit price 1.90 EUR). 16.5 million Germans play on the internet (first term 2012), of which 5.6 million play MMORPG's, online-games and the like, 12 million play social online games (i.e. Facebook games) (BIU 2012, p. 3).

With the increment of opportunities to play games on almost every screen there is, the potential audience grew accordingly. With better controls and elements, games are now able to be controlled more intuitively.

So called *AppStores* are able to deliver a low-threshold service for an unmanageable market for every kind of inquiry. So it is of little surprise that in the first term of 2012 4.6 million (2011: 3.7; 2010: 3.2; 2009: 1.1) people have bought virtual gaming items and on average spent 66 EUR, compared to the 43 EUR in 2010. The development becomes especially clear if the consumption is viewed over a span of multiple years (BIU 2012, 5).

This explains the still very strong growth of the gaming industry, at least if directly compared to other media products. A growth which isn't only produced by the franchises themselves but also by a still growing market penetration. Next to mobile phones there are especially flat screen TV's, which today mostly have some kind of networking features and internet access and a link to AppStores – bringing games to almost everywhere. PriceWaterhouseCoopers visualizes this with the numbers they collected: In 2011 console games in Germany had a market share of 55.2%, PC-games 22.4% and online-games 20.9% (mobile devices 1.5%). This is going to change until 2016 to 33.9% for online games with a slight decrease in console gaming (49.9%) a heavy decrease in the PC segment down to 14.2%. Mobile games could grow slightly to 2.1%.⁷

The German video game industry has earned EUR 1.098 billion EUR with console games, 445 million EUR with PC games, 29 million EUR through mobile games, 416 million EUR with online games and a total of EUR 1.988 billion in 2011. By 2016, PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates an average growth of the overall market by 7.7% with corresponding growth rates.⁸ PWC considered not only the sold unit count, but also DLC's (downloadable content) and online games, as most legal purchases are done online these days. A dark figure could possibly arise as there are

7 <http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/239635/umfrage/umsatzanteile-im-markt-fuer-videospiele-in-deutschland/>, 28.7.2015.

8 <http://www.presseportal.de/pm/8664/2305447>, 31.7.2015.

foreign portals which are able to operate in Germany but their revenue and sold units are not to be counted.

Compared to the other media like movies and music a market situation arises in which the video game market has surpassed the music and movie industry. They have found a new niche in health and fitness programs, as we are facing a older growing society, which are advised to be used by the health politics and the health insurance's.⁹

Artificial worlds, content and game types are becoming daily routine for more and more people, as are Apps with gaming elements. Video gaming has become a matter for almost anyone now in one form or another.

4 Industrial Field, Job Market and Content Spectrum: Who are Game Developers and What is Going Through Their Mind? The IGDA-Survey (2005)

The about 300 established video game companies in Germany (165 developers, 60 publishers and 75 developing and publishing) are employing a total of about 10500 people at the moment - 6350 are directly employed with publishers and developers and 4150 are people that work in cooperation with them, such as sound engineers, distribution, advertisement, merchandising and so forth) (BIU 2012, 3). What kind of people are hiding behind these numbers? Since no comparable figures exist to date for Germany, an American survey addressing the topic shall now be consulted.

In 2005 the *International Game Developers Association*¹⁰, conducted a research about the demographic background of game developers and published two main documents (referenced as IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS and IGDA WHITE PAPER). Already in the preamble the main stereotypical question arises, if the “young white male” dominates the industry, as it always has been assumed. Also the IGDA has found out that the personal convictions of humans always flow into their work and that this work will display the personality and views of the developer (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 4).

Noteworthy is that there have been no explicit questions about religion and familiarity, although they are still considered very important to creative work (ibid.). There is hope for future work in this sector expressed as it is forming the “*culture of gaming development*” (ibid.). But even their newly conducted survey was groundbreaking, said the IDGA, as nothing similar has ever been done before (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 5).

9 <http://www.medienpaed.com/globalassets/medienpaed/15-16/lampert0903.pdf>, 15.7.2015.

10 <http://www.igda.org/>, 15.7.2015.

The IDGA survey stood before the same question as we did: Who do we ask? Only developers or also other people in the gaming industry that might still add up to the creative results that materialize in a video-game? How do we identify the creative flock of people and how would you separate them from others? To solve this problem, two investigations have been done by IGDA. One directed at the more administrative staff and another at the creative personnel.

Because of different assortment processes only 3128 of the 6437 replies (80.000 questionnaires were sent out resp. individuals were contacted) have been validated and processed (for critical honouring see Piasecki 2015, chapter 7.1.2).

With regards to the total requests that were sent out we can see a response rate of 12%, of which only 5% were used, as certain developer and world markets have been excluded on purpose.

According to this IDGA-survey developers are: white, male, hetero-sexual, not disabled, are on average 31 years old, have some form of higher education, have worked at least 5 years in the industry, earn an average of US\$ 57,000 as developer, artist or designer and most of them come from a wide spectrum of developers, so that the variety of ideas, preferences, convictions and experiences of the market (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 4) can be represented (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 10).

With 83.3% the most employees are of white skin colour (ibid.) and work the longest time in the industry, where they also earn the most (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 11). The authors claim that the long time employment is causing the high salary and not the skin colour.

Because of the high number of whites in the industry the survey differentiates only between white and non-white (black, hispanic., asian, ...). This appears to be quite sad as the minority of non-whites seems to think of the industry more diverse than the whites which represent the majority (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, p. 11).

Onwards to gender equality, 11.5% of the questioned appear to be female (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 12) (which mainly work in managing, writing and marketing positions, seldom in actual technical jobs (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 13)). The sexual orientation is mainly hetero-sexual with 92%. Only 2.7% said they are homo or bi-sexual, 2.6% refused to answer the question (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 15).

Interesting to note: Especially the questions about sexuality (Sexual Orientation / Transgender) sparked anger with some of the participants towards the IDGA, even led to personal insults via mail and even had participants cancel the survey (ibid.).

This negative tendency towards personal questions could already be observed in 2005 and re-occurs today in the following survey. This time it wasn't questions about sexuality that caused the anger but rather questions about religious identity. The critical response even sounds very similar.

Here some of the interviewees claimed questions about religion would be “religious propaganda” and an attempt to “misuse games as a tool for missionary work” (Piasecki 2015, chapter 7.7 “closing comments”).

With regards to their “White Paper on Industry Quality of Life Issues” (IGDA WHITE PAPER 2004) the authors explained that a third of the developers expect to leave the industry in five years and about half think they will leave in the next 10 (IGDA WHITE PAPER 2004, 17). This shows the extreme working conditions inside the industry (raised by IGDA in an “open letter”¹¹), which are affected by very rapid rates of extensive success and failure, as well as a lot of burn-out experiences (IGDA WHITE PAPER 2004, 44).

A lot of companies now have official diversity-programmes a.k.a. anti-discrimination-programmes (81%) and equality-projects (78%). When now looking at the very high stress potential and the high personnel demand, as well as the short time people stay in the job, it is almost unbelievable that only 22% of the companies have seized measures and offer company intern social work or “retention” (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 21 and IGDA WHITE PAPER 2004, 46).

The significance of personal views and convictions of developers is highlighted several times. The massive success of games like “The Sims” (Maxis / Electronic Arts, since 2000) is claimed to be partly coming from the gender-equal developing teams (as “The Sims” had) (IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 22).

Even though there are no German surveys which could be an equivalent to these, rare results about self-perceptions of developers from surveys around 1990 give us a deeper look.

Schachtner had asked developers predominantly from the industrial sector (Schachtner 1993, 10). The questioning took place in 1989 and comprised 36 interviews in the greater area of Munich, meaning it is neither up to date nor representative. But it gives us a very unique angle and ideas for our own questions and reflection. Because even back then there were similar things to be observed as it was about 15 years later with the IGDA study: Developers wanted to “quit” or “stop working (for at least a year)”, “disappear” or go into early retirement, as they are not going to last longer than 5 years (Schachtner 1993, 230). They even had escapist fantasies: doing cabaret or travel by bike through Arabia – working anything but technologically (Schachtner 1993, 231) – which shows the deepness of frustration. A remark made by Söder-Mahlmann in the same time frame gives us some insight into this. He describes, in reference to Kidder as well as Huebner / Krafft / Ortmann, how company intern propaganda (a project is called “Kampfhandlung” / fighting operation, the team has to “achieve something, that goes beyond the achievability of a single person”, “ones own

11 <http://www.igda.org/news/176887/Open-Letter-Quality-of-Life-Issues-are-Holding-Back-the-Game-Industry.htm>, 31.7.2015.

fate is connected with the project”) and production force tie the personnel to the product and how they have to submit themselves (socially and personally) to it (Söder-Mahlmann 1992, pp. 147).

Developers, as it seems, are giving projects their all and are in danger of burning out, doing so. “Work” is obviously much more than just a “job” to them (another formidable witness of this is Weizenbaum who also reports about the mental behaviour of “obsessive programmers”, spanning two decades from the 1960s-1970s (Weizenbaum 1978, pp. 161)).

5 Why Care About Developers? Aspects of Author Research

If production could influence the recipients' awareness, the question of producers' intention arises, especially if their work ethos is very high. Communication researchers have, for that reason, been investigating the personal attitude of journalists to learn about their determination and “Weltbildproduktion” (“production of worldview”) (Schulz 1997, 236). This kind of research is lacking in other areas such as the portrayal of world view in youth novels. Examples like C. S. Lewis' “Narnia”-books with its strong Christian pictures, motifs and language as well as the openly anti-Narnia works of Philip Pullman (“His Dark Materials” and of course the “Left Behind”-novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins) show how intentional authors fill up their literary works with their own opinions. Although not as fully interactive as games, books can also be read in different ways (Jacobs 2015, 96) and therefor be “personalised” by “users”.

Video games, next to movies, TV-shows and books, are very impressing and formative for a child's mind and are often fondly remembered (see with reference to comic books Leinen / Rings 2007). Older surveys about youth affine media come from Doetsch and Neumann. As with newer research Doetsch (Doetsch 1958, 73) decided to go with an analysis of comics in different categories (i.e. pictures, structure, language, world view). But also things like how it is with self control, one's social skills, and how one is able to control his feelings and will power of readers were tested (Doetsch 1958, 104).

More interesting things were found in the aftermath of the 1968-movements. In line with the back then in Germany predominant “Ideologiekritik” some critical questions were not only directed towards the world view submitted by teachers or through the media and its productions like youth novels but also to the authors of such; they provided information about what kind of books they read during their own childhood and which influenced them most (Gelberg 1974).

The authority critical discourse analysis in the 1970's especially tried to find anti-Semitic traditions in works by authors that were socialised during the hight of the NS-regime. It was feared

that ideological constants and anti-democratic thinking was transported to a new generation through books (see also Jäger / Jäger 2007, p. 43).

Neumann was looking at the political content of “Groschenheften” (cheap little magazines: “penny dreadfuls”) which were a common thing used to pass time in 1976 before there were things like game boys and the like. The survey researched the “Groschenheft” as a mass communicator (!) (Neumann 1976, 12) and shined a light on the “construction of a contrast world” (ibid., pp. 26), before the lines were subject to content analytical treatment (ibid., 33). The different categories / contents of these booklets were presented (Landser-books, western story's, Dr. novels and so forth) (ibid., 34) as well as “the role of women” (ibid., pp. 138), sexual morality (ibid., 142) and lastly political content were evaluated (ibid., 147). This work is unique in the way that it is the only case where authors (of novel-booklets from Bastei-Lübbe in Bergisch-Gladbach, Germany) were actually asked about their work (ibid., 14).

Only a few books shed light on the the life and work circumstances of authors (Müller 1980; not focused on just youth books, Fohrbeck / Wiesand 1972; about how authors developed a sense for reading in the first place Unseld 1975, Bücken 1979 and recently Naumann 2005).

The conscious and deliberate questioning of authors has not been continued since the late 1970's. Some famous authors like Astrid Lindgren have come to attention and her work has been contemplated in context to it's time. But these remained exceptions. There is still a great desire as not only novel authors but also song writers, screen-play writers and the like take influence in forming a world view for people.

For the sake of completeness I would like to point towards a recently established series of lectures at the University of Kassel, which looks at the communicated worldview to children in children's audio dramas like “Benjamin Blümchen”, “Das Sams” or “5 Freunde”. These were inspected, through a societal- and cultural scientific perspective, for stereotypes.¹² Even if this is not a dedicated author research, it is interesting to see that the personality and behaviour of Benjamin Blümchen and others seems to portray anarchistic world views. The same goes for comics, their authors represent positions which are detectable in the end product. Such influence and interests from authors and clients were lately drawn by Hangartner for non-fictional comics. Comics are also able to deliver narrative approaches to every day topics and living environments. They have a goal; this projection is gladly acknowledged (Hangartner in Hangartner / Keller / Oechslin 2013, pp. 317).

That author research makes sense of creative productions is obvious, as everybody that is creative or thinks of himself as an artist has and needs always a part of himself to flow into his creation / work. The “Kundegabehandlung”, an action to express an individual will of

12 <https://www.uni-kassel.de/fb05/index.php?id=37979>, 20.7.2015.

communication does always have an impact on those who receive this act of communication and its content (Radlanski 1995, 223). Based on this we can understand game developers both as creators *and* communicators - but still they don't get the scientific (and public) recognition they deserve. Many specific articles regarding video games are written by former game developers, but they mostly address practical questions. Individual views and opinions seem not to have been too interesting in the past, but slowly this situation changes, as industry veterans like Nolan Bushnell oder Steve Jobs come to age and step out into retirement or pass away (Slater 1989, Wolf 2013, Kushner 2004). Grossman presents current and former developers and grants them space to let them express their view on things and how and why they developed their games, what worked great and what went wrong (Grossman 2003). Here, they also talk about how and why they added aspects of religion into their games: most often a “system of religion” next to diplomacy and resources was integrated (Age of Empires II – Grossman 2003, 116) as part of the general set of tools and functions or “various aspects of environment” (Tropico – Grossman 2003, 138). There is another book called “Game Generations” which is entirely dedicated towards developer interviews (Magdans 2008). The downside is, there are so many (although all very interesting) interviews featured, they are all kept very short; sometimes they even cram multiple developers onto two pages and don't even conduct a scientifically correct questioning.

If children books like “Momo”, “Pipi Langstrumpf” (Pipi Longstocking), “Jim Knopf” and others have not only been able to emboss public opinion, but also influence youth culture, the same must be thought of video-games.

Games are, without any exaggeration, for many many people part of their very personal media biography - even though they are not recognised by society as such (see also Zimmermann / Geißler 2008). Only after the creation of the “Deutscher Computerspielepreises” (German video-game award) by the federal secretary of state for culture in 2009, video-games are now better recognised as cultural goods.¹³

To come to the point: If good literature can inspire and move people, why not video-games, too? And if games can do so, who is weaving them and why to raise this effect?

13 http://www.bundesregierung.de/Webs/Breg/DE/Bundesregierung/BeauftragtefuerKulturundMedien/medien/medienkompetenz/dtComputerspielpreis/_node.html, 24.7.2015.

6 Field of Research: Game Designers at the Games Academy in Berlin and Frankfurt

To make an educated guess about the intentions of game designers, they need to be consulted. But as the IDGA already spotted there is the big problem of finding people to talk to; most companies are pretty small and the staff fluctuates a lot. Another problem is the uncertainty of responses, too different are the jobs that people are doing especially in smaller companies, where people sometimes perform several jobs at the same time.

In contrast to that, undergraduates studying game design are young, interested in technology and skilled in development. They all come together to central places (educational institutions) and make it a lot easier to conduct surveys. A steadily growing number of facilities offer courses that teach gaming related subjects. One of the best known facilities in the industry is the Games Academy (GA)¹⁴ in Berlin ([media.net](http://www.media.net) says it is the leading academy for the education of professional game designers, programmers, artists and producers in Europe).¹⁵ It was set up and is still led by Thomas Długaiczek, who also founded the USK (“Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle” - entertainment software self-monitoring control) in the early 1990s which is in force in all of Germany. The USK is an age-rating board for video-games, much like what the FSK is for movies. Because the Games Academy is so well known it is one of the most sought after places to go for people who want to become game designers; tuition fees underline the professional approach.

On November, the 13th of 2008 the first industry-hearing between software developers, game developers and the federal government took place there (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Technologie 2009). Thomas Długaiczek has over 20 years of industry experience, he is also a registered social pedagogue which the GA emphasised qualifies him to be a suitable cooperation partner for this hearing.

GA has two facilities: one in Berlin and one in Frankfurt. In 2012 a total of 180 people studied at their schools. The group of students will here be understood as *collective* for this survey (Bortz 2005, 15 and also 27), since their validity cannot be closer examined out of the total of German game developers, although they still serve as a sample for all of the industry and can be used as such for future surveys.

The students come from all of Germany and were presented with the background of this study in Berlin through a personal introduction. For two weeks the students could answer using an

14 <http://www.games-academy.de/>, 17.7.2015.

15 http://www.medianet-bb.de/DE/Medianet_Member/Games-Academy-GmbH/, 19.7.2015.

online form hosted by MonkeySurvey. The link to the survey was only known and submitted to the students.

Talking to a collective of subjects and not to staff of certain companies also helped to avoid distortions that may arise from loyalty constraints or “brand awareness”. In this study the young developers had a very strong sense of milieu, the identification “as developers” was very strong. Withing the frame of a concrete company a different “gravity” between departments, projects or even in comparison to other companies might have influenced the reactions.

Brief description of the samples:

A total of n=59 students (of 180 in that year according to numbers provided by the GA) took part. The students were mostly between 19 and 27 years old. Almost one quarter (23.4%) was female (11) - 76.6% were male (36) and 12 did not specify. Most of them were from western Germany (further information arises from results about the social-demographic, questions 64-68, chapter 7.7 Results).

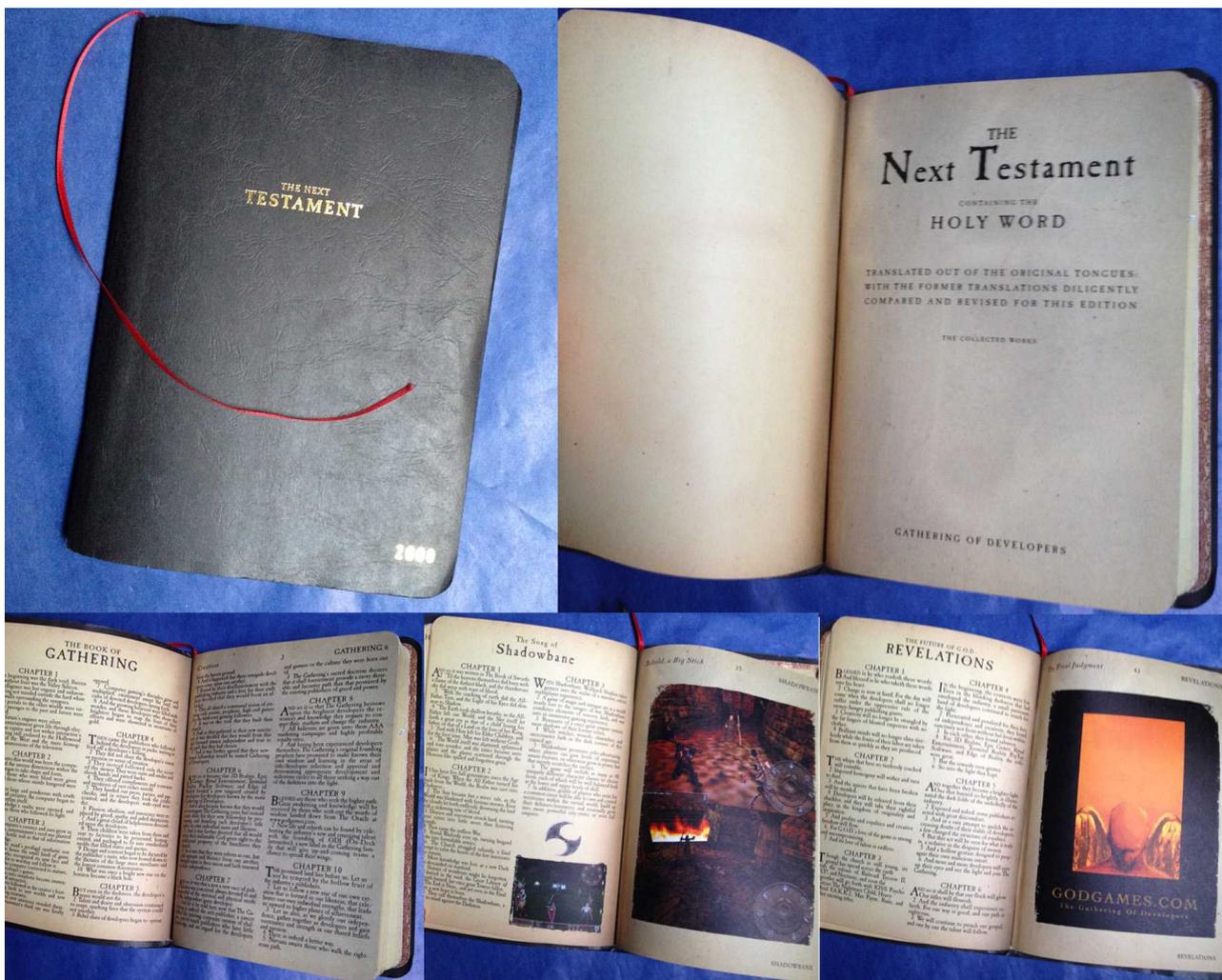
7 Developers and Their World View

What do game developers think, believe and feel religiously, politically and culturally?

In contrast to other discussions that are focussed on how games actually influence players, this is about *who* actually makes media (video-games). Game developers like to play with religious subjects, pictures or symbols in their productions. For instance, the developer group “Gathering of Developers” - short: Godgames - released a catalog in 2000 called “The Next Testament” in form of holy scripture.

The design of this catalog is done quite lovingly and dignified. The title page speaks of this “next Testament” containing “the holy scripture”, “translated from the original languages”. The first chapter of the catalogue, whose creator wanted to emancipate oneself from the all mighty game publishers, starts with analogies to the gospel of John (Joh 1,1 – GOD Games 2000, 3).

Of course this layout and self depiction does not imply any kind of avowal. Rather it shows that widely known cultural and religious topics are used and woven into a fantasy-setting – just as O’Donnell described (see above). Otherwise they obviously refer to something that they believe is known by their target audience – either previous religious knowledge or rather prejudices of and about religion. An examination of the subject by the reader is expected, thought processes are to be put in gear. Interest in the product that is at stake has to be communicated.



Schachtner and Söder-Mahlmann had clues to this already 25 years ago in their work. Schachtner asked questions about the self-conception and mysticism in developers lives. She learned that developers acknowledge subjectivity of their machine dominated life, that they see their life trimmed down, also through long work hours (Schachtner 1993, 206).

Söder-Mahlmann, who also worked in software development for many years, found very clear words for what he thinks of the subjectivity of developers. They don't search for paradise, they create it; They don't beg the Gods for absolution, they made themselves to Gods (Söder-Mahlmann 1991, 11).

Hackers, video game players and programmers are all connected by the desire to execute power in a controlled, particularly the virtual, universe (Söder-Mahlmann 1991, 78). According to him, employees in this industry are looking for the adventure the same way professional athletes

are. They are inclined to link their personal fate to that of the project. The accomplishment of a project is absolutely necessary (Söder-Mahlmann 1991, 151).

Next to details about a typical work day, Schachtner wanted to know very personal and world view related things from the developers. Her religious / world view related questions were hit by reluctant answering and questions about the soul were even completely rejected by a developer. His comment to all of it was that the brain cannot be explained with a soul, it is not necessary for it. The human body is a biological system and its component brain is operating all the sub components (Schachtner 1993, 208). More direct questions about feelings and emotions were stopped by a programmer; a questioned student tried to find a girl friend by using a precise, planned analytical plan, as if he was writing a computer program (Schachtner 1993, 209). This hints that technicians, tech-savvy people or programmers trust structures more than emotions (Schachtner 1993, 210).

But doesn't this mean that programmers are over proportionally rational? And doesn't this mean that their interest in religion may not be very developed? These questions already lead us into the field of interest: What do developers think and believe? What kind of (also religious) socialisation have they experienced? What affects them when they are making up background stories for their new games? Are culture and religion only quarries to them that they can pick and choose from to make their story more interesting? Or are they fields of interest that are used deliberately to communicate messages?

And what role do possible clients and employers play? Do game developers fundamentally follow them or do they mostly follow their own plans?

7.1 Questions and Hypothesis / Methodology and Instrument

Games are the result of complex thought processes by socialised individuals. This had to be respected. Firstly hypotheses (H1-4 – see below) had to be made, which are supposed to help the development process of a video game in its social and cultural dimensions.

The hypotheses (H1-4) were then tested and scrutinised by asking over 60 questions. The survey was anonymous (Atteslander 1995, pp. 132, esp. pp. 167) and the scientist was never present during the answering process. The questions were asked in mixed orders and were later pinned to the according hypothesis.

Standardised questionings are a common and structured method to determine personal views from individuals (Treumann / Baacke / Hugger / Vollbrecht 2002, pp. 39). Whilst quantitative questionings are economically awesome, they don't leave space for “personal” and “emotional” overtones. A qualitative survey may be great to determine individual views, but economically only a very limited number of participants could have been interviewed, too few for an explorative work.

Another important thing is the anonymity. Especially world view or sexual questions are met with reservation, as it has been visible in the past.

A decision was to be made between an approach following the “grounded theory” (Lamnek 2005, pp. 100) which deals with a smaller amount of participants but promises more in-depth results (Strübing 2008, pp. 37 resp. pp. 79) and a quantitative questioning that suits larger groups of participants better.

For the questioning we found a middle way. We did a quantitative online survey with comment sections so people were able to give us also qualitative answers (Scholl 2009, pp. 178).

The population consists of makers of “screen-based video games” (game developers). Being screen-based means we do not have all kind of developers in the survey: e.g. people working on electronic board game designs, real-role-games, or real-laser-fights (“Laser Dromes”) are of course not included.

As this is such a new survey extra care was taken to make sure we are able to conduct it again in the future (Scholl 2009, pp. 87). Because of this it was important to have direct and secure access to a social-demographic and a with regards to content determinable collective of which we needed to generate a good sample (Buttler / Stroh 1992, 33 – regarding the construction of samples see Lamnek 2005, pp. 187 resp. 189). All this we were able to do at the Games Academy (regarding the design of samples see Schnell / Hill / Esser 1995, pp. 251, resp. pp. 256).

The questionnaire addresses a number of items which give us access to unprecedented views at the thought processes of developers. Some parts of the Shell youth-survey from 2010 (“Lebenswelten und Weltorientierung” (Shell 2010, pp. 37), “Familie, Schule, Freizeit” (Shell 2010, pp. 53) and also “Wertorientierungen und Religiosität” (Shell 2010, pp. 194) as well as “Zeitvertreib, Alltagswahrnehmung und Inhalte im Internet” (Shell 2010, pp. 101) and the qualitative oriented considerations from Faix (Faix 2007, pp. 123 and pp. 136 – categories from pp. 170) gave us incentive. To some degree from Grazow (Gramzow 2004), as well as the older studies by Jörns (Jörns 1997, pp. 28 – questionnaire pp. 233) and Nipkow (Nipkow 2000, pp. 51 (- 88)).

Furthermore the surveys by Ziebert and Riegel were helpful at letting us understand the world-views of youngsters (Ziebert / Riegel 2008, construction of questionnaire pp. 203).

In multiple runs prior to the actual survey the questionnaire was modified, shortened and made easier to understand (Scholl 2009, pp. 147).

Participants were asked about their personal media usage, their school and family background. Also about their cultural and political views and about some subjects and themes of the

games market. There were even questions such as which political party or religious group they would work for.

Especially questions about the world view were asked in a way that the participants didn't feel “interrogated” about their religious preference (still readable: Noelle 1963, pp. 50), as an “allergic” reactions to these questions had to be expected. In the course of ALLBUS 1982, questions of such nature caused irritation amongst many participants and forced the researchers to remove such questions (Hagstotz / Kirschner / Porst / Prüfer 1983), the same way we saw questions about sexual orientation being rejected in the IDGA-survey IGDA DEMOGRAPHICS 2005, 15 – see also “Comments on Diversity”¹⁶: 2).

7.2 Overview on Results, Evaluation and Summary: Meaning of Religion as an Element of Video Games – the Developers' Views

The answers to the questions correspond to the hypotheses that were formed early on in the process of designing the study. These hypotheses will now be followed by conclusions extracted from the results of the survey.

H1: Game developers are nonreligious and nonpolitical “technical handyman”. They choose themes and subjects according to the game that is being developed. Because of this a game with political or religious content is nothing more than a “theme composition” and does not intend any “persuasions”.

The assumption of game developers being entirely areligious and apolitical has to be looked at very considerably. Most of them indeed seem to be quite unreligious: Two thirds of the participants have never prayed at home (Q7), less than 10% go to church ever so often or for special occasions (Q19), more than 50% does not believe in God and less than 15% answered the question about their personal beliefs (Q16) approvingly.

Although 53.6% are still part of a Christian confession, 39% left the church. No other religion was represented (Q12). Only 8.8% felt like they have a “strong” or “somewhat strong” interest in religious subjects (Q6). At the same time they would be o.k. with religious content being part of the game if it was part of the end goal or general content (Q26), God in the classical sense is not favoured, rather in form of “a higher being” or “cosmic energy” (Q28).

Religious connoted terms, such as “redemption” (Q42) and “destruction” (Q48), are well known and most of them accept traditional pictures in games, even though they think of it as old-fashioned. On the other hand such topics deliver material for video games (Q45). Part of that are

16 http://www.igda.org/sites/default/files/IGDA_Survey_IGDA_Comments-on-Diversity_Jul05.pdf, 17.2.2013 – Link no longer active, 31.7.2015.

characters that are “redeemers” and “saviours” (Q50), which are helpful for the game development and are appreciated by the gamers, but - just like questions about the end times / apocalypses (Q49) - only can be imagined as structural elements of the game and not to be understood in their religious meaning.

Game developers are interested in subjects of society and politics - almost half of them even show interest in (Q5) questions about justice, war and peace or in the environment. Still only under a fifth are engaged actively in politics or society (Q20).

That questions of societal or cultural meaning can be implemented into games in a fun and informative way is accepted and believed by more than half of them: Almost 40% strongly believe so and almost a quarter of them can at least imagine of doing so depending on the games design (Q36).

There seems to be a broad willingness to implement their own opinions and views into games. Only a fraction repelled the idea, almost half could imagine doing so always or sometimes and designing games according to their own convictions (Q40).

H2: Game developers derive from their own target group. They mainly develop what they are interested in themselves. They want to entertain and do not want to influence their target audience with the product in a certain way. Next to providing an entertaining experience to the users, there is no interest in taking responsibility for them.

Video game developers are gamers themselves - the medium of choice since childhood, which most of them say has always been of interest to them. TV and movies, as well as books and other audio-visual media have been of great influence to today's developers. Rather insignificant were chat-rooms (Q1).

The prejudice of video gamers often staying at home, being unable to find a way out of their digital world, can only, if at all, be said about less than a third of the participants (Q2). Only a fifth regularly played alone (Q11) and only a fourth remembered their school time as unpleasant (Q3). About two thirds of the future game designers were sure about their career choices quite early (Q4).

A little less than 60% of the participants have let the experience of the video games distract them from real life problems in the past (Q9). The hypothesis that video games can influence, move and affect a human being the same way as a book or movie was met with overall approval (Q24).

Game developers mostly play: RPG's, adventure games and shooters (Q27).

Games influence the players. The developers think that games not only improve the players reactionary time but also assertiveness. But also “good”-deeds can be transferred as a pattern of behaviour into the real life. That this could change the character of an individual, they say, only happens at times or rarely. The wish to be entertained is always the main focus of the player (Q39).

That games can have a learning effect, is true for most of them and they are mostly aware of their role in creating the content (Q41). Half of them are aware that they have some form of “power” over the players and about a fifth admit that they have some kind of influence over them (Q59) which according to the developers mainly use games to pass time or even use this kind of media to learn things or get out of their normal role (Q54). Be it by the popular theme of saving the world or populating outer space (Q61).

Despite the very complex development tasks and own media know-how, the wish to be in contact with the target audience prevails for most of them. Almost two thirds are directly available to players criticism, only a minority wants to restrict that and wants to keep it limited to tech support (Q53).

H3: Game developers primarily feel compelled to their work. As development times get longer, more expensive and more complex developers are not really interested or critical regarding the intentions of their business.

If game developers play games themselves then, like their target audience, these are mostly set within science-fiction or fantasy (Q18) settings. The questions regarding the most popular genres shows that there is difference between them and the players: they estimate that especially shooters, RPG's and strategy games are popular. They think that the adventure games that they prefer are not as interesting to the end user as to them. According to the developers games with social or societal matters are also met by big interest (Q23).

How is the personal wish to work in the gaming industry displayed and how is the relation between developers and clients viewed?

The creative aspect of their work seems to be especially important, as well as the prospect of “inspiring people”, to come up with good stories in a creative field which are told through the medium of video games is one of the main motives of the developers-to-be. To change the world or do other influential and enduring things is a wish only less than half of the participants have. Liberty and “action” in the job is something more than half are hoping for. Interestingly money doesn't seem to be a big motivator (Q22).

Developers are realists when it comes to the necessity of having foreign influences becoming part of their production. Most of them are open to suggestions from colleagues as well as requests by clients (Q29). We can see this being confirmed in the control question that asks about the degree of “liberty” they are looking for in development: Here 30.8% of them are ok with foreign influence and 13.5% are willing to submit to them. Less than a fifth expects and wants total creative freedom when developing a game (Q30). The Genre of “indie games”, independent productions which come close to author's film, lacking the external financial support of business clients, allows the most unlimited creative freedom. The participants appreciate indie games but are also aware that having

an investor with financial backing is necessary for creating a quality product. Only a minority values creative freedom over money (Q32).

Even though and political subjects are possible themes in certain game genres i.e. role play games (Q62), having a political party or religious group as a client is very unlikely to most. But there is an exception for certain religious groups: traditional churches are very opposed, but “interesting” (for the sake of oddity?) religions such as Buddhism or nature churches could be possible partners. Almost 20% can indeed imagine to work for religious organisations, here the protestant and catholic churches dominate as well as judaic unions, thereafter islamic. A minority is open for assignments by the scientology church (Q57: “imaginable” 6.1%, “good idea” 4.1%).

Similar results were discovered regarding political parties as business clients (Q55). Again most would refuse to work for political parties, but still there is some support for it, although this support varies depending on what party would be the potential client. Most would work for “The Pirates” (42.6%) and “The Greens” (26.1%), the German political mainstream with SPD, CDU and FDP gets very little support (each around 15%). The left and right spectrum of the scale are (if viewed on their own) represented by only a minority of the participants - although 6.7% could be open to work for the Linkspartei (left wing party / formed from the former GDR-state party SED) and more than 10% for right-wing conservative or extreme parties (Republikaner 6.4% and NPD 4.3%) - showing that there is some willingness to work for the political outsiders (Q55).

A refusal to work for religious groups and political parties is very explicit. The accountability for one’s product and how it effects the players, which is mostly recognised and respected (Q51), is visible in the answers. Especially because game developers know (but personally refuse) that games can be used for propaganda (Q56) and that fictional game characters could convey religious (and political) ideologies to the player (Q52), especially when the player is active and bound to do certain things such as performing rituals, procedures and actions (Q63).

H4: Video games are mainly technical entertainment products to the developers. They don't see them as a cultural contributor to society. Topics of video games are not of interest to society.

Are video games technical products or part of our presence-culture? Directly asking this question caused quite some inconclusiveness with the participants (Q14), but the question whether video games are relevant to culture when compared with books and movies the result was far more distinct: more than two thirds fully agree and only a minority is reluctant or wants to see the question connected to a certain game (Q25).

Whether it's social issues such as exclusion, same-sex relations or disability, these subjects are possible themes to most of them. Only a minority thinks that they are too difficult to implement (Q46).

After we already discovered how developers think about influencing players, they are more reluctant when answering to the question on how much they influence societal, cultural and social processes. Fundamentally most of the new developers think that societal discourses can be inspired, initiated, and accompanied by video games. But they doubt players would be open and interested enough to find such topics mentioned in games (Q60).

To what extent do video games have to comply to the users and watch out for their cultural profile? Are games static offerings that, once they are designed and produced, are ready for the market or do they receive cultural awareness? Most developers have the understanding that players view games as an entertainment-offer that they can leave or take the way it is - it doesn't have to be altered according to cultural or ethical arrangements. A fifth believes that players willingly submit to the rules of the game. Not even a third affirms that games have to be culturally understandable and adaptable to a wider variety of gamer-cultures (Q34).

8 Conclusion

The survey and its results above could only be displayed heavily abridged, but still is hopefully able to give a unique insight into the minds of young game developers, even though it is not representative, or does it claim to be. Clues as to continuity, regarding the self-evaluation by developers are found in comparison to interviews with other industry employees and the other (older) surveys and studies. Following basic results can be deepened and refined in future surveys that hopefully happen on a larger scale:

- a) The questioned game design students (which are the future of the German video game industry) are mainly male (Q 65: 76.6%, female 23.4%) and young (Q 64; 75.5% between 19-27). Politically, societally and religiously most of them are inactive, but come (if) from a Christian denomination or were socialised by the Christian-connoted but secular society - other religious influences were not detected.
- b) The developers-to-be made their hobbies become their jobs; this makes them children, but also creators, of media worlds. They acknowledge that the result of their work is taking part in forming the cultural environment. And they realise that they have, like other people engaged in the cultural sector, some form of influence over the end user, which is important to them. The same way they acknowledge the guide lines that investors set them. They want personal and artistic liberty, but accept influences from colleagues and employers.

- c) Game developers consistently reject working for political parties or religious groups but accept and know that they need content from religion and politics that they then implement into their games. A majority consciously declines to put messages (“propaganda”) into their games. Only a minority is willing to do so.
- d) Game developers identify themselves with their job and the target group for which they produce. This becomes visible as they try to protect players from negative influences in their games.

Some questions were evaluated based on gender: In some cases, women collectively answered questions differently than men. As an example the question if developers could initiate social processes (Q60) - here women were more optimistic than men. That personal themes and values should flow into the games production (Q40) was met with more reservation by them. That games could impress players (Q24) is far more likely to be conceivable to women, but both genders mostly believe this to be true. Women were more likely to reject questions about personal belief and questions about God (Q16). It is men that were more likely to confess to it; although the feedback was generally higher with men. Same goes for personal interest in religion (Q6): disinterest is prevalent here, but less so with women than men. Furthermore women vote similarly on the subject of responsibility of developers to their audience (Q51), if social themes are arrangeable in video games (Q46) and how far individual liberty is needed for creative work (Q30).

What do all these answers tell us now? How come some responders thought questions about religion (also homosexuality in the IDGA-survey) were to be taken personally and that such questions were even asked of developers at all made them upset and why did they not just jump to the next question or quit, but even took the time to distance themselves from “religious propaganda” in video games by flooding the comment section of the survey and accuse the survey of trying to implement such “religious propaganda” in games?

Religion, emotions and sexuality are common subjects in entertainment productions as they are elements of discussions in society. Traditionally they have a tendency to bonding and polarisation as it has been visible. It is amazing to see that these themes concerning the emotional and cognitive area are met with such harsh reactions by some developers, which should be supposed to - having a certain higher education, an intercultural focus and analytical skills - be able to discuss these subject unbiased.

As there has been no deep psychological evaluation done, this observation can be registered but only viewed as such and not be further evaluated. Schachtner tried to explain: maybe some of the developers that were questioned by her largely accommodated to their job (“Anpassung an das Maschinenmodell” – “Alignment to the pattern of machine”) and tried to distance themselves from certain external situations and stimuli which would irritate and yet at the same time restrict and cut

their world within (Schachtner 1993, 210). The “Maschinenlogik” (“Logics of the machine”) may serve to them as a pattern of behaviour, which protects them from unknown situations, so that there is no danger of becoming emotionally involved or be forced to give a statement (Schachtner 1993, 211).

How else could the strong wish to entertain others and work creatively be explained? Söder-Mahlmann quotes Lasch, who said that “the modern narcissism” could not survive without an admiring audience. His apparent liberty from familiar responsibilities and institutionalised constraints sadly doesn't enable him to stand on his own feet or celebrate his individuality; they only contribute towards his own uncertainty, which can only be overcome by seeing himself reflected in others attention (Söder-Mahlmann 1991, 194). Similar to the way Blackburn explains the selfie-boom (Blackburn 2014).

The rejection of certain themes may also be possible to explain with societal opinion-multiplicators which tend to disregard religious subjects as un-modern or discredit them altogether. But the “Left Behind” and “Resident Evil”-franchises hint at the potential that games have both for enthusiastic fans as well as for conflicts.

One can only hope that inter-religious and inter-cultural as well as awareness of historical and political research is implemented into the education of new developers to the video game industry, so that misconceptions like the “Capcom”-case can be prevented in the future.

As Grossman's interviews and many individual games show, religion is an important part of many game-worlds and is used to add more depth to a game. As long as religious motifs aren't too strong, game developers show a distant curiosity with a positive note.

Game developers are independent acting and thinking individuals. They are specialists who often portray the ideas that others had and implement their own themes. Also true is: An attractive game can, in the hands of, or designed and financed by a potent political or religious group, pave way for influencing possibilities. It is the developers who are responsible for this and they are also the ones that could prevent it.

And the church? And educators? When it comes to the wide array of possibilities and implications, pedagogics as well as theology have not taken video games serious enough in the past, as they might have only been viewed as meaningless entertainment forms and / or not understood them fully enough, for these and other reasons. Maybe they were ignored because the communicative potential of this medium seemed suspect. Maybe game-designers have not been seen as credible partners to talk to and to work with.

That churches know of the importance of media-creators is visible in the number of broadcasting boards they are on. Only that cultural subjects are being formed somewhere else today.

Further studies need to be proceeded to deepen interest and the understanding of game-developers. They are a bunch of people who are often willing to spend much more time and power than they are paid for in the efforts to entertain yet other people.

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Biography

Prof. Dr. habil STEFAN PIASECKI teaches social work and media studies at the YMCA University of Applied Sciences in Kassel, and is also an advisor for the German movie and television age-rating board at FSK (Wiesbaden) and FSF (Berlin), with a research focus on interactive media, politics and religion.

His doctoral thesis, published in 2008 as *Schaufenster des Schreckens in den Tagen des Zorns* deals with the public reception of the dispute that arose out of the publishing of caricatures of the prophet Muhamad in a Danish newspaper. He has spent the first 12 years of his professional life as a producer in the international computer-games business followed by another 6 years within the public social administration.

Just recently his state doctorate about religion and world views in computer & video games was published: Piasecki, Stefan (2016): *Erlösung durch Vernichtung ?! – Religion und Weltanschauung im Videospiel. Eine explorative Studie zu religiösen und weltanschaulichen Ansichten junger Spieleentwickler*, (State Doctorate / Habilitationsschrift), Kassel: Kassel university press, 1040 pages.

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Praise Helix!

Christian Narrative in Twitch Plays: Pokémon

Jenny Saucerman & Dennis Ramirez

Abstract

In this paper, we examine the influence of Christianity on the religious narrative of Twitch Plays: Pokémon. Twitch Plays: Pokémon was a new take on a well-known game by allowing over 100,000 players to control the same character simultaneously, which resulted in the character's chaotic movements and gameplay decisions. In order to derive meaning from the chaos, the Twitch Plays: Pokémon community banded together and developed a sophisticated narrative surrounding the game. This narrative was highly religious in nature. We argue that this sophisticated narrative heavily referred to major religious figures, texts, imagery, and structure in Christianity in order to create shared meaning and experiences of the game among Twitch Plays: Pokémon community members. Having this shared meaning and experiences allowed the Twitch Plays: Pokémon religion to proliferate.

Keywords

Pokemon, Christianity, Helix Fossil, Twitch Plays: Pokemon, TPP, religion of Twitch Plays: Pokemon

1 Introduction

Twitch Plays: Pokémon (TPP) took a well-known video game, *Pokémon Red*, and transformed it into a completely novel gaming experience by allowing more than 100,000 people to take control of the game at the same time. The new gaming experience, and the social interactions that resulted, created a rich community surrounding TPP. A significant portion of the community constructed, recorded, and recited the narrative of TPP. One major component of the community's game narrative was religious in nature. In this paper, we examine the role the real-world narratives from Christianity played in the development of this major component of the TPP metagame. The analysis

presented here is draws from the authors’ participation in TPP, the TPP chatroom, the TPP Reddit board, and most importantly, artifacts created by the TPP Community.

2 Twitch Plays: Pokémon

In order to understand the nature of TPP, it is important to grasp the components necessary for its creation. Since TPP and its community have been discussed in other academic literature (e.g., Ramirez, Saucerman, & Dietmeier, 2014; Lindsey, 2015), our discussion of TPP and its components will therefore be brief. In order to create Twitch Plays: Pokémon, an anonymous Australian leveraged three different technologies: a video streaming site, previously existing video game, and a command parser. When combined, these three components resulted in a new gaming experience.

2.1 Twitch

Twitch.tv is a website that allows users to stream videogame playing sessions. It is well known for airing e-sport competitions but can be used by anyone to stream their own gaming sessions. A Twitch.tv stream is composed of two parts: a window where broadcasters display their gameplay, and a chatroom where spectators comment on the events that occur.

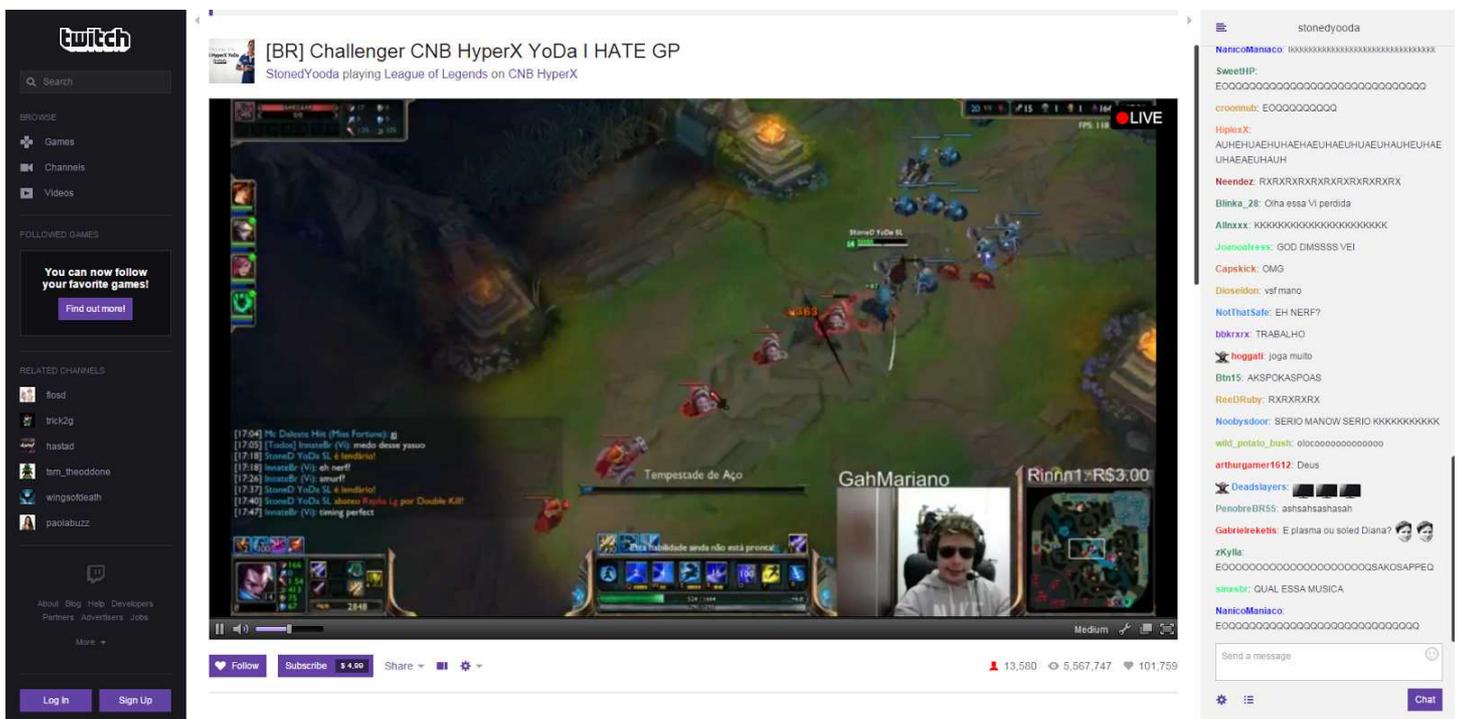


Figure 1: A Twitch.tv gaming session

A typical Twitch.tv session is a passive experience for viewers who cannot influence the game directly. Twitch was used as the platform through which players could access TPP.

2.2 Pokémon Red

Pokémon Red (Gamefreak, 1996), the game used in TPP, was the first installment of the most successful role-playing game (RPG) franchise of all time (Nintendo of America, 2013; VGChartz, n.d.). *Pokémon Red* is an RPG in which players collect and battle creatures known as Pokémon. Players do so in order to earn the title of Pokémon Master within the game. The game has been discussed at length in various academic literature (Tobin, 2004; Allison & Cross, 2006; Kent, 2006) and popular press pieces.

2.3 The Command Parser

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) Bots are no strangers to chat rooms like the those used in Twitch.tv. IRC bots are a set of scripts that connect to an internet relay chat as a client, which gives it access to text within the current chat. By parsing chat data, IRC bots are able to moderate chat rooms, provide information, or keep running statistics about the chatroom. In the case of TPP, an anonymous Australian modified code for an IRC Bot to accept predefined commands, such as “up” or “right”, and forward those commands to a video game. By parsing the commands of anyone using the chat during a twitch stream, a new way to play an old favorite was born.



Figure 2: Multiple players entering different commands in TPP (Twitch, 2014)

2.4 Twitch Plays: Pokémon

TPP turned the streaming of *Pokémon Red* into an active experience by allowing users to input commands via chat (e.g., Figure 2). As one could imagine, parsing hundreds of commands a second results in chaos. The protagonist stumbled his way through the game: he spun in circles, attempted to use items at inappropriate times, and generally performed actions no competent player would do (such as naming a member of the team “ABBBBBBK (“). Despite the protagonist’s chaotic movements, there seemed to be just enough consensus in the mind hive to make progress. As a result, the TPP community completed *Pokémon Red* within 16 days.

3 Narrative and Meaning

Typically, games have narrative components which help players interpret the nature of the game world and their role in it. According to Nitsche, narrative “...can create a supportive context for the necessary interpretation and prevent a chaotic and meaningless explosion of possibilities” (Nitsche, 2008 p. 43). In the case of *Pokémon Red*, the protagonist is informed that his quest is to collect as many Pokémon as possible and to become the “Pokémon Master” by battling and defeating eight “gym leaders” and four other Pokémon trainers who are known as the “elite four”. When playing the game normally, this narrative goal is usually met. However, because of the chaotic nature of TPP, the collective players caused seemingly meaningless actions to occur frequently, resulting in a rupture in the game’s traditional narrative. The TPP community constructed a new narrative in order to reconcile the protagonist’s random actions with the game’s own narrative. As the game progressed, players were encouraged by the TPP community to provide input to the developing lore in real time. This process of active reconciliation, we argue, is what caused the religious narrative around TPP to proliferate.

Narrative also serves an important role in meaning making by allowing individuals to reflect on experiences and enabling that information to be transmitted to others. The field of narrative identity research has conveyed the importance of developing narratives from the diverse experiences that make up an individual’s life. Singer argues that “once we have filtered life experiences through the narrative lens, we can make use of the narratives we have created. We can employ stories to raise our spirits, guide our actions, or influence others as a tool of persuasion or rhetoric” (2004, p. 442). Similarly, the narrative that arose from TPP helped to guide the actions of the TPP community (Wankerzz, 2014; Siigari 2014) and raise the spirits of individuals when a particularly tough challenge arose (such as being stuck in the same location for over 24 hours without making progress).

The narrative emerging from the TPP playthrough was highly religious in nature (Magdaleno, 2014). By alluding to Christianity, a majority real world religion, information about the game's significant events could be conveyed in a form of shorthand within the community. For example, if a comparison was drawn between an in-game character and a saint, it could be inferred that the character was good, or at least popular, with the majority of the people playing TPP. More specifically, the TPP community drew upon Christian religious figures, texts, imagery, and structure in order to frame their understanding of the chaotic events that took place within the game.

4 Major Christian Figures

The earliest and most important instance of this occurring during TPP is the worship of the Helix Fossil. The Helix Fossil game item cannot not be used in most gameplay circumstances, but due to the game's chaos, there were numerous occasions when players attempted to use it at inappropriate times. This act, which initially occurred due to random combinations of input from the TPP community, was eventually interpreted by the community to hold significance to the game's protagonist, as if the protagonist were consulting The Helix Fossil when he, according to the narrative, "didn't know" what to do next (kyacobra, 2014; BLourenco, 2014). The Helix Fossil frequented the screen so often that the TPP community came to view it as an object of worship and guidance (*know your meme*, 2014).

According to one reporter (Barsanti, 2014),

"...the Helix was promoted from 'magic advice giver' to 'messiah,' which is certainly a reasonable leap to make. Cries of 'Praise Helix!' arose from the chat whenever things went well, and it became so integral to the adventure that some people thought bringing the fossil to the Pokémon Laboratory was more important than actually beating the game. After 11 straight days of lugging around a useless rock, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* reached the lab and earned its Omanyte. He was proclaimed Lord Helix, god of anarchy, and there was much rejoicing."

Within this description, the author describes (and seemingly adopts) the terminology used by the TPP community. As TPP continued, terms such as "Messiah", "praise", "Lord", "God", and "rejoicing", which are usually terms used within the context of Christian discourse, were adopted by the community as a way to explain that the seemingly strange pattern of behavior exhibited by the protagonist was not frivolous, but in fact critical to the ultimate goal of completing the game. From

that point forward, the TPP community continued to reference Christianity as a defining structure of interpretation for the chaotic events that occurred within the game.

After the initial allusion to Christianity was established with the Helix Fossil, players of TPP incorporated more aspects of Christian religions to quickly expand the lore of the game. As Joseph Campbell argued with his theory of a *monomyth* (Campbell, J. 2008), the use of common tropes helps make a hero more fulfilling and relatable to an audience. The original *Pokémon Red* game had its share of in-game heroes, but TPP's random events made for a fractured narrative. As a result, the community compared major characters in TPP to figures in the Bible in order to flesh out their perceived major characters while implying complete character arcs. The three important examples of this phenomena can also be found in the Helix Fossil, the Dome Fossil and Flareon, and Pidgeot (otherwise known as "Bird Jesus").

4.1 The Helix Fossil

As previously mentioned, the Helix Fossil played a central role in the religion of TPP. It, however, was not always a kind god. In *Pokémon Red*, there is a mechanic that allows players to remove a Pokémon from the game permanently. "Releasing" Pokémon effectively removes the Pokémon from the game and does not allow the Pokémon to be recovered. The only way to release a Pokémon is use a personal computer simply referred to as the PC, which is also the only way to manage which Pokémon are available for the user to play with. A Pokémon trainer can only keep six usable Pokémon at a time, though they can capture as many as they want, and must use a PC to switch out a playable Pokémon for one they have in storage. This presented a problem to the TPP community because if they wanted to switch or store Pokémon, they ran the risk of releasing, and therefore permanently deleting, an important Pokémon.

Understandably, use of the PC caused apprehension among the TPP community (gingermagician2, 2014). Unfortunately, using the PC was unavoidable during gameplay, and many Pokémon were released during the course of play, leaving the players to determine what happened to them within the narrative of the game. The general consensus at the beginning of the game was that releasing a Pokémon was the equivalent of killing them since they would not be a part of the stream anymore (PatThePirate, 2014; throw_away_account23, 2014; Vmoney1337, 2014). The release of notable Pokémon also spurred debate around what, if anything, occurred once a Pokémon was deleted from the game. Some streamers suggested that the Pokémon lived on in a hypothetical wilderness (bak-chor-mee, 2014; 7ofDiamonds, 2014), mirroring the belief of major religions that promise a version of life after death.-

The most devastating use of a PC resulted in the release of 12 Pokémon. The loss was so significant to the feed that it became known as “Bloody Sunday” (Aeuma, 2014). In an attempt to add a powerful Pokémon, Zapdos, to the party (fortherreddits, 2014) the TPP community accessed the PC and proceeded to release 12 Pokémon, including some crowd favorites (Master565, 2014; Main_sShane, 2014). Originally, this mass release was perceived as a slaughter (Juz_4t, 2014) or the aftermath of an epic battle (sizesixteens, 2014). The antagonist in this situation was ambiguous, with streamers blaming the protagonist, the PC (MindEntropy, 2014), a non-player character named Bill (YourMachine, 2014), and even the Pokémon they wanted to withdraw, Zapdos (DrBob3002, 2014), all of which had some connection to the Dome Fossil in the narrative that players had constructed.

It wasn’t long before players began to make explicit connections to the religion, such as interpreting the ordeal as the Helix Fossil (God) demanding sacrifice as was practiced in the Old Testament of the Bible (Jp3ilson, 2014; Leviticus 4:35 English Standard Version). The TPP community concluded that the Pokémon released had died honorably, resulting in the Helix Fossil blessing the players with the addition of an Archangel, Zapdos (carlip, 2014).

4.2 The Dome Fossil and Flareon

As the game progressed, more of the community comparisons of Helix to the Christian representation of God increased. In the game *Pokémon*, the Helix Fossil can be resurrected into a usable Pokémon through the course of a normal playthrough. This in-game feature made the references to the Christian God all the more comparable (UniversityGyno, 2014). The Helix Fossil’s identity as God also allowed the community to define another character as being in direct opposition to the Helix Fossil. The Dome Fossil, the alternative to picking the Helix Fossil within the *Pokémon Red* game, was associated with evil and served as a convenient scapegoat for any ill-executed plans. One instance of this scapegoating resulted in the creation of a Pokémon named Flareon.

During the run of TPP, a badly executed plan resulted in a Pokémon being changed, or “evolved”, into a fire type Pokémon instead of a desired water or electric type Pokémon (Toysrmi, 2014). This was thought to have been done intentionally by trolls, or intentional antagonists on the internet, (micmanguy, 2014) and made the potentially useful Pokémon worthless in the eyes of the majority of the TPP community. Because this change was viewed as a choice against the will of the majority, the event was deemed to have been caused by the Dome Fossil, and Flareon was seen as a “false prophet”.

Flareon's association with the Dome Fossil, and the subsequent, accidental removal of two popular characters (Foxblade, 2014; J4k0b42, 2014), made Flareon a very unpopular Pokémon. Flareon soon served as an antagonist to the community during gameplay by being compared to Satan (MemeTLDR, 2014; redrumthrowaway, 2014). A small contingent of the TPP players did not agree that Flareon was evil and began to expand the character's backstory by painting him as having been misunderstood (Shanigami, 2014). This sympathetic stance toward Flareon much resembled the sentiments of real-world Lucifarians regarding Lucifer within Christianity. The removal of Flareon from the game also helped to expand the mythology, allowing the community to construct the narrative that Good had triumphed over Evil, or alternatively, that Flareon had "died" a martyr (Rob1Ham, 2014).

4.3 Bird Jesus

In most role-playing games, characters acquire experience points in order to make them stronger while also giving them access to special abilities (Schell, 2014). Narratively, this mechanic serves to give the player a feeling of progression throughout the game. Because of the unique way the TPP game was played, one Pokémon grew disproportionately stronger than the others. The difference was so great that players believed they would not be able to make any progress in the game without the use of this particular Pokémon, a Pidgeot (a pigeon Pokémon.) The community found itself relying on the Pidgeot as a "savior" and, because of the Christian allusions during the game, was deemed Bird Jesus (Toysrmi, 2014).

The comparisons of Pidgeot with the Christian Jesus helped the community frame the events in the game in a way that was meaningful to them. For example, Bird Jesus frequently used a battle move known as "Mirror Move" which exactly replicates a battle move used against it. The TPP community interpreted Bird Jesus's use of the move as an implementation of the Golden Rule, which states that one should do unto others as one would want done to oneself (JohnMarkParker, 2014). The Golden Rule is thought to be a sentiment shared by the Christian Jesus (Matthew 7:12 English Standard Version). In addition, the subsequent removal of Flareon, the character who represented Lucifer, was considered in terms of God's banishment of Lucifer from heaven (kalasad, 2014; SpinelessCoward, 2014).

5 Religious Artifacts

The TPP community appropriated texts and artwork from Christianity in order to frame their understanding of the chaotic events of the game. This resulted in an influx of fan-art both on- and off-line. Because artifacts play a fundamental role in the field of Religious Studies (Day, 2004) it is also important to discuss the artifacts produced by TPP. One particular type of artifact – texts – contain many of these aspects of religious artifacts and therefore provide one useful medium through which to study a particular religious group (Beckman, 2006). Perrin (1972) argues that because religious texts share the characteristics of other literary texts, such as “distinct and individual structure(s)”, “thematic concerns”, and “protagonists in a plot”, they should be examined similarly. Given that text was extensively created by members of the TPP community, user-generated text is a useful tool through which to discuss the religion of TPP.

The following prayer, which can be found in the *Pokémon Red Archive* Google doc (TPP, 2014), make the allusions to Christian belief even more salient. Using what is known as “The Lord’s Prayer” in certain Christian subgroups (Kang, 2007; *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979) as a base, the TPP community remixed the prayer to convey a message of Helix Worship. The prayer, as it appears in the *Pokémon Red Archive*, alludes to many events that occurred within the game, as well as objects and characters the TPP community deemed to be important.

Pokémon Red Archive Prayer

Our Helix, Who art in fossil.
 Hallowed be your shell,
 Your evolution come,
 Your will be done
 In Kanto, as it is in Sinnoh,
 Give us this day our daily gym badge,
 And forgive us our start spam,
 As we have forgiven those who pressed down on the ledge,
 And lead us not into the way of the domed one,
 But deliver us from Eevee,
 For thine is the move-set,
 the rare candy, and the SS Anne ticket.
 For ever and ever,
 Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven
 Hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come.
 Thy will be done
 On earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread,
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 As we forgive those who trespass against us,
 And lead us not into temptation,
 But deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom,
 And the power, and the glory,
 Amen.

“The Lord’s Prayer” provided a framework through which members of the TPP community could interpret the meaning of events that occurred within the stream. For example, “As we have forgiven those who pressed down on the ledge” refers to the incident in which game progress was impeded by players of TPP who purposefully moved the protagonist off of a ledge, causing the collective to lose hours of progress (Bromigo96, 2014). The players who “pressed down on the ledge”, were considered to have “trespassed” against the TPP community members who wanted to move forward in the game. By replacing the “evil” in the line “But to deliver us from evil” with “Eevee”, the name of a Pokémon in the game, the TPP community identified Eevee as an unworldly antagonist. Eevee is the form Flareon, described above, takes before it encounters an in-game item which causes the Pokémon to change its form. The prayer ends by listing items that were considered to be desirable to the TPP community by replacing “kingdom”, “power”, and “glory” from the original text. These connections to a pre-established framework helped to both strengthen the narrative within the community, and helped new players understand basic TPP lore.



Figure 3: A chapter from the Book of Helix (PhantasRS, 2014)

Other players also created artifacts that mirrored significant religious text. For example, after TPP came to an end, the community came together to produce an entire Bible-like book (PhantasRS, 2014; see Figure 3). This 27 page text did not appear to explain any of the bizarre or chaotic behaviors in the game, but instead served to document the major events, and enrich the lore of the TPP universe. By using the Bible as a framework, the community identified missing pieces of their mythology and attempted to fill them. For example, lacking events that would be considered an origin for TPP, the TPP community adopted the creation myth from the Christian Bible's chapter of Genesis and made it their own. Because the artifact was created after the events of the game, the community also employed more sophisticated narrative techniques, such as the use of foreshadowing, to make the narrative more cohesive.

Over the course of gameplay, players began to use other artifacts such as religious imagery to create meaning from the chaotic events that occurred. This modification of "The Creation of Adam" is only one example of this. In this particular image, "The Creation of Adam", Adam's face has been replaced with Red's, who is the main character of Pokémon Red and thus the main character in TPP. God's face has been replaced with the Helix Fossil, further emphasizing the fossil's status as the Christian God. Other works expressed more complex relationships, such as the community's need to use the PC, but fear of releasing their Pokémon, as is referenced through a depiction of the story of Abraham who is asked to sacrifice his son for God (omerben, 2014; Genesis 22 English Standard Version). Much like the religious texts, these pieces of art were helpful in conveying major parts of the established TPP religion using Christianity as a shorthand for shared meaning making.

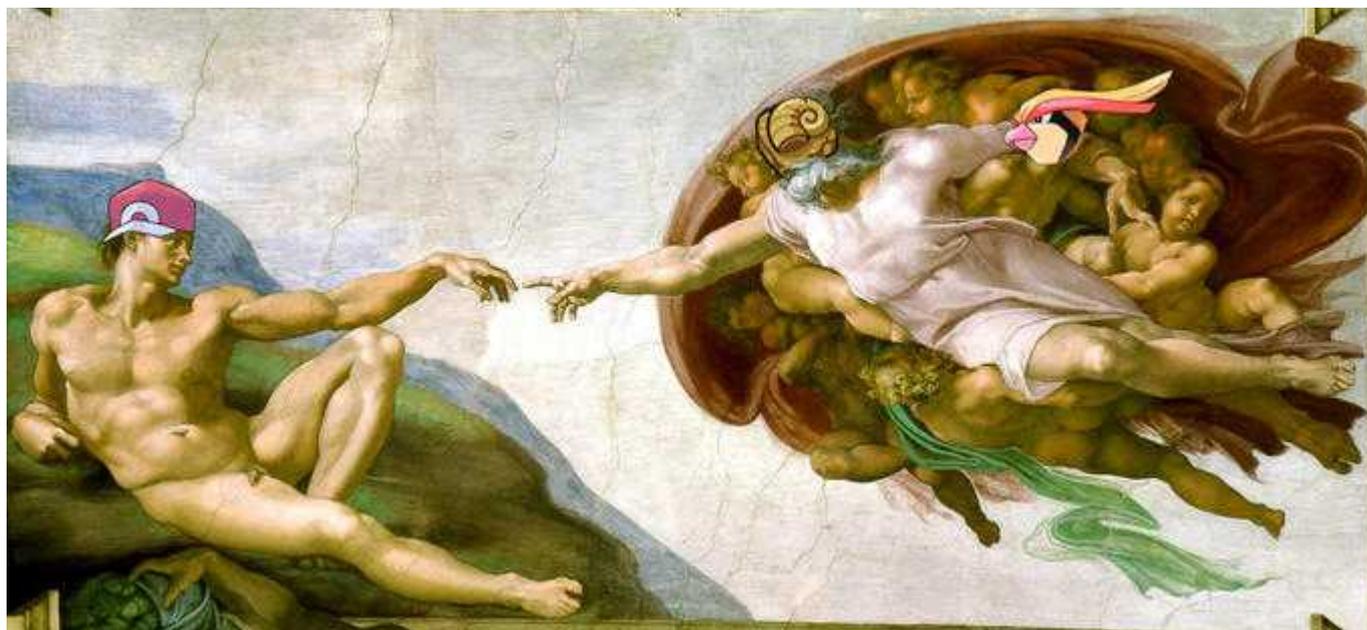


Figure 4: *The Creation of Red* (knowyourmeme, 2014)

6 TPP Religious Structure

In addition to using Christian literature and art for deriving meaning from the game’s chaos, the TPP community incorporated other branches of Christianity to reflect the differing objectives and ideologies of players within the larger TPP religious context. We can observe one visualization of this structure in Figure 5:

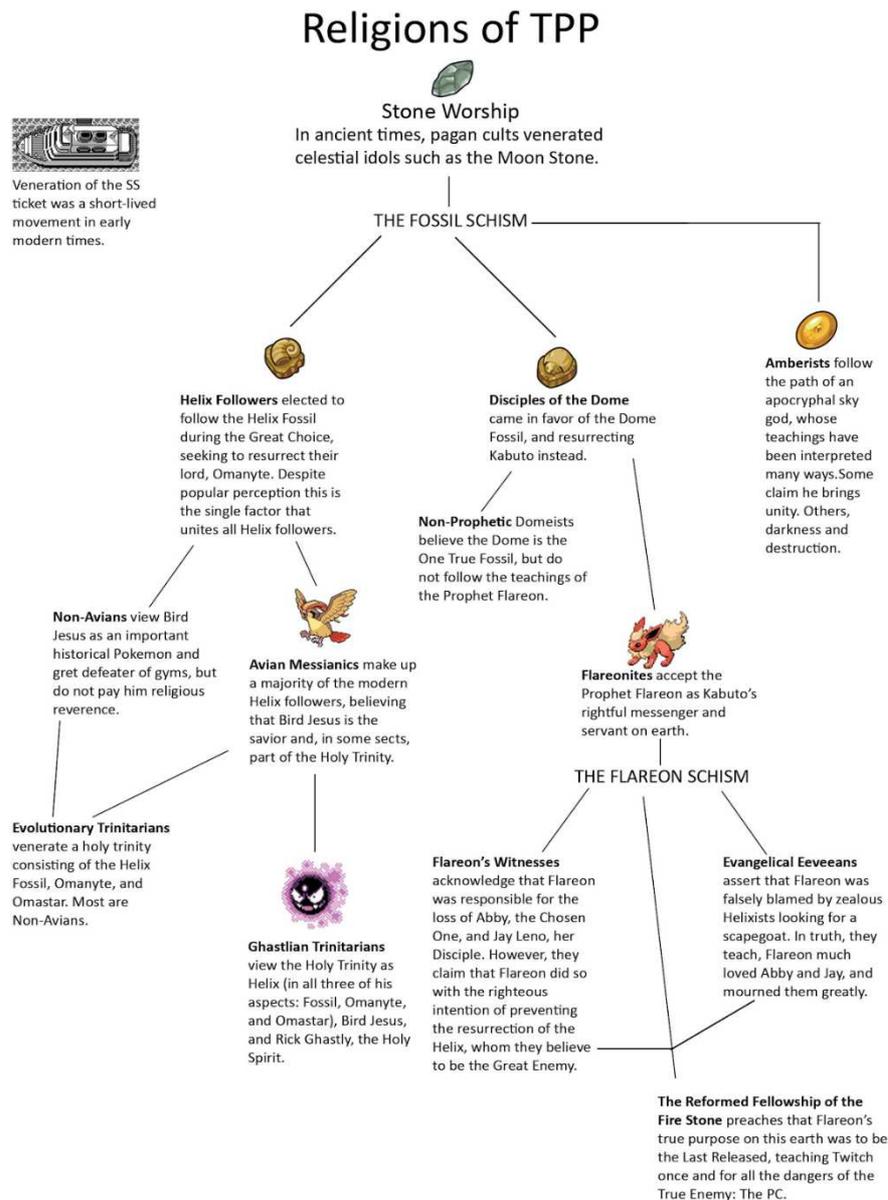


Figure 5: TPP Religious Sub-Sects (American Religion in America, 2014)

The structure of these subgroups are determined by what are deemed “schisms” within the TPP religion. The majority of these schisms closely correspond to Christian subsects, with others reflecting world religions as viewed from a Christian perspective. The “Stone Worship”, for example, serves to explain events that occurred before the worshipping of the Helix Fossil, and appears to refer to paganism, or beliefs that predate modern Judeo-Christian religions. Before the Helix Fossil became an item of worship, a similar item, the Moon Stone, was selected incorrectly in much the same way. Unlike the Helix Fossil, looking at the Moon Stone was considered to be a quirk of the game rather than a religiously significant event, and was only give significance after consulting the Helix Fossil was considered to be a ritual.

At the core of the diagram is “The Fossil Schism” which embodies the major aspects of the TPP religion. There are many ways to interpret the major branches of the TPP religion, but we propose that:

1. The “Helix Followers” branch draws primarily on Judeo-Christian religions and was considered to be moral, or just, because it was associated with defining characteristics of the game (chaos and anarchy) and events that promoted progress. Its subcategories mirror subsects of Christianity.
2. The “Disciples of the Dome” branch was defined by being in opposition to the goals of “Helix Followers” and was originally associated with characteristics that were not considered to be in the spirit of the game such as structured teamwork (democracy), and events that impeded progress. Its subcategories mirror minority Christian sects and religions other than Christianity (aseanman27, 2014).

6.1 Helix Followers

The subgroups within the “Helix Followers” schism relate more closely not to specific subgroups of Judeo-Christian religions, but more closely to specific beliefs within those religious subgroups. Non-avians appear to resemble Judaism's beliefs regarding Jesus' godhood, as non-avians “view Bird Jesus as an important historical Pokémon...but do not pay him religious reverence.” Followers of Judaism similarly do not regard Jesus as a god, but generally consider him to be an important historical figure.

Alternatively, “Avian Messianics” appear to believe in Bird Jesus's divinity. This aligns with majority Christian beliefs regarding Jesus. Within this description, there appears to be a reference to Christianity as a majority religion. The description states that “Avian Messianics” “make up the majority of the modern Helix Followers.” Similarly, in the United States, the majority of the population belongs to a religious subgroup within Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2015).

From there, we see two branches off of Avian Messianics. Both are different forms of a Holy Trinity. In Christianity, the holy Trinity consists of the Father (God), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit (also known in Christianity as the Holy Ghost). The Fossil, or the first mentioned in both of the trinities, likely refers to God. The second of the two trinities, which more closely aligns with Christianity, acknowledges Bird Jesus as a member of the trinity and likely references Jesus. Finally, the Holy Ghost is represented as a ghost Pokémon from the stream (Champie, 2014). This is likely a pun as this particular character did not play a major role within the fiction of the TPP religion.

6.2 Disciples of the Dome



Figure 6: Image Macro depicting the Dome Fossil's break from Helix Followers (FailedCanadian, 2014).

As mentioned above, the Disciples of the Dome Branch is characterized primarily as being in opposition to the main Helix Fossil Branch (Sebulba_Chubaa, 2014; FailedCanadian, 2014). As such, this branch of the TPP religion generally absorbs the parts of the game that the majority of the TPP community found undesirable, such as the creation of Flareon and structured teamwork. Structured teamwork, or democracy, was viewed negatively because it slowed the progress of the game, and limited the random acts that occurred during play. (More on the politics of the anarchy/democracy divide can be found in Lindsey, 2015 and Ramirez, Saucerman, & Dietmeier, 2014.)

Because followers of The Dome and the Prophet Flareon were the minority of TPP players, we believe these subgroups represent the beliefs of non-majority religions within the US. This interpretation of events is highly skewed towards western belief systems with an othering of non-majority US beliefs under the branch of the Dome Fossil. For example, the “Non-prophetic Domeists” appear to represent Deism (note how closely the word “Domeists” resembles “Deists”.) Just as deists believe that there was a god who created the earth but do not engage in the social practices of any particular religion, Domeists believe in “one true Fossil”, but “do not follow the teachings of the Prophet.” As discussed previously, the Prophet Flareon represented an alternative to the majority belief system under the Helix Fossil. We have interpreted this particular group to represent Luciferianism. The rest of the diagram corresponds with religious sects that have fewer followers, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses (“Flareon’s Witnesses”) and Christian evangelicals. As is evident by the diagram, the mapping of in-game ideals to real world religions starts to break down after the first couple of levels. Some of these connections are tentative and others are simply puns on the names of existing religions. This may be the result of the community’s lack of experience with the different subsets of Christianity, or that the major branches of the religion (Helix and Dome) were enough for the narrative purposes of TPP.

7 Conclusion

Narrative serves an important role in meaning making by allowing individuals to reflect on experiences and allowing that information to be conveyed to others. The TPP community reflected on their experiences of TPP and conveyed that information to others through the use of forum posts, in game chat, and artifacts revolving around their satirical new religion. The TPP community adopted the major characters, narratives, imagery, and religious structure of Christianity in order to quickly develop the in-game lore. As a result, TPP’s religion achieved an impressive amount of complexity given the game’s short duration. Although TPP ran for only 16 days, the sheer magnitude of lore produced during its run and the number of people who were exposed to it, 36 million viewers (Chase, 2014), makes its religion unique and significant.

8 Literature

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Biographies

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DENNIS RAMIREZ is an award winning educational game designer and doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Dennis has been making games professionally and independently for over 10 years, working with groups including OLPC, NIH, NSF, and the DoD. His work on educational video games and failure has resulted in award-winning educational games and invitations to speak at universities, companies, and events internationally including Arhus University Denmark, TEDxABQ, and LEGO. Prior to attending UW-Madison, Dennis received his MA in Learning Design and technology from Stanford University and an Honors BS in Computer Science from the University of New Mexico with an emphasis on Machine Learning.

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Mark R Johnson, Creator of *Ultima Ratio Regum*

Interview

For our third special issue on religion and digital games, Online had a chat with Mark R Johnson, games studies scholar at the University of York and creator of Ultima Ratio Regum¹, an ambitious game project aiming at creating “the most culturally, religiously and socially detailed procedural world ever generated.”²

Mark, please tell us something about yourself, your academic background, religious affiliation (if any), scholarly and game design related work.

My name's Dr Mark R Johnson. I'm 26, and at the moment I'm a postdoctoral fellow in the Digital Creativity Hub at the University of York in England. My undergraduate degree was in Politics & Sociology, my doctorate in Science & Technology Studies, and right now my field of research is firmly in game studies, which – for me, at least – makes my work somewhere between philosophy, sociology, media studies, computer science, and anthropology. I've published and spoken at conferences on a pretty huge range of gaming topics, from game semiotics to interactive storytelling to Japanese arcade culture. I'm currently writing up my first monograph for Bloomsbury Academic, which is going to be applying the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze to studying games, specifically games of unpredictability, randomness, chance, luck, etc. In my spare time I make Ultima Ratio Regum, which I've now been working on for close to five years, and is the first game I've ever made (though I do have super-secret plans for two subsequent, much shorter games I intend to make in the future). I'm profoundly atheistic, but (rather like Umberto Eco) I do find some aspects, primarily the impact of religion upon world history and the visuals of religious artwork, to be quite interesting, and amazingly rich ground for procedural generation. I also think certain belief systems, such as ancient Mesoamerican beliefs and Eastern quasi-religious philosophies like Daoism, are way more intellectually stimulating than most of the beliefs that dominate the real world today, and the religions in URR are very much designed to be unusual and intriguing to the player.

1 Can be downloaded free of charge at <http://www.ultimaratioregum.co.uk/game/> (last access 15.02.2016).

2 See <http://www.ultimaratioregum.co.uk/game/info/>.

What is your history with games?

I've been playing games since I was around 2 or 3. I played a lot of early MS-DOS games on my father's laptop, including some "educational" games, though I tended to favour those that weren't explicitly pedagogic. A family friend also gave us a bunch of old home computers – a C64, a ZX, an Acorn Electron – and it was at that moment I really fell in love with the medium. We probably had upwards of a thousand games on cassette across these three platforms, and I'd say I wound up playing a good 75% of them during my childhood, though many were sufficiently obtuse that in these cases there was just no way a five-year-old, no matter how game-literate, could ever solve them. I was first struck by the incredible capacity of games to create fully-realized fictional worlds when I played 1995's *Command & Conquer*, and to a lesser extent *Perfect Dark* in 2000, and most recently, and most significantly, the freakish masterwork that is *Dark Souls* (which I now consider to be the absolute highest point of artistry that games as a medium have ever achieved). At this point I own the ZX, Electron and C64, an N64, PS1, Xbox, Xbox 360, PS4, and probably around half a dozen gaming PCs have come and gone in my life. When I was a teenager and young adult I tended to play primary strategy games and first-person shooters, reaching the world #1 rank in the multiplayer mode of one of the former and getting close to playing at a national level in the latter (in *Counter-Strike: Source*), after which I shifted into card games (playing poker professionally for a few years), and these days I mostly play roguelikes, "bullet hell" games (in which I hold a couple of world record high scores), and weird experimental art games.

What exactly is Ultima Ratio Regum?

It's somewhere between a classic roguelike (a game with procedural generation, permadeath, and high levels of complexity and challenge) and an experimental art game. The core objective is to uncover a mysterious intellectual conspiracy hidden in the world's cultures, religions, societies, artworks, and so forth, by close examination of the game's generated world and conversation with those who live within it. Currently the world that the game generates is the most socially, culturally and religiously detailed world ever procedurally generated, and I'm (finally!) adding in the game's core gameplay systems at the moment.

What is your idea or intention behind creating URR?

The intention at first was just to create a roguelike for my own amusement – I never had any idea it would become such a big project or get so much attention! After a year or so, however, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to try creating a game that took the best elements of roguelikes, combined it with the best elements of puzzle games and open-world games, add a pretty heavy dash of philosophical and literary concerns, and see what emerged. My intention on a technical level is to continue pushing what I'm calling "qualitative procedural generation" in entirely new directions, and my intention on an artistic/gameplay level is to make a very unique

game that encourages people to really think about the world, and exercise problem-solving and critical-thinking skills that the majority of games don't demand (and if they do, ordinarily once you've solved a puzzle once, you know the answer, but URR's core puzzle will be generated anew each time you play).

What is the most challenging part about creating URR?

The AI and scheduling/pathfinding systems. It's just an unspeakable nightmare. Basically, the game only spawns areas of the map it needs to, i.e. areas that the player is in, and that means lots of the world map, and many buildings, often "don't exist" until the player goes in or near them. However, there are many other important characters in the game world who need to act within these areas that might not exist yet, and follow their own schedules, and remain consistent in their behaviour no matter where the player steps and what areas of the world the player spawns by stepping into them. This has led to monstrous complexity in ensuring that the AI can behave correctly when the player might be spawning and unspawning the areas of the map they're trying to pass through! I've almost got it finished, though, which is a massive relief.

What are your future plans and long term goals for URR?

This year I'll be adding in millions of generated non-player characters who act within the world and whom the player can speak with to gain information, implementing travel systems for oceans, deserts and mountains, and redoing how the game generates its history, since right now it's not in a very usable form. In the coming year or two I will get the game to generate everything needed for the game's central mystery – books, poetry, artworks, tombs, biographies, a million other cultural artefacts – and start to seed the clues to the game's central mystery within these.

What is the role of religion in URR? How and why is it part of the game?

Religion is basically just one of a number of cultural/societal factors that the game procedurally generates. Religions can exist in one nation or many, and range from the peaceful and broadly benevolent to the violent, expansionist and proselytizing, and everything in-between. It's a part of the game since it's an integral and unavoidable part of world culture (even during the Renaissance/Scientific Revolution when the game is set), and because (as above) I soon realized how much fascinating stuff I could get the game to create with a detailed religion generation system, and how much richness I could add to the actions of in-game characters.

Within URR, you are using lots of religiously "loaded" imagery and objects (like the altar depicted on the front of this issue). Did you use any kind of source material for their depiction?

To a small extent, though for the most part I created it from scratch. For some of the altar generation system I drew upon a few real religious altars from various religions, generally more

modern ones, and in a few cases I was inspired by literary sources, particularly Lovecraft and his disciples, for the weirder gods.

Did you receive any kind of reaction from players on the religious aspects of the game?

I've had a lot of feedback from people who are just really impressed and intrigued by the variety of religions in the game. No negative feedback, but then I've tried to ensure the game's religions can never be too close to real-world religions, but are always believable and coherent and what real-world religions might have been if certain people hadn't been born, others had, some cultural beliefs had survived, others had died out, etc etc.

You are – among others – naming Umberto Eco as an inspiration for creating URR, could you elaborate? What about your other inspirations?

In a way, URR is like a procedurally-generated version of the mysteries in *The Name of the Rose*, and to a lesser extent in Foucault's *Pendulum* – that kind of very deep, obscure, literary/semiotic, semi-conspiratorial puzzle. I also think Eco in *TNotR* and also in *Baudolino* paints amazingly rich pictures of historical eras, particularly the intellectual currents of those eras, and that's something I really want to produce too. The two other major inspirations are Jorge Luis Borges, for his amazing work on labyrinths, riddles, infinity, conspiracies, and a lot of other themes that really resonate with my project, and Luther Blissett/Wu Ming, particularly their novel *Q* and, similarly, its incredibly rich portrayal of the complex relationships between religion, politics, intellectual thought, war, and so forth. "Richness" is a massive goal of URR, which is why it generates everything from the overarching ideologies of each nation, down to what their chairs and tables look like; that kind of detailed "simulation" of culture and society is really crucial to the kind of world I'm trying to make and story I'm trying to tell.

In your own words: what is a "Roguelike"? What separates them from other games/genres, and what is their status within the broader gaming community and game industry?

Like I said above, to me a roguelike needs three things – extensive procedural generation to ensure the distinctiveness and uniqueness of each playthrough, permadeath which means you cannot reload when you die and have only a single life in the game, and a high level of complexity and challenge. It's a contentious word, though, and that's just my interpretation! I think their status until recent years was always quite fringe, and generally suited very much to the most "hardcore" of players who had both the strategic and tactical ability to factor in the massive complexity of these games, and – frankly – the patience to play until they were able to achieve a victory. I also think it's very important in permadeath games to have a mindset where you always blame yourself for a loss, not the game. Many newer and less-skilled roguelike players tend to always blame the game when they die, not seeing that they could in fact have survived the situation that killed them, and so it definitely requires a certain attitude towards "self-improvement" (for lack of a better term). These

days, though, with the rise of a lot of popular new roguelikes or roguelike-likes or roguelites, such as *The Binding of Isaac*, *FTL*, *Spelunky*, *Darkest Dungeon*, etc, the genre has gained a massive new appreciation, even if people have started throwing around the word “roguelike” itself with reckless abandon. In a lot of ways, I think roguelikes speak to quite a core demographic of game players, particularly to those who are perhaps unimpressed with the directions that role-playing games more broadly have moved towards in recent decades – towards simplicity, openness, forgivingness, appealing to broader swathes of the gaming public, etc – and relish the opportunity for a game that truly pulls no punches, and thereby awards a feeling of the most incredible victory when you’re finally able to beat it. The feeling of beating a classic roguelike for the first time (for me this was *NetHack* in 2008) was unlike anything I’d felt in gaming for a long time, and I didn’t really feel it again until beating *Dark Souls* for the first time.

What – if any – is the relation between the roguelike genre and religion or religious elements? Both with regards to URR and roguelikes in general?

A lot of roguelikes contain religious elements, most often in the form of unusual gods you can worship and who lend the player character particular powers in exchange for loyal behaviour. A holy crusading god wants you to kill undead; a god of ice forbids you from using fire attacks; a demonic god wants you to cause destruction; and so forth. *URR* doesn’t have this, since *URR* is filled with religious beliefs but no actual gods to be seen anywhere, which is quite unusual for a “classic” roguelike. In many ways this classic model of deities harks back to things like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Sword & Sorcery* books, and the like, where deities directly interacted with characters who existed within their quasi-historical quasi-mythopoetic worlds – indeed, the names of the deities in some roguelike games are drawn directly from these kinds of ludic/textual sources. I see it more as a genre norm, and something that speaks to the genre’s history, than any kind of inherently necessary component of a good roguelike, although some games, primarily *Dungeon Crawl Stone Soup* (*DCSS*), have elevated the creation of pantheons of interesting distinctive gameplay-altering deities to new levels.

What relation do you see between religion and games?

That’s a really interesting question. Lots of scholars like Girard, Gadamer, Schechner, Turner, Levi-Strauss, etc, have written on the relationship between ritual and play, though I’m not quite sure where I stand at the moment in the debate about the similarities and differences. So many societies had games that were intended, in some way or another, to show the favour or displeasure of the gods (Maya, ancient Egypt, etc), that there is certainly some deeper connection between the experience of play and the experience of ritual, or the use of play as a means for bringing a perceived divine order and sense to the chaotic randomness of the world. I think Girard’s observation that there are few non-ritualized games in ancient societies due to the risk of resentment

and vengeance in cultures lacking the strictures of the “rule of law” is particularly fascinating, and work from authors like Mihai Spariosu seems to support this kind of theory that our common perspective on play as being trivial, frivolous, and outside the normal realms of human life, is actually a very modern perspective. Ancient peoples tended to take play far more seriously as an important, challenging, potentially ecstatic or violent part of life, instead of the softer, safer models of play we have today. I think this is a really fascinating sub-field, and something I’m working on at the moment for a paper about the portrayal of “deep play” (play where the outcomes will seriously affect someone’s “real life”) and “dark play” (non-consensual or unaware play) in contemporary games-focused cinema, which should be out before too long.

Is there anything we didn’t ask that you would like to talk about?

I think I’ve covered pretty much everything. In my academic and game design work I’m coming at questions of religions and games from two different angles – examining the relationships between rituals and play in a historical/theoretical context, and then creating new religions for the player to “play with” in the present day – but I think these are both equally rich directions, even if they don’t actually inform each other all that much. Roguelikes, although an aspect rarely talked about, are probably one of the most “religiously rich” genres of game, even though all the religions present are entirely fictional, and often quite bizarre (I remain particularly fond of Jiyva, the Slime God, in DCSS). Games are a hugely intriguing field for exploring beliefs and rituals and ways of life, whether seriously or tongue-in-cheek, and I think we’re still only touching the surface in this kind of work – though hopefully URR will go a long way to moving these ideas forward!

Thank you very much Mark, and best of luck for your present and future projects!

The interview was held by Tobias Knoll.

Biography

DR MARK R JOHNSON is a postdoctoral fellow in game studies in the Digital Creativity Hub at the University of York. His work variously explores deep and dark play, gaming cultures, professional gaming, participatory game design, card games, computer game history, and unpredictability and skill in gameplay. He is also an independent game developer, a leading figure in the global roguelike community, the co-host of the Roguelike Radio podcast, a former professional poker player, a multiple game world champion, and a freelance games writer for a number of online games publications.

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